**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 27**

**Episodes 3328–3451**

# Episode 3328

Melusine’s words completely silenced the last of my hope. “What do you mean they can’t help us?” I gestured at the jar. “Aren’t these Seluna’s ashes?”

Melusine offered yet another *Mona Lisa* smile. “Those are not demon ashes, child.”

*No way*, I thought. After everything we went through trying to get these? And it was all for nothing?

Artemis didn’t seem convinced. “They *look* like regular ashes, but is there a chance you could be wrong?” she asked Melusine. “We’ve been through a lot to get them.”

I could hear that she sounded about as stressed as I felt. We needed these to be the real ashes, because we’d gone to hell and back to get to this point. But Melusine shook her head, all sympathetic as she said, “Apologies. But the fact remains, they are simply no more special than the ashes found in a hearth, my dear.”

I had been so certain that we were getting closer. My heart dropped, and I wasn’t even being dramatic right now—finding the ashes was the key to my freedom. I looked over at Greyson and Xavier, and they seemed gutted—even Greyson, who normally kept his feelings in check, was at a loss.

“So what?” Gabriel huffed. “We went through all that for nothing? This isn’t fair to Cali!”

“I’m not sure what Melusine can do to make it fairer, Gabe,” Mikah replied gravely.

Gabriel scoffed as Tabitha said, “But what do we do now?”

Adair didn’t seem to have an answer as he shrugged, his expression severe, but I could never tell what was going on in his head.

“Are you sure these aren’t Seluna’s ashes, though?” Xavier asked Melusine gruffly.

“Yes,” Rishika added, “like Artemis said, is there some way to check?”

Melusine frowned slightly. “I’m always sure about everything, child.”

“So there’s no spell or something to actually confirm?” Greyson pressed.

With narrowed eyes, Melusine glared between the boys, my sister, and her girlfriend. “Are you doubting my words, wolf?”

The last word she uttered vibrated through the air; the forest started to shimmer and shake all around us, a little ominous buzzing of insects in the air. Alarms went off in my head.

*The last thing we need right now is to piss off an almighty nature creature!*

Greyson looked like he shared my exact sentiments. “Of course we trust you! We’d be idiots not to!” he rushed to say. Instantly, Melusine fixed her gaze on him, and the buzzing and shimmering subsidized. Greyson added, “It’s just that we were told to find you, and we thought that you’d be able to help us.”

I suddenly felt like crying. All this, and we were still no closer to finding the ashes. How many times had I almost died on this trip? How many more times would my life still be in danger as long as those ashes remained out of our reach?

“But you’re a witch, right?” Harlow’s voice pulled me out of my miserable thoughts. She’d been so quiet for the past few minutes that I’d forgotten she was there. Now she stared at Melusine and added, “Isn’t there something you can do?”

Melusine paused. Her gaze grew distant as she said, “I *used to* be a witch.” She squeezed her eyes shut before taking a deep breath. Then, she glanced at the jar in her hands.

“The point is that I would be able to sense if there was a demon presence here. The same way I can sense that you’re Fae,” she said, looking at Artemis, Adair, and myself. “And werewolves.” She looked at Greyson, Xavier, Rishika, and Gabriel. “And of course there’s the vampire.” She gave Mikah a final look before staring down at the jar. “Even after death, the essence of a magical creature remains. And this is not a demon.”

I slumped back in the chair, feeling completely hopeless. I was so fucking exhausted it wasn’t even funny. I could have curled into a ball right then and there and waited for the earth to swallow me up.

*Please, love, don’t give up hope*, Greyson mind linked.

*We’re here for you*, Xavier added in my head.

I didn’t miss the way they both looked so very worried, though.

“What do you mean when you say that you *used* to be a witch, though?” Harlow spoke up again, this time cautiously.

Melusine didn’t speak a word. Just stared at Harlow with cool eyes.

Harlow pressed further. “My friend Clementine was killed, but before that she left a message for Cali saying to come find you, Melusine. Do you know why?”

Melusine’s mouth had dropped open in shock. “Clementine?” The distant look in her gaze returned as her voice dropped to a cracked whisper. “I haven’t heard that name in many, many years. I—” She cut herself off, looking between Harlow and me seriously. “No. Clementine’s not dead.”

Xavier cleared his throat. “Uh, we saw her body.”

Melusine’s brows furrowed as she closed her eyes momentarily. Shaking her head, she said under her breath, “No. I would have sensed it. Clementine doesn’t feel…”

I exchanged a look with Harlow. Once the witch nodded, I asked Melusine, “Where did you know Clementine from?”

Melusine’s eyes opened, but she seemed a bit lost, her gaze unfocused, faraway. As if in a trance, she muttered, “When I was a witch, I knew Clementine. We grew up together.”

Harlow’s eyes widened.

“Clementine and I were once quite close.” Melusine frowned. “But then, something… something happened.” She winced, as if the memory was too painful to utter. “I was banished here.”

I wasn’t the best at math, but Clementine—well, she seemed really young. How were she and Melusine the same age? Or was Melusine younger than she looked under all that tree and moss aesthetic?

“Wait, but my parents and grandparents and their grandparents have been telling your story for centuries,” Harlow spoke up, clearly thinking the same thing as me. “Clementine isn’t that old!”

Melusine offered a sad smile. “Oh, my dear. Sometimes stories become reality.”

*Well, then*, I thought with chagrin, *that was sufficiently vague and mysterious.*

Didn’t bring us any closer to the ashes, though!

“So Clementine sent us here because you guys used to be friends?” Greyson asked, thankfully putting us back on track.

Melusine shook herself out of the past and said, “I suppose so. And you are claiming that Clementine was killed by Adéluce Duquette?”

Greyson nodded at the same time as Xavier. Melusine’s expression grew darker, obvious anger pouring out of her as the forest all around us started buzzing and shimmering again, more wildly this time. The reactions from the group were instant.

Adair wrapped a protective arm around Tabitha, Rishika did the same with Artemis, Mikah peered around as if ready to attack, Greyson and Xavier moved closer to me, and Gabriel waved away a gigantic dragon fly and muttered, “This tree lady sure likes her damn bugs!”

Only Harlow didn’t react. She stared at Melusine like I did, waiting for her to go on. With the nature all around us shimmering, Melusine said, “I cannot speak to what’s happening with Clementine, but this Adéluce has been disturbing the forces of nature for years now. She pushes everything out of balance. It infuriates me—nobody has the right to interfere with nature’s course!”

Melusine really reminded me of Vander. If Vander was slightly scarier and greener.

“If your quest is to take down Adéluce,” Melusine said, her eyes fixed only on me now, “I am willing to help.”

My hope had been squashed, but now I felt it surge again. I grabbed the jar of ashes and looked at the former witch, speaking urgently. “We need to find the real ashes we’ve been seeking. Would you be able to help locate them? Sending Seluna’s ashes back to the demon world would for sure help return the balance of magic and nature!”

Melusine gave me a real smile. It was gorgeous, and I felt much more soothed. “But of course. I can find anything, child.”

“Thank you! That’s so—”

“I can speak to the leaves of the trees; the birds send me messages; the ground sings to me,” Melusine cut me off to wax poetic.

Gabriel mumbled, “I bet bugs love her too.”

Mikah elbowed his mate, and Gabriel said, “What? They gotta love her!”

Melusine smiled. “They do. Bugs are beautiful!”

Tabitha gulped. “Even spiders?”

Melusine nodded. “Spiders most of all. Their webs are works of art, and have you seen their little mating dances?”

“I feel we’re getting off track,” Adair commented wryly, and Greyson steered us back on course.

“This must be why Clementine sent us to you, Melusine,” he said. “It sounds like you could know all there is to know.”

“Precisely!” I enthused. “And once we find the ashes…”

“You’ll be free,” Xavier muttered, squeezing my shoulder encouragingly. He’d looked haunted this entire time, but now he seemed better. I was going through whiplash over here too—I’d jumped from disappointment to excitement all over again.

“We can try to track them right now,” Melusine said pleasantly, coming to sit right next to me. “Try to focus on the demon’s ashes, and close your eyes.”

I instantly followed her direction as Melusine took my hand and started to murmur. It didn’t sound like a human language, more like bubbling water and wind in the trees. The sound was so smooth and soft that I could breathe more evenly.

*It’s beautiful…*

I kept my eyes closed as Melusine’s mutters grounded me. Literally. I felt the strangest sensation, as if my feet were growing roots into the earth. Yet the feeling was comforting, not scary. It filled me with hope.

*Could this truly work?*

# Episode 3329

**Xavier**

Just seconds after Melusine took Cali’s hand, the sight of them started to blur at the edges. I scowled, blinking to clear my eyes before I realized that this wasn’t normal. This was magical, and the blurring only got worse with every passing second.

Melusine’s presence radiated sound—birdsongs, buzzing bugs, tree leaves shuffling, water bubbling. All the noises together created a cataract that vibrated through the room and everybody in it. Gabe, Mikah, and even Adair seemed taken aback, Tabitha and Harlow looked a little freaked out, and Greyson—

Even Greyson looked worried.

We had no idea what the hell was happening before our eyes. For a long-ass moment, I was concerned that we made a mistake coming here. How did we know that we could trust Melusine? Clementine had sent us to her, but Adéluce was the one who’d attacked Clementine, so how the fuck did we know that Adéluce hadn’t performed some sort of spell on Clementine to tell us to find Melusine?

The vampire-witch had obviously planted the fake ashes, and she’d proved repeatedly that she was one step ahead of us. This didn’t bode well.

My racing thoughts made my head pound. The sight of Cali and Melusine was still blurry at the edges, and Melusine’s sounds kept going. I imagined Cali morphing into a swamp creature like Melusine, then shook my head to push the thought away. If Melusine turned my mate into a tree, I’d find a way to kill the witch-nature-creature-thing myself. Cali had been through enough. I wanted to find a way to get to her, to prove she was fine and not under some new spell. My wolf was snarling at the idea of another magic user having their way with her while I could still do something to stop it. I looked over at Greyson and saw my brother was equally on edge. I was sure he must be having similar thoughts.

That obviously didn’t help with my paranoia, and now I started to wonder if Pierre was in on Adéluce’s plan from the beginning. I cursed under my breath—I should’ve taken out the vampire when I’d had the chance. I despised being tricked and bested, especially right now, when Cali’s life was on the line.

No matter how Greyson tried to spin it, I was the reason Cali was in this position in the first place. Adéluce had a grudge against me, and even if she was an evil mad woman…

How the fuck could I ever shake off the way René had stared at me in that haunted house?

I clenched my jaw in frustration—this feeling of guilt and helplessness made me want to fucking break everything around me. The vampire-witch was allowed to come after me, but not Cali. This couldn’t keep going on.

Adéluce couldn’t be as all-knowing as she seemed to be. She had to have a weakness, something that could be used to destroy her. I’d give my own life to find out what it was before it became too late for Cali. As I stared at my mate, my chest ached, but suddenly—

The blurring around the edges of my vision cleared up.

Cali and Melusine were once again sitting normally in Melusine’s forest of a living room. Cali opened her eyes with a gasp, and Greyson and I rushed toward her at the same time.

“Well?” Greyson urged.

“What happened?” I asked. I hated the way my voice cracked.

Cali was breathing fast, her cheeks flushed. She thankfully didn’t look green, which was a thought that was ridiculous and would make Greyson laugh at me, but whatever.

“Melusine?” Cali’s voice was a whisper. Melusine stared back at her calmly.

“The ashes aren’t here,” she said.

Cali’s face fell, and I felt her reaction like a blow to my own chest.

“But—but you saw them, right?” Greyson urged, his eyes fixed on Melusine.

“I did,” Melusine admitted. “But they’re not anywhere near my domain, child. They’re in Oregon.”

Nobody spoke for a long moment.

And then, Gabe met my gaze and broke the silence. “You can’t be serious.”

“I assure you I am most sincere,” Melusine said with frustrating calmness.

“But we were just in Oregon!” Rishika exclaimed. She was usually so levelheaded, but this had obviously cracked her calm veneer.

“We came all this way for nothing,” I said under my breath, turning my hands into fists. While the group looked around at one another, making similar comments that didn’t fucking help at all, fury pounded at my temples. We’d been through hell ever since we got to New Orleans—for fuck’s sake, Clementine had died! When the source of our problem had been back in Oregon, at home, under our noses the entire time.

Given what we had learned about Adéluce, it seemed exactly her style. Put us off-guard, always one step behind running to catch up to her.

“We didn’t come here for nothing, Xavier,” Cali insisted, shaking her head vividly. “We helped Gabriel and Mikah save Tabitha, and we found Adair.” She gestured at the foursome before pointing at Harlow, adding, “Plus, we restored magic for the New Orleans witches. Those are all things that helped everybody in this room—”

“Apart from you,” I cut Cali off, lowering myself beside her chair to stare into her eyes and grip her hand. “And you are what is most important to me.”

Nobody spoke. Greyson broke the silence with a cold look at Melusine. “Are you certain about the ashes’ location?”

Melusine narrowed her eyes at Greyson, and the buzzing of nature rose up around us again. “You asked for my help, and I did what you asked. I don’t appreciate being doubted.”

“Apologies,” Greyson said, nodding curtly.

Melusine seemed appeased, and the irritating buzzing eased. Greyson rested his hand on Cali’s shoulder. She gazed up at him, then down at me as I knelt by her feet. Then, she spoke, her voice throaty. “Well, at least we have more info now.”

“That’s true,” Artemis said quietly.

“At least now we know for sure,” Rishika agreed.

“It’s always possible that there are remnants still here in New Orleans,” Melusine said suddenly. “I felt the tiniest of pulls here, actually. But I’m sure that the majority is in Oregon.”

I couldn’t fucking believe my ears. Cali looked equally alarmed. “What is ‘the majority’ supposed to mean? Did Adéluce, like, spread the ashes all over the place?”

“Now *that’s* a detective’s nightmare,” Mikah said under his breath.

“I don’t mean…” Melusine cleared her throat, looking uncomfortable. “I didn’t mean that Adéluce spread the demon’s ashes anywhere. It’s just that some of it is in you.”

Cali grimaced, looking like she was in pain. “The handprint.”

“Of course…” Greyson trailed off. His eyes met mine, and a low growl escaped me as I shook my head.

“That does make sense,” Artemis whispered. She and Rishika, along with Gabe, Mikah, Tabitha, and Adair were standing around, looking deflated. I sighed, straightening to my feet before turning to face Melusine fully.

“So where exactly in Oregon are the ashes?” I asked.

“In the middle of Crater Lake,” she replied.

I just stared at her in even *more* disbelief. “Are you fucking kidding me? In the middle of the lake?”

Melusine frowned again, flicking a leaf from her forehead. “First of all, mind your language, child. Second, that’s all I know. I’d need more time to be precise, but that’s my best advice.”

The feeling of fury returned tenfold—this situation was so screwed up. It felt like we were running in circles here while Cali remained in danger. I hated it.

As if she could sense my feelings, Cali jumped up from her chair, grabbed my hand and Greyson’s, and declared, “Well, it’s a start, at least.” Artemis gave her sister a flat look, and Cali anxiously looked between her, Greyson, and me. “No, I mean it! Now we just need to get to Crater Lake!”

The words hung between us. Gabe said, “Sounds good to me. We’re all still in this together, anyway.”

“And I’m going to see Dani too, so that’s great,” Tabitha added.

Rishika nodded. “And we found Adair—”

“—while I was trying not to be found, at that,” Adair said wryly.

“So there,” Cali said, her eyes bouncing between Greyson and me. “We accomplished so much on this trip!”

He gave her a tense smile. “You’re right, love. We’re going to take this to the end.”

Cali seemed so hopeful and sweet that I couldn’t be a dick right now. She’d been through so much, had almost died so many times, put her life at risk to save everybody else, just to have her quest end up like this. But Greyson was right about one thing.

We were going to take this to the end.

At least I was. I was the one who’d forced Cali into this position, and I’d die if it meant freeing her. As for right now, I forced myself to act more optimistic for her sake. Squeezing her hand in mine, I said, “I guess we’re going back to Oregon. I’m ready to—”

Gabe’s loud, sudden growl interrupted me. He snapped his head to the side and shifted into his wolf, howling. What the hell was going on with him? I pulled Cali behind me, at the same time turning to look where Gabe was glaring, only to see…

Fucking *Pierre*.

# Episode 3330

**Greyson**

Pierre was here.

Xavier and I moved in front of Cali, Rishika snarled and shifted into her wolf right next to Gabriel, Artemis right by her side with Adair and Mikah bringing themselves before Tabitha and right behind Cali. My mate had ended up in the middle of a defensive circle. She was protected, and that was the only reason I didn’t pounce on the guy at the start for everything he’d already pulled.

“Well, this is interesting,” Melusine muttered in the background.

She was the only one who hadn’t moved. Pierre didn’t even glance at her or anyone else, though—his leery gaze was fixed on me, a smirk on his mouth. “Hello, Alpha,” he told me. “Miss me?”

My mind was on overdrive. This jerk had escaped our capture—I was still kicking myself over that—but now he was back. What the hell for? How long had he been standing there? Did he hear about us knowing that the ashes were in Crater Lake?

If so…

Even if I knew that Cali opposed killing, there was no way I could let him leave.

Cali had to be protected, and Pierre couldn’t be trusted, so I had to rip his throat out. And, honestly, I wouldn’t feel all that bad about ending this vampire’s unnatural life.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. I kept my fury down, my voice even, and moved forward slowly, hyperaware of my surroundings in case Pierre was laced with one of Adéluce’s enchantments.

“I have a message for you all,” Pierre said, still smiling as if this was a cordial visit.

I paused, narrowing my eyes at the mad vampire. “A message from Adéluce? The woman who locked you up and starved you in a basement for years?”

Pierre smiled even wider and extra fucking creepily. “But of course! She’s all I care for.”

“Right. You’re loyal to her after all she put you through. Have you ever heard of Stockholm syndrome?” I made sure to sound cocky and unworried, because the thought of Pierre believing he could scare us was fuel to my rage.

At the sound of my words, his smile vanished. He cried out, “It’s not like that. You will never understand the bond I have with my sweet Addy.”

Before I could reply, Artemis scoffed, “Your sweet Addy is a bitch! She doesn’t give a shit about you—she’s using you! You have to be completely blind to not see it.”

Pierre sneered. “I don’t expect any of you to recognize the depth of our connection. I am only here to deliver my message.”

“We’re waiting,” I said impatiently. Because yeah, I *was* waiting.

For the right time to rip off his head and use it as a basketball.

The urge solidified when Pierre quirked a smug grin and gestured all around the forest, at the trees… and the sun rising above them.

My heart dropped.

“Tis sunrise,” the bastard said gleefully. “You’ve wasted your time, and now she’s coming for you.”

Adéluce’s warning to Cali. She’d said Cali had twelve hours to find the ashes without the witch interfering, and that time was up. I could feel Cali’s reaction through the mate bond—her terror and apprehension, her shock.

She gave a little whimper of fear behind me that made me want to tear the world in half.

Xavier reacted to it—growling as he stepped even closer to me, blocking Pierre’s line of vision to Cali entirely. But that didn’t matter. The damage had been done—Cali was terrified, and I was so furious my hands grew claws. My wolf howled on the inside, begging for violence and blood and the kind of cruelty that tore me down till I was more beast than human.

When I spoke, the words were a snarl. “How dare you threaten my mate?”

Pierre didn’t even flinch. He smiled again, looking between Xavier and me. “If I were you, I’d say my goodbyes to Cali now.”

I was done thinking.

Xavier shifted with a howl, and I did the same—both of us charging forward toward Pierre. He whirled and sprinted away, cackling loudly. My eyes zeroed in on him, a target to demolish, while my ears and sense of scent took in everybody’s position.

Mikah, thanks to his vampiric speed, was right next to me. Gabriel’s and Rishika’s wolves flanked Xavier a few paces back, with Artemis and Cali on Rishika’s back, and Harlow, Adair, and Tabitha on Gabriel’s. The Fae and Harlow shouted among one another before sending energy bolts off to hit Pierre, but he ran so fast that they missed each and every time, their magic crashing into Melusine’s forest.

Pierre jumped over tree trunks and leapt through streams and used branches to propel himself forward so fast that he looked like a blur. He had obviously regained his full strength, and his speed was fucking formidable.

“He shouldn’t be so fast!” Mikah shouted as we ran. “This isn’t right!”

None of this was right.

The forest had started to change around us, vines reaching down to grab Pierre by the ankles. Melusine had joined the fight, I realized, but her efforts to help had backfired. The forest had become so deep and dense with branches and leaves and vines. They moved all around to capture Pierre, but at the same time they blocked my line of vision, making it hard for me to keep an eye on him.

*On your left!* Xavier mind linked. But when I looked to the left, Pierre was already gone.

*The asshole’s scent is hard to follow with the smell of magic bursting all around!* Gabriel mind linked, slowing down behind us right along with Rishika. Cali and Artemis climbed off Rishika’s back, and Artemis shouted, “He went this way!”

I was about to follow when I sensed movement in the opposite direction—I thought I saw the vampire dart behind a tree. It snapped and fell, almost catching Pierre by the ankle. Melusine was doing her best, but Pierre was like a fucking tornado, and Mikah’s earlier words echoed in my head.

Adéluce must’ve fortified Pierre’s speed.

He vanished behind some bushes, and I slowed down to take the turn when I heard Artemis’s scream of agony. I reacted automatically, bounding toward the sound with my teeth bared and the feeling of fury cursing through me.

When I burst into a clearing, Pierre was holding Artemis up in front of him, blood trickling down her neck. He looked up at me and gave a gruesome, bloody smile before licking his lips. “One Fae down. *Delicious*.”

He hurled Artemis in my direction and took off again, just as Rishika’s wolf skidded into the clearing behind me. She shifted into human form to fall on her knees by her partner, crying out her name.

Rishika’s pain sliced through me. But I didn’t have the time to stand by and make sure Artemis was okay—Pierre would escape, he’d get away with hurting my pack, and the instinct to protect and eradicate was all that was left in me. I howled, springing forward, jumping over streams and fallen trees to catch that son of a bitch and tear him apart.

But then the thick forest disappeared around me.

Melusine gave me a massive wide meadow, and Pierre was right there. I knew he saw me, and that I had a direct path toward him. That was when he switched directions on me, barreling straight for…

*Cali*.

There were about three hundred feet between them, but Pierre was closing the distance at a staggering pace. Seconds were all I had, yet time slowed down. I no longer felt my body, my head, my breaths. All I was swiveled down to this moment—to the bounding leaps I took to reach him, to the howl that escaped my throat and bought me a few precious seconds when Pierre turned to look at me.

To see that to me, *he* was the prey.

With a snarl, he dashed forward, but I had the upper hand to intercept him. No way was he going to get past me to reach her.

When I jumped next, Pierre was the target to land on.

I crashed onto his back, just as three feet remained between Cali and him. He fell on the ground with a thud, but I twisted him around so he could see me, so he could fucking look into my eyes as I stomped on him and raised my paw to his throat.

I used my claws to tear it out.

Cali’s voice was in the background, an echo. She was safe, but there was no room in me for relief right now. My chest filled with nothing but rage and the primitive need to eradicate the threat, both so piercing that I just dug my claws deeper into his neck just to feel Pierre squirm, snapping my jaws over his face.

But in his expression, I didn’t see fear. Just sickness.

Blood gurgling through his mouth, Pierre’s lips split into a bloody grin before he choked out, “She’ll… find… you… anywhere.” He laughed sickeningly even as he faded to dust.

# Episode 3331

I’d stumbled on the ground, heart pounding, out of breath, heaving all over.

I was fucking terrified and frozen in shock.

I had been able to sense Pierre—felt the wind as he ran behind me, his outstretched hands and the malice radiating off him. The last time I’d looked over my shoulder, he had been less than ten feet away.

If it weren’t for Greyson, the vampire would’ve grabbed me.

I stared at my mate’s wolf, still shaking and crouched over the dust of Pierre’s body. There was blood everywhere, on his paws, on the ground. The gruesomeness of the sight smacked me right in the chest, shaking me out of my stupor.

“Greyson!” My throat felt hoarse, and I wondered if I’d screamed his name before without realizing. I stumbled to my feet and ran to him while he shifted back to human, my eyes running all over his body. I rasped, “Oh my god, are you hurt? Is that your blood? Is it—”

Before I could look too much, before I could finish my sentence, he pulled me into a crushing hug. I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight, my cheek against his hot skin. His heart was beating just as fast as mine, the feel of it against me visceral. Our mate bond vibrated like a tangible thing between us, trembling with tension and disarray.

Greyson did not let go until we had both stopped shaking.

The second our eyes met, I whispered, “Are you okay?”

He looked raw. His voice sounded that way too. “I’m fine—how are you? Are you hurt? Dizzy? Anything?”

His rapid-fire questions were laced with stress, and the way he looked at me made a lump grow in my throat. I wasn’t going to cry right now, though—the last thing either of us needed was a fucking breakdown. I could do this—I could stay cool and move on, because that was what I needed to do. This was far from over, and Adéluce was out there.

*She’s after me*, I thought. *And I will NOT let her win.*

“I was going to blast him. I’m okay,” I said, reaching to touch Greyson’s face. His jaw clenched under my palm, and the worry in his face was palpable. “You didn’t let him touch me.”

Greyson’s whole body eased at my words, and I knew I’d done something right.

*I love you*, I mind linked.

But before Greyson could reply, I heard my name.

“Cali!” Xavier was running into the clearing, the rest of the group following. Melusine glided alongside them as if the grass was her personal ocean and the hem of her leafy dress was a surfboard. Everybody was here—both my mates, Gabriel, Mikah, Adair, Tabitha, Harlow, and—

*No!*

Rishika wasn’t here, and the memory of Artemis’s earlier agonizing scream exploded inside my brain.

“Artemis,” I choked, letting Greyson go and breaking into a sprint. “Artemis!” I shouted, dashing through the meadow, retracing my steps—on the left of that cypress tree, on the right of that boulder, and then out to the small clearing where I’d last seen Artemis.

She lay on the ground, eyes closed, neck bloody, Rishika bent over her with tears falling down her cheeks.

“*Artemis!*”

Now, I was screaming.

“Get the others,” Rishika called out desperately. “We have to help her!”

*Artemis is hurt! She’s passed out—Pierre bit her!* I mind linked to Greyson and Xavier, falling on my knees by my sister. I was so frantic I didn’t even feel pain at the impact, adrenaline coursing through me. My throat closed up, and I didn’t breathe until I saw that her eyes were fluttering. She looked so pale, though, and there was spilled blood all over her chest from when he’d fed.

*She’s not dead! She’ll be okay!*

*She has to be.*

“The bite wound is raw,” Rishika was saying, her strong palms flush against Artemis’s neck, “but I don’t know what else to do—what the fuck are we supposed to do? I have no idea how much blood he took from her.”

“I don’t know! I wish Torin were here, I…” I locked eyes with Rishika. “We can’t let her lose consciousness.”

Rishika nodded vividly, turning to Artemis. “Baby, see? Cali’s here! Can you try to look at your sister?”

“Artemis, can you hear me?” I rasped, grabbing my sister’s hand. She winced, focusing her gaze in my direction. “It’s okay—stay with us, don’t fall asleep!”

Artemis groaned, and my panic only got worse, but then…

Pink flowers bloomed on the grass all around me.

*Melusine?*

I realized that Melusine was bent down next to me, her green eyes peering at Artemis. Then at Rishika. “Step aside.”

Rishika looked at me, clearly searching for some help.

“Trust me,” Melusine said calmly before either of us could say anything.

Rishika turned to me. Her eyes were watery, her lips parted, her fear so obvious it just fueled my own. But I had to think—I had to focus here and help us both.

“Torin isn’t here,” I whispered. “We have no idea what we’re doing… If she can help…”

Rishika slowly, shakily stepped away from Artemis.

I reached for her in an instant, both of us holding hands as Melusine immediately rested her own hands over the bleeding wound at Artemis’s throat. Melusine’s fingers looked human yet at the same time like leaves. At her touch, a poultice of moss grew over Artemis’s wound.

“Whoa,” I whispered with a sharp exhale.

*This reminds me of my mom’s magic…*

Artemis gasped, her eyes flying open. Shaking, she reached for her wound, but Melusine grabbed her wrist. “Now, you don’t touch that.” Melusine turned to Rishika and me. “Make sure she keeps the poultice on. It will eventually heal the wound, and she’ll be okay.”

I was so damn relieved I thought I’d turn into a freaking hot-air balloon and float away.

“Hear that?” Rishika sniffled, stroking Artemis’s cheek tenderly as I gripped my sister’s hand. “You’re gonna be fine!”

“She’ll pull through,” I repeated to Rishika. When Rishika turned to me, we hugged each other tight, and I whispered in her ear, “Are we allowed to cry now, or am I supposed to act tough?”

“I’m already crying!” she whispered back. I laughed a little, rubbing my eyes with the backs of my hands.

“Ahem.”

Xavier’s voice startled me. I looked up to see him standing there. In all his glory.

Naked, obviously.

“This is an interesting angle.” Artemis’s voice was weak and raspy, but she eyed Xavier from the ground with arched eyebrows. She was in the mood to give him shit, so that was good. Rishika barked out a laugh, leaning down to kiss Artemis, and now I was definitely certain that my sister would be okay. I smiled at her, breathing evenly.

“We gotta get out of here,” Xavier said in a serious tone, unfazed.

I frowned. “What? No, Artemis needs to rest; we can’t put her through the journey.”

“Sorry, love,” Greyson said gently after walking up to us. “Xavier’s right. We can’t stay here—our time is up, and Adéluce isn’t going to be happy that Pierre’s dead.”

“They’re right,” Artemis spoke up again. Her voice was still raspy, and she struggled to sit up.

Rishika put an arm over her shoulder instantly. “You’re in no shape to do this.”

Artemis shook her head. Hoarsely, she said, “You heard Melusine. I’ll be okay as long as I have the moss patch on. Xavier and Greyson are right—we can’t stay here any longer than we have to.”

I turned to Melusine anxiously. “What do you think?”

Melusine shrugged. “I said what I said.”

*Ugh!* I thought. *Does that sound cryptic, or am I just freaking out right now and not seeing things clearly?!*

“But how are we going to get back?” I blurted. “With our kind of crew, the idea of taking a plane seems pretty unrealistic. And with Artemis in this condition…” I waved a hand in my sister’s direction and spotted her staring at Adair.

She looked better, but there was a question in her eyes. Before Adair broke eye contact, I could swear I saw a flicker of real emotion in his gaze. Was he going to get his head out of his ass and finally realize that connecting with his niece was the best thing he could do for BOTH of them?

*Is he even coming with us to Oregon, though?*

Before I could mull it over further, Xavier spoke up. “We need to get to Crater Lake as quickly as possible. Thus far, Adéluce has been one step ahead of us, so we’ve got to try and get ahead of her before she realizes we know the location of the ashes.”

Xavier had a point. By Greyson’s nod, I could tell they’d already discussed it and agreed. I felt the same way at this stage despite everything—I was so anxious to get my hands on the real ashes that I was shaking with it.

“But how do we get there fast? That’s almost impossible, unless…” I paused, my eyes widening in realization.

*The witch blipping thing!*

I looked around the group till I spotted Harlow.

“Harlow!” I gasped. “Can you blip us all to Crater Lake?”

# Episode 3332

I was bouncing with excitement and way too much hope that I prayed wouldn’t crash and burn. I almost got all starry-eyed at the thought of us instantly blipping over to Crater Lake and grabbing the ashes.

*Bing bang boom, done!*

Harlow, however, didn’t seem so enthusiastic. “Well, um…” She looked around at all of us as if she were counting heads. “This is a lot of people, Cali.”

“Is it?” I asked, blinking. I was clearly still firmly in denial, because I needed this to be over sooner rather than later.

“Yeah,” Harlow said with a frown. “I mean, I’m not sure. Given how unreliable magic has been lately, and what a long distance it is…”

“But could you at least try?” I stared at Harlow. Despite my having put all my hopes and dreams into that look, Harlow sighed dejectedly.

“It could be really dangerous, Cali,” she said. “I could end up injuring some of you, or separating you from the group to who knows where, or *literally*—uh, separating you. Like, your limbs left in different dimensions and—”

“Absolutely fucking not,” Xavier declared, turning to me. “We’re not doing that.”

I scowled. “But—”

“Love,” Greyson spoke in a low voice, “what if you got separated?”

Waving a hand, I went *pfftttt*. “I’m sure Harlow wouldn’t let me get split in half!”

“Though I might send you to Antarctica by accident,” Harlow said with a cringe.

“That was oddly specific. Have you sent a lot of people to Antarctica before?” Mikah deadpanned.

Harlow didn’t reply, which was probably not a good thing.

“Could you send me to, like, the Maldives or something?” Gabriel wondered. “I’ve heard it’s pretty there.”

“Nobody’s going to be sent anywhere,” Greyson said curtly. He stared at me as he calmly said, “It’s not worth the risk.”

I was starting to deflate when Tabitha spoke up. “Erm, I don’t think I can get blipped anyway? What with the whole magic negation thing?”

“Oh my god, you’re right,” I breathed, “it’s kind of the point of your power!”

Tabitha winced. “I’m sorry if this is an issue that puts a damper on your plan, but—”

“Please don’t worry,” I said right away. “You’ve helped us so much on this trip!”

She seemed appeased, and I really did mean what I said. But at the same time, I had now fully lost all hope about a quick trip to Crater Lake. My brilliant blipping plan would only remain a fantasy.

*And I really thought I had something there!*

“Okay, what are we going to do now?” I asked nervously, running my hands through my hair.

“Maybe there’s a different way I can help,” Harlow said, reaching out to squeeze my arm. “Clementine has—” Harlow cut herself off. When she spoke again, her tone had dropped, obvious sadness in it, but determination as well. “Clementine had a lot of magical objects at her place. She might have something that could help us ensure a safe blipping, and I know she’d want us to use it.” Harlow swallowed. “I know that she wouldn’t want her death to be for nothing.”

Harlow was grieving but still willing to help us, and that had to count for something. I was desperate for a solution for all this to be over with, and I was so grateful to her.

“Onward to Clementine’s, then,” I declared.

Greyson and Xavier nodded.

“We’re ready to leave now,” Greyson said.

I turned to the rest of the group only to catch Gabriel staring at Xavier. Gabriel broke eye contact with Xavier, exchanged a glance with Mikah, and then said, “It would be better if the group splits up.”

“There’s still stuff at the Airbnb they need to pick up,” Mikah continued, “and Artemis needs a break. Your group should go ahead to try and beat Adéluce. Time is of the essence. We can all follow along as soon as possible.”

“That way, we won’t slow you down,” Gabriel added, shooting a meaningful glance at Tabitha.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Xavier said.

I couldn’t disagree with that. Artemis had to rest, and Rishika immediately spoke my thoughts out loud as she helped a protesting Artemis up. “Believe me, I’ve sustained worse!” Artemis grumbled, as if a vampire hadn’t just drunk half the red stuff in her body.

The moss at her neck made me feel so relieved.

“Thank you so much for helping us,” I said after turning to Melusine.

She gave a little smile. “But of course. We have the same goal. I wish you well in your quest. I hope you’ll be able to restore nature’s balance, for everybody’s sake.”

Before I could say goodbye, Melusine started to fade at the edges, and then *WHOOSH!* She turned into colorful leaves—greens and pinks and purples and yellows, all shapes and sizes—that blew off through the wind in waves, sparkles glimmering through them.

“*Wow*…” Harlow trailed off with wide eyes.

“She really is something, right?” I said in awe.

Harlow let out an awkward chuckle, shaking her head. As she turned to lead us out of the forest, I heard her mutter under her breath, “I still can’t believe I met Melusine.”

Melusine sounded like both the Boogeyman and some sort of elusive, fabulous celebrity around these parts. I was here for it, actually. As we trudged through the swamp—with Greyson and Xavier on either side of me always—I tried to think of Melusine and how much she’d helped us, instead of whatever lay ahead.

*More chaos, no doubt!*

What felt like a long while later, we finally reached the road. I hugged my sister tight, ignoring her when she said, “I’m okay, stop fussing over me!”

“*Never*.”

Artemis huffed but didn’t stop me from kissing her cheek. She and Rishika, along with Mikah, Gabriel, Tabitha, and Adair would take a slower—aka normal—trip. After we said our temporary goodbyes to everyone who was returning to the Airbnb, Greyson took my hand in his and squeezed.

I looked into his grey eyes. “I’m staying with the two of you.”

I waited for a moment, wondering whether they were going to disagree with me. There could be a scenario where I was safer with the others, but I knew I wouldn’t go for it. I would go with my mates wherever they did. This was my fight too.

Xavier nodded. “You should. We have no idea what Adéluce might do.”

“You’re safest by our side,” Greyson said.

I smiled, my heart swelling. I definitely felt safest and strongest by both of my mates’ sides. Together we could do this. We could get the real ashes back. We could stop Adéluce. I had to believe that.

I *did* believe that.

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Five minutes later, Harlow, my two mates—fully dressed in clothes they’d left in the car—and I were driving back to Clementine’s place.

“As much as it pains me to admit it, we need to be extremely cautious going back to the apartment,” Xavier was saying. “Greyson’s right, Adéluce is going to be furious about Pierre, so we need to keep our guard up constantly.”

“Adéluce is probably not expecting us back at Clementine’s apartment, though,” Harlow said. “And we killed Pierre, so he can’t tell Adéluce that we know where the real ashes might be. And the fact that she doesn’t know we killed him might be the only thing helping you right now.”

Greyson’s face was grim. “Then we need to be fast. She’s always tracking us, so it’s only going to be a matter of time before she catches up to us.”

A shiver ran through me at the thought.

*No*, I thought, *if she were watching us in real time, she’d know where we were. Where we were going. She would’ve attacked already.*

The thought comforted me. Somewhat. Not really, because then we were back at Clementine’s apartment, and the thought of seeing her again like that—creepily suspended in the air—made my pulse race.

*Poor Clementine…*

All she’d done was help us, and this was how she’d ended up. The thought brought a hot wave of guilt inside me, and I paused as I reached for the car door.

“Cali?” Xavier’s voice was low. “Are you going to be okay? I know seeing everything earlier was hard.”

I gulped, taking in his words. It had been difficult earlier, seeing Clementine like that. But I couldn’t be a fucking coward right now. Clementine had died, Artemis had almost died, and I needed to honor both those things and push forward. Squaring my shoulders, I said, “I’ll be fine. I can do this.”

With Greyson and Xavier on either side of me and Harlow in the lead, we walked up to Clementine’s door. We all took a breath, bracing ourselves, and then Harlow reached for the handle.

But when she swung the door open, I gasped in shock.

There was nobody there.

Clementine’s body had disappeared.

# Episode 3333

**Artemis**

We were back at the Airbnb, and Rishika was all up in my business.

“No, come on!” she’d insisted, locking her arm with mine to steady me as I walked. “Let me help you!”

It was *very* frustrating.

Okay, perhaps I needed a bit of a shoulder to lean on. For a moment there, as I’d lain on the forest floor, I had felt myself weakening, and it had been terrifying… But then, Melusine had put that moss-like bandage on my wound, and now everything was great. Almost. I only felt slightly dizzy, really.

More than anything, I was mad.

I wanted to be in the frontline group. I wanted to be there for Cali and protect her. I hated feeling hobbled and like I was dead weight.

“Here we go,” Rishika said once we passed through our room’s threshold, still holding on to me as if she was afraid I’d collapse any minute. I was in a pissy enough mood that I shook her arm off, huffing before sitting on the bed.

“I said I’m *fine*,” I snapped, crossing my arms over my chest.

Rishika paused before me, her eyebrows arched.

I sighed, shaking my head at myself. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. I just—I hate just sitting here.” I bounced in the bed. “Fucking vampires! How the hell didn’t I know Pierre would come at me from behind? I should’ve known better—I acted like an amateur out there.”

Rishika sat down next to me. “It wasn’t your fault, Artemis,” she said gently. “Pierre was way faster and stronger than any of us expected.”

I pointed at my chest. “But I was a bounty hunter! I’m supposed to expect the unexpected, not sit there like a duck and wait for a vampire to almost drain me!” I gestured at my neck. “This is ridiculous.”

Rishika pressed her lips together. “It’s *not* ridiculous that you just had your throat slashed. I know you don’t like feeling weak, but you deserve to take it easy and rest up.”

I huffed. “Take it easy? When Cali’s in danger? Sounds like a thing a coward would do!”

Rishika scoffed, “You’re not a coward, you’re just injured.”

“Same difference,” I grumbled.

“Being injured means that you fought, and that’s the opposite of what a coward would do.” Rishika moved closer. She placed one hand on my thigh, the other on my shoulder. She lowered her tone. “You’re the bravest woman I know.”

I swallowed thickly. “You think so?”

Rishika bit her lip, nodding before she leaned in to give me a kiss. It was soft, brief, but it still warmed me up. “We’ll see Cali in Oregon,” she muttered, caressing my cheek. “The best thing you can do for your sister right now is to get better.”

“But—”

“Artemis, *please*.” The emotion in Rishika’s gaze overwhelmed me, and I stopped talking. “When I saw you in the forest, lying on the ground… For a moment there, I…”

Rishika’s beautiful brown eyes glistened at the edges, and her voice had turned shaky. I finished her sentence in my head.

*“I thought I’d lose you.”*

I leaned closer, stroking her cheek with the back of my hand. “I know.”

Sniffling, Rishika pulled me in for a gentle hug, but the angle made my moss bandage pull. I winced slightly. She instantly noticed, pulling back. “Shit, sorry, I—”

I didn’t say anything, just grabbed both her elbows and pulled her in for a tight embrace. My neck tugged, but I didn’t care—I needed Rishika like this, with me, so close I could feel her warmth.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” she whispered in my ear. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. I love you so much.”

I faced her. I pulled her in for a kiss, not a peck like before but more, my hand snaking at the back of her neck to pull her where I wanted her. She let me lead, and it felt so good to have her like this I thought I’d burst.

“I love you too,” I muttered, panting after breaking the kiss. “You’re incredible.”

She kissed my cheek, my jaw, my neck a few inches above where the bandage was. I shivered, pulling her in for another hug. She breathed deeply, holding me tight.

“I wish everything could just be good for a while,” I said in her ear. “I wish for everybody to be safe.”

“I know.”

I sighed, closing my eyes. Rishika felt so amazing against me that my thoughts traveled in an entirely different direction. “I also wish you were naked right now.”

Rishika choked in what had to be shock. She laughed loudly and faced me. “*Seriously?*”

“What?” I asked innocently.

Rishika scoffed. “Artemis, you’re supposed to be resting! You literally almost died!”

“Which is exactly why you should celebrate life with me, take off your clothes, and—”

A knock on the door interrupted us.

“Who is it?” I called, annoyed that we’d been interrupted.

No answer.

“I’ll get it,” Rishika said. Her playful mood had vanished. Her reaction confused me, until I saw who stood behind the door.

Adair. He was looking between Rishika and me.

“Could I have a word with Artemis?” he asked.

This man was bold to want to talk to me after the way our last conversation had ended.

“What do you want?” I asked. Bitterness and hurt had returned tenfold.

Adair shifted in place, looking almost… awkward? No, that couldn’t be.

“I would just like to talk with my niece.”

My laughter was acidic. “Oh, so *now* I’m your niece?”

Adair grimaced. “Please?”

His dejected tone shocked me. Rishika turned to me, her gaze questioning. “I can stick around for the conversation if you like.”

Adair still looked dejected, and I had no idea what to do with it. I took a deep breath. “It’s fine. I’ll hear what he has to say.”

Rishika nodded curtly, walking over to give me one last peck on the lips. She headed to the exit, but not before she shot a cold look at Adair.

“Shout if you need anything,” she told me.

She left the door open, and Adair didn’t make a move to close it. He kept standing there, looking all weird and nervous and so unlike himself it was *disturbing*. What on earth was happening to him? His demeanor would be almost endearing if he hadn’t treated me as if I were dirt on his shoe only a few hours ago.

I hardened myself, glaring at him.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked coldly.

Adair ran a hand through his hair, finally meeting my eyes for more than a second. “I just thought we should talk.”

I was not going to make this easy for him. “Yes, you said that already. About?”

Adair stepped closer. Took a deep breath. “I hope you get that all this has been a lot for me to take in. I thought you were dead, and I’ve been dealing with so much more than you could ever imagine when it’s—”

I cut him off. “Of course it’s hard for me to understand what you’re dealing with; you refuse to give me any explanations or spend any time with me.”

Adair huffed. I’d never seen him so animated. “That’s just it,” he said, pointing at me. “I can’t spend time with you, for your own safety!”

“That doesn’t even make any sense,” I snapped, crossing my arms over my chest. “What are you talking about?”

Adair paused, taking me in. His eyes studied my face before a pained smile formed on his face. “Sometimes you look so much like your father.”

I was struck by the heady emotion in his words.

“Me being around you, and vice versa, puts you in danger,” he went on, his tone much gentler than anything I’d ever heard from him. “The Fae court is looking for me, and my past is only going to come and haunt me sooner rather than later. Don’t you see?”

The only thing I saw right now was how stunningly honest Adair appeared. Who would’ve thought there were so many feelings hiding under that cool exterior? Then again, I had seen the way he’d treated Tabitha, how he’d done everything he could to save her even while trying to hide his emotions. I’d also seen how cordial he’d been with Gabriel and Mikah, how he seemed to care for them deeply.

The thought that he could act that way with me made all my shattered hopes soar.

“But you can’t just avoid me. We’re family,” I said quietly.

Adair’s mouth quirked. “We are, indeed. And you might be the only member of my family I might actually like.”

I gulped. “I am?”

He let out a breath, shaking his head. “That doesn’t change the fact that I have to keep my distance—from you, from Cali. It’s how things need to be, so—”

“Wait, what’s Cali got to do with this?” I asked, confused.

Adair gave me a severe look. “If my enemies find out who you are in relation to me, if they figure out that Cali is your sister and a Wrenthorn, she could be in even more danger than she is right now, Artemis.”

# Episode 3334

**Greyson**

I blinked up at the ceiling, fighting to wrap my head around what the fuck was going on this time. How was this goddamn possible? Clementine’s body was gone entirely—no sign of her anywhere in the room whatsoever. It wasn’t like we’d called the cops, or like anyone would come take care of the body out of the blue.

*Right?*

I turned to Harlow. She looked queasy, so I gathered she was equally stunned, but I had to give it a shot here. “Uh, is this, like, some kind of thing when witches die?” I asked.

She stared at me in complete and utter confusion. “Excuse me?”

“Well, vampires turn into dust and such, but I’ve never heard about a witch just evaporating,” I explained. “Do they?”

Harlow blinked in alarm. “God, no! This is not a witchy thing, at least… at least not one I’ve heard of before.”

“I don’t like this,” Xavier declared, sounding pissed off. Always helpful, my brother. Also, *no shit, Sherlock*—did he think any one of us were fucking delighted right now?

“Wait a second,” Cali whispered, getting this devastatingly hopeful look on her face. “What if this means…” She tiptoed further into the apartment and tentatively called out, “Clementine? Can you hear us?”

I shook my head, reaching for Cali’s wrist to pull her back gently. I didn’t want her to get her hopes up only to have them crushed again. “Cali,” I muttered, “she’s gone.”

Cali’s face fell. My stomach churned, and I thought back to the moment we’d seen Clementine. “Are we sure?” Cali asked.

I shook my head. Clementine had definitely been dead—blue lips, no heartbeat. “I would’ve heard her pulse,” I said. “There was none.”

Harlow’s eyes glistened. “So who took the body?” she quietly asked.

We all looked at one another until all eyes fell on Xavier. Xavier, whose past had come back to haunt him in the form of a goddamn vampire-witch who just wouldn’t let go.

“Adéluce must’ve come back,” he said, his voice hoarse.

Cali shuddered at his words instantly. I realized we had to move the fuck along now before Adéluce decided to pay a second visit.

“All right, let’s make this as quick as possible,” I said. “Harlow, what are we looking for?

“I know that Clementine has a lot of magic items here. She’ll have something that will help secure long-distance blipping,” Harlow said, “and I still think it would be best to retrieve it to ensure a safe passage.”

“What is the item?” Xavier asked.

“We need chalk and a particular set of beads,” Harlow said, looking among the three of us. “It will be easier for me to blip just the four of us instead of a whole group of people, but still. I just got my magic back, and I would feel much better if we have the extra security.”

“Me too,” I said. I didn’t think Antarctica would be nice this time of year, so Harlow accidentally shipping Cali off there would probably not be a great idea. Plus, any injuries and other issues—it just wasn’t worth the risk. If Harlow felt safest performing the spell while using Clementine’s beads, we would get them.

“Do you have any idea where Clementine kept those beads?” Xavier asked.

“Not sure—let’s split up to cover more ground. You and I can take the main rooms. Greyson and Cali,” Harlow said, pointing toward a back room, “that’s where Clementine kept a jumbled assortment of magical objects. Not a pretty sight, but you two seem patient enough to deal with the mess.”

Xavier had the decency not to argue with that. He was the least patient man I knew; he would probably flip a table if he saw it full of a bunch of bullshit that he found useless.

“Let’s do this and get it over with as quickly as possible,” I said.

We split into our groups and went searching, everybody quiet and tense. Cali looked antsy, and I was glad I got to stay with her—after the close call with Pierre, I didn’t want to let her out of my sight. The image of her running scared and him ready to grab her as if she were nothing but a piece of meat still burned inside my head.

I’d been so relieved to see him dead.

“Oh, wow.” Cali’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts. We’d just entered the room, and she took in the chaos all around. Harlow hadn’t been kidding—the space was a total mess, papers and strange objects everywhere.

“Yeah, we’d better get to it,” I said, huffing out a breath.

I started rummaging through a massive basket on Clementine’s desk when I noticed that Cali hadn’t moved. When I looked up, she was staring at me, her eyes huge and vulnerable, her lips pressed together. A pang of worry hit me instantly.

“Are you okay?”

She chuckled awkwardly. “As okay as I can be, I guess.”

“Then what is it?”

“I just…” She shook her head, looking down at my hands. “It just hit me that an hour or so ago, there was blood all over you.”

I’d washed in one of Melusine’s ponds, rubbed some herbs on my skin to kill off the scent. But none of that could wipe the image of me killing Pierre out of Cali’s brain. For a moment I was struck, unsure of what to say. But then she stepped closer, staring at me with those eyes of hers that made my heart drum.

“Thank you for saving my life,” she murmured, walking up to me. She seemed so somber that the need to touch her overwhelmed me.

I took her into my arms. She buried her face in my chest. “You know I’ll always be there for you. Always.”

She gazed up at me, her palms sliding from my chest up to my face, stroking my neck, my cheek. Her tenderness made me feel woozy, like this was a type of comfort I hadn’t even known I’d needed. I was so relieved and grateful she was here, alive, with me, that leaning down to capture her mouth was the only thing that felt natural right now.

Her lips parted for me, both her hands reaching up my nape and running through my hair. She glued her body against mine as I kissed her. She kissed me back with her all, then broke it off. “I love you so much.”

“Hey! Is this it?” Xavier’s loud voice dropped like a bucket of cold water all over me.

Right. We were supposed to be searching—*not* kissing. So much for my plan to prioritize and get out of here ASAP. As if she could hear my thoughts, Cali cringed, blushing as she let me go. Her expression shifted to determined, and she nodded, looking up at me.

“Let’s go see what they found.”

The fire and courage in her eyes made me breathe right.

“What’s going on?” I asked once we moved back to the main room.

Xavier was holding up a string of black beads for Harlow to inspect. Her eyes lit up as she examined them. “Yes, you found it!”

Xavier reached for Cali, holding her hand as he blew out a breath of relief that mirrored my own. “Thank fuck—I want to get the hell out of here.” His eyes flickered to the spot where Clementine’s body had been suspended in the air, and I felt unease build in my stomach.

Seriously, what the hell could’ve happened to the body?

What would Adéluce want to do with it?

What kind of goddamn creepy ritual would she—

I didn’t want to finish that thought.

“So how does this thing work?” Xavier’s no-nonsense attitude pulled me back to the present. “You just draw some shit on the ground, put on the necklace, and we’re good to go?”

Harlow shook her head. “Not quite…” She looked around the room, pushing the desk. She threw open some drawers and came back with a piece of chalk. Cali, Xavier, and I watched as Harlow drew a large shape on the ground.

“What’s that?” Cali murmured, nudging both Xavier and me.

“A witchy shape, obviously,” Xavier informed her.

“It’s a polygon,” I corrected.

“Yes, what the nerd said,” Xavier muttered.

I ignored my brother’s insult while Harlow fussed over her design, perfecting the corners.

“Okay, all three of you stop rambling now,” Harlow declared. She straightened to her feet, throwing the chalk away. “This works as follows: you guys will stand in the symbol. I will wear the beads, and all should be good, *but*…”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “But, what?”

“But we’ll need someone on the other end to mark our arrival point,” Harlow said.

Cali frowned. “Our arrival point? We’ve never had to do that before.”

Harlow nodded. “It’s because it’s such a long distance,” she said. “This way, we can try to secure the magic and get you there.”

“That sounds good to me,” Cali said, looking at Xavier and me.

It did to me too. With the way the ashes had affected magic previously, we needed all the strength we could get. I knew what we had to do next.

“So we need someone on the other end to help our landing?” I asked.

“Yes, ideally,” Harlow said.

I glanced at my brother and Cali. “I know exactly who to call.”

# Episode 3335

**Lola**

Jay and I were tangled up together in bed, my chin resting on his bare chest. “So what does it feel like being in charge of the pack house now that Greyson’s been gone?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Jay shrugged coyly. “Pretty cool.”

I smirked. “Oh, come on! I know you love it—you’re totally into the power trip!”

“I am *not*,” Jay said with a snort. “I’m just—”

“Mr. Alpha,” I said, my voice teasing and breathy. “Mr. Alpha-For-Now, actually, but I’ll take it.”

Jay scoffed and flipped me back on the bed. I let out a squeal when he pinned my wrists over my head, his massive muscular body crushing mine.

“You’re such a fucking tease,” he said, chuckling as he nibbled up my neck. Heat spread all over me, and I squirmed closer. But of course I didn’t stop teasing.

“What? You don’t like Mr. Alpha-For-Now?” I asked innocently. My voice was breathy. “Would you prefer something else, then? What about Mr. Man? Mr. Big Boss?” I gasped. “I know, Mr. President!”

Jay faced me, his face both dubious and utterly amused as I wrapped my arms around his neck and did my best Marilyn Monroe singing impression. “*Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, Mr. President*—”

Jay’s gaze was alight with amusement. “My god, you’re so ridiculous I don’t even know what to—”

“*Happy birthday to youuuuu!*” I keened the last note, and Jay’s boisterous laughter vibrated between us. I grinned, locking my legs tighter around him as I stroked up and down his back. “Now,” I whispered in his ear, “show me who’s in charge.”

Jay’s bright expression shifted to something sharper, and I was all over it. He didn’t say anything—just kissed me hard enough that I saw stars. He rubbed up between my legs, hot and heavy up against me, the friction between our bodies so intense that I had to beg for it. When I breathed, “*Please*,” Jay flipped me onto my stomach.

I gripped the sheets as he hauled me on my elbows and knees, gasped when I felt his hand on the flesh of my ass. His palm landed there with a smack. The impact made me gasp, whine, throb all over while my hips moved backward for more, twitching.

“You love this,” Jay rasped, caressing the spot he’d struck. Breathless, I nodded vividly. The insides of my thighs trembled as I arched my back for him, when—

The phone on the bedside table vibrated.

And Jay actually *dared* pull away to pick up.

“Are you fucking serious? Whoever it is can wait!” Outraged, I grabbed him and pulled him back in for another hard kiss.

Jay laughed around my mouth. “Lola, it’s Greyson. It might be important!” He gently pushed me away, and I flopped back on the bed with a groan.

“*Unbelievable*,” I lamented. “This is the downside of power—my man is no longer my own, the temporary Alpha crown has swallowed him whole!”

Jay was still laughing when he grabbed the phone. “My god, you’re *so* dramatic.”

Still set on luring him in, I turned to my side, resting my weight on my elbow. “But you love it when I’m dramatic.”

Biting his lip and shaking his head at me, Jay picked up. “Greyson?” he said. “Yeah, right here…” His gaze trailed down my breasts. I made sure to jut them out for effect. “Yeah, I can check on them.”

*Check on what? We’re kind of in the middle of something, Greyson!*

I fluttered my eyelashes at Jay and blew him a kiss. But suddenly, the devilish grin vanished from his face, and he sat up. “Seriously?” he said. His expression alarmed me, so I sat up as well, leaning closer to eavesdrop.

“What’s going on?” I mouthed.

He raised an index finger at me, indicating I should hang on. At the same time, he said to the phone, “Okay, I’m on it.”

When he hung up, his face was so severe that all my horny thoughts were assassinated.

“What’s going on?” I asked anxiously. “Is Cali okay?”

“Cali’s okay,” Jay said, “but Greyson and the others need Big Mac and Kira to help them out with something right away. The witches aren’t answering their phones, though, and it sounds serious.”

“Shit, we have to wake them up!” I hopped out of bed, starting to get dressed. “How serious? Is everybody okay? Are you sure Cali’s fine?”

“I think so,” Jay said firmly. “But we need to get moving—Greyson said it was urgent.”

My best friend’s safety was the most important thing right now. Jay and I put on our clothes at the speed of lightning, and then Jay said, “I’ll talk to Kira. Go find Big Mac.”

“On it.” I grabbed his face, kissed him one last time, then dashed out of the room and down the hall to where Big Mac’s room was. I knocked on the door, paused for a few beats.

Nothing.

Ugh, what was she doing? She had to be in there—I could smell her!

“Big Mac?” I called, knocking once more. “Hello?”

Finally, a breathless-sounding Big Mac called out, “Go away!”

I rolled my eyes. “Big Mac, this is important!”

I banged on the door repeatedly till I could clearly hear the witch stomping around the room. She shouted at me, “Stop knocking, and shut up!”

And then, she yanked the door open with a huff. “This better be important,” Big Mac snapped.

“Don’t you have your phone on you?” I asked impatiently. “Greyson needs you!”

Big Mac’s eyebrows arched. She glanced back toward Mrs. Smith, who was still in bed. “It was on silent—I *was* asleep. What’s going on?”

“Follow me,” I said. “Greyson needs your help.”

Big Mac didn’t protest. She tied up her robe and walked with me down to the living room.

“… that’s what Greyson said,” Jay was saying to a sleepy-looking Kira. His eyes flickered upward, and when he spotted Big Mac and me, he nodded. “Big Mac—I was just telling Kira that Greyson, Cali, and Xavier need to get back as soon as possible, so—”

“Wait!” I gasped in excitement. “If they’re coming back, does that mean they found the ashes?”

Jay shook his head. “No clue. They didn’t give me a lot of details.”

Jay’s downcast gaze and worried tone of voice got me all frazzled. If the trio had the ashes, they would’ve been making a triumphant return. This was far from it. I lapsed into silence and took a seat, my stomach churning at the thought of Cali going through even more trouble because of that damned demon.

“Let me call Greyson,” Jay said, looking between the two witches and me. “He said he’d explain everything.” Jay tapped on his phone, and we all waited as he FaceTimed Greyson. Greyson picked up instantly—I could see his blond head pop up on the screen.

“Greyson,” Big Mac said, “we’re here.”

“What do you need?” Kira asked. “We’re ready.”

“Thank you,” Greyson said, letting out a sigh of relief. “Let me pass you over to a new friend of mine.”

Suddenly the unfamiliar face of a woman appeared on screen. Big Mac frowned. “Greyson, what’s going on here?”

“We’ll explain everything once we’re back,” Greyson said from the side of the screen, his voice tense. “Right now, please listen—this is Harlow, and she needs your help to get us home. We need to hurry and get out of here.”

*Here?* Where was *here*? New Orleans, but where exactly? My anxiety for Cali—and the two Alphas—started to ramp up again. *What is going on?!*

“We need to blip to Oregon,” the strange new witch said, “but it’s long distance, and there’s a situation with the magic in New Orleans. We’ll need some fail-safes… We need the two of you to go to Crater Lake. Now.”

“What?” Kira said. “Why?”

“It’s the only way we’re going to be able to blip there successfully.” Harlow then started describing some sort of shape to draw and a bunch of witchy stuff that went over my head. But Big Mac nodded and immediately stood up.

“I’ll get what we need.”

Once she was gone, I sat down next to Kira and leaned over to lock eyes with the witch on screen. “Hi, is Cali there? Can I talk to her?”

She looked to her side. Cali’s voice came through as she said, “Hi, Lola.” She sounded just as tense as Greyson, and my stomach lurched.

“Babe, hi! Can I see you?” I asked, trying to sound chipper despite my stress.

The screen lurched, and Cali’s face appeared on camera. “There you are!” I exclaimed, quickly scanning her for any outward signs of injury or anything. “You’re okay!”

“Of course I’m okay,” Cali said. “Not dead yet.”

I chuckled, feeling much better. Cali smiled, and just then, Big Mac returned to the living room. “I’m ready!” she called.

The screen moved again, and Harlow reappeared. “I need you to do this with the old method—it’s the only one that’s foolproof, okay?” She started talking, saying stuff I barely understood, but Kira and Big Mac were on board.

“Ready?” Harlow asked.

Big Mac and Kira exchanged a serious glance. Together, they said, “Ready.”

# Episode 3336

**Xavier**

“Okay, everyone in the pentagram,” Harlow called out, waving us all into the five-pointed star in the center of Clementine’s living room. “We all need to be standing within the shape for this to work.”

I never liked the sensation of blipping from one place to another, and I’d have been lying if I said I was looking forward to this one.

“Now hold hands,” Harlow instructed.

I took Cali’s right hand, and I saw Greyson take her left. I took a deep breath and braced myself for what was about to happen. I didn’t like blipping under normal circumstances. It was weird and felt unnatural. Besides that, it made me dizzy and motion sick, like I’d just gotten off a rocking boat.

But it was our best option for fast travel. I just hoped Harlow was right and this was all going to go well and without incident.

Harlow slipped the string of jet-black beads around her neck and looked around at us. “Are you ready?” she asked.

I nodded, and Cali did the same. We were ready. Then my eyes strayed to the right, and I looked over at the space where Clementine’s dead body should still be.

I couldn’t wait to get out of here. Out of this apartment, for sure, but just out of New Orleans in general. I was done with this messed-up place.

Harlow took my hand and Greyson’s hand, then closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and began to speak, almost like she was singing. “*Itinerantur, peregrinatio, iter*.”

The next moment there was a lurch, and I was suddenly surrounded by a confusing blur of sounds and noises. I tried to look around, but I was having trouble moving my head freely. This wasn’t like any of the other times I’d blipped through space with a witch. All those times it had felt basically instantaneous, but now I was in this strange, interstitial void, and the moment seemed to be stretching out for far too long.

My heart pounded, and I felt fear beginning to course through me. I squeezed Cali’s hand and was reassured when she squeezed back. She was there. Cali was there, and her presence grounded me back to reality.

*Cali? Can you hear me?*

*I can hear you*, she responded instantly. *I’m here. Whatever you do, don’t let go of my hand, Xavier.*

*Never.*

Finally—after what felt like ages—the roaring confusion all around me came to a sudden stop, and we all fell into a confused jumble on the cold ground.

I rolled toward Cali on instinct and put my arm around her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, all in one piece,” Cali said, though she was breathing hard, like she’d just run the distance.

Satisfied that she looked unhurt, I looked around. The ground was cold and covered with frost, and all around us were high, snow-covered mountains.

I blew out a breath, relieved to be back on solid ground. I fucking *hated* blipping. No matter how many times I did it, I was never going to be used to it. I scanned the area again, using my werewolf senses. I wanted to see if there was anything near us that constituted an immediate threat. I sensed the presence of more than one person and turned quickly. But it was just Big Mac and Kira, standing motionless in the cold.

“It worked, then,” Big Mac said briskly.

It had worked. We were home, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Greyson got to his feet. “Thank you for coming.”

Big Mac nodded. “Of course.” She raised an eyebrow. “Though there aren’t a lot of things I’d blip to a remote location in the mountains to help with.”

“Thank you,” Cali said, her face flushed. “Thank you so much for your help.”

Harlow had gotten to her feet and stepped forward. “I’m Harlow. Thank you for your help arranging this meeting place.”

Big Mac nodded. “You can call me Big Mac, and this is Kira. And you’re welcome. Thanks for getting them home.”

Harlow glanced around, looking nervous. “We might not have a lot of time.”

“We probably don’t,” I agreed grimly. “Adéluce has been able to track us this entire time. She must know that we’ve left New Orleans, and even if she doesn’t know yet, she probably will soon. Which means we don’t have very long.”

“So what do you need to do?” Kira asked.

“We need to find the ashes—the real ones—as soon as possible,” I said.

Cali looked around. “But how? Where could they even be, here?”

“I’m… I’m not sure,” I admitted. I ran a hand through my hair. “I haven’t been to Crater Lake in a long time. Not since Colton and I used to go camping.” But the one thing I did know was that it wasn’t a place I’d even begin to know how to search.

Greyson had been looking around, too, but now he turned toward the three witches. “Is there anything you can do?”  
 “Is there anything we can do about what?” Big Mac demanded, looking annoyed by Greyson’s vagueness.

“About Adéluce!” Greyson burst out. “Is there anything you can do about her? Anything you can do to outsmart her? I mean, Adéluce is a witch, and you’re witches. There must be something you know about her, right?”

“Right,” I said, feeling the oddness of agreement pass between us. “But we can’t let our guard down for a single second. We know how Adéluce likes to play games, right? And we know she’s going to go after Cali, just for fun. We have to be careful not to let Cali out of our sight,” I said, looking at Greyson. “She’s in danger every second until Adéluce is neutralized.”

“You are, too.”

I looked down at Cali, who was looking up at me.

“She’s coming after you, too,” she said.

I gritted my teeth at the reminder, but Cali was right, and I didn’t disagree. Adéluce had made it perfectly clear to me that she was looking for revenge.

Greyson looked like he was thinking hard. “I have a question,” he said, turning to the small knot of witches. “Can you do some kind of cloaking spell? Something so Adéluce doesn’t know where we are, even if she’s out looking for us?”

Kira looked thoughtful. “I guess that might be an option,” she said slowly.

“But it still might not stop her,” Big Mac said bluntly. “This isn’t a normal situation, gang. Adéluce is a very powerful magical being, and even if we do cast a spell like that, a smart witch would know how to break through it.”

Greyson shook his head. “Even if she can break through it, we need to do something. And a spell that might slow her down a little is better than nothing.”

Big Mac thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. “I guess I don’t disagree.” She looked around at Kira and Harlow. “Care to join me?”

The two younger witches stepped toward Big Mac, and the three of them bowed their heads. Big Mac began to speak in low tones, so I could only just catch the words she was murmuring.

“*Celare, abdo, occulto, abscondo*…”

After a moment Kira and Harlow joined in, so they were all chanting. I began to feel a little warm, like there was a patch of heat spreading out from my core, but I tried to focus on the words they were speaking.

After a moment the witches fell silent and Big Mac looked up at us. “She can’t track you. For now. But it’s not going to last, so keep your damn eyes open.”

Cali nodded. “We will. Thank you. All of you.”

Big Mac gave her a brisk nod. “Now,” she said, looking over at Greyson, “let’s think about how we’re going to find these ashes of yours.”

Greyson sighed. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that, too. We should start in plain sight, even though that seems counterintuitive. I just think Adéluce might just work in the opposite way we expect…”

I tuned the conversation out as my thoughts went to Adéluce and everything I knew about her. It wasn’t much, exactly, but I had a sense of the kind of person she was—ruthless, vengeful, powerful, vindictive. So what did that tell me about where the ashes could be?

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a wisp of smoke, and it distracted me from my thoughts. I looked around, trying to find the source, and when I found it, I felt like my heart had stopped.

The smoke was rising from the back of Cali’s shoulder, where Seluna’s handprint still marked her skin. And as I watched, Cali’s dark hair turned quickly to red, almost as though it was being eaten up by flames, right before my eyes.

*What the fuck?*

# Episode 3337

**Artemis**

My conversation with Adair was interrupted when Mikah checked in. We’d all agreed that we would get packed up and hit the road to the airport shortly. After Adair left, I started throwing my stuff in the suitcase and went through our conversation multiple times in my head.

I had no idea how to feel about it. About *him*.

He had claimed, pretty intensely at that, that he was keeping his distance to keep me safe. Could that be all? Would he be acting differently if it weren’t for the Fae court? Or was that just an excuse? But if he didn’t want anything to do with me, why would he care enough to make up an excuse? That did not make any sense. Frustration made my eyes burn, and I zipped the suitcase shut with a huff.

The vigorous motion strained my wounded neck, and I winced. Pain was nothing to me usually, but a vampire bite was a whole other problem. I shoved the image of Pierre’s bloodthirsty eyes out of my head and quickly headed to the bathroom. I looked at myself in the mirror, leaning closer to inspect the mossy bandage thing. It hadn’t moved.

Melusine’s work actually looked quite sturdy. Pretty weird, but effective. The spot still felt tender, but it was obviously way better than getting your neck ripped open. I wished Torin were here—he would’ve been able to fully close up my wound without any fuss. Despite being useful, having a bunch of moss strapped to your neck wasn’t exactly a stylish look.

Then again, I’d never really gone for *stylish*—I preferred *badass*, and I grinned to myself at the thought of a fearsome scar forming after the wound healed up. I would like that very much, and I suspected that Rishika would as well.

Speaking of Rishika, when I returned to the room, I noticed that her suitcase was open at the corner, only half-packed. She hadn’t returned to the room yet, so I finished up packing for her and rolled our suitcases out to the hallway. Ignoring the sting at the side of my neck, I called out to her.

“Over here!” Gabriel’s voice came from the kitchen. I found him and Mikah by the dining table, both their suitcases packed and ready.

“Are you good to go?” Mikah asked impatiently.

“Yes,” I said, just as Rishika popped out from behind the refrigerator. “I got you a snack.” She grabbed a plate and plopped a bunch of grapes on it, along with some cheese.

“Do we really have the time for snacks?” Gabriel asked. “Because if we do, I could eat a whole—”

“You already ate a whole loaf of bread and didn’t even ask me if I wanted some,” Mikah deadpanned.

Gabriel laughed. “But vampires don’t eat bread.”

“I can still *taste* human food, and I would have liked it if my mate had offered me some nonetheless,” Mikah declared.

While the two boys bickered, Rishika walked over and handed the plate to me. Her voice was low when she spoke. “How did it go with Adair?”

I glanced at Mikah and Gabriel—still bickering—and said, “I’ll tell you later.”

“Okay, but you’d better eat right now,” Rishika said. Not even a minute later, Tabitha and Adair walked into the kitchen. My stomach closed up at the sight of him. Our eyes locked for a moment, and then he looked away.

This felt so *wrong*.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road,” Gabriel said, as cheerful as ever. Mikah seemed fine as well, so I gathered they’d made up in the past thirty seconds. Good for them.

“Grab your suitcases, we’re—” A loud crash from outside interrupted Mikah. It didn’t sound that close, but it was enough for everybody to go on edge.

“What was that?” Tabitha whispered.

“I’ll go check,” Mikah said, heading outside.

“I’m coming with you,” Gabriel said and followed.

“I’m not leaving those two alone—they always get into trouble,” Adair grumbled, going after Gabriel.

“Wait, I’m coming too!” Tabitha was next, walking out the door.

Rishika and I were left alone in the kitchen. “Eat your snack, and let’s go see what’s happening.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Hey, you gotta keep your strength up, especially after everything.”

I sighed long-sufferingly. “Is this how it’s gonna go, then? You’re gonna keep fussing over me?”

Rishika raised an eyebrow, resting both her hands on my shoulders. “Yes. Because I love you. That’s how it works.”

Warmth spread all over me at her words. Nobody had ever stuck around long enough to take care of me like this. Being with Rishika was a whole new experience—one that I’d never even known could be possible for someone like me.

Ignoring the lump in my throat, I grumbled, “You’re so stubborn.”

She laughed. “Right, look who’s talking.” She pointed at the plate. “*Eat*.”

Pretending to be annoyed, I rolled my eyes and emptied my plate. Rishika kissed my cheek, and I hid a smile as we both went outside. The rest of the group was looking around, Mikah in the lead.

“Nothing seems amiss,” he said gravely. “No odd scents, no traces of magic.”

“What was that crash, then?” Tabitha asked cautiously.

Adair frowned, gazing at the distance. “Perhaps it came from down the street?”

“Did you look over here?” Rishika asked. She was off to the left, looking by the yard. “Must’ve been a raccoon or someth—”

A flurry of motion too fast for me to see burst out of nowhere.

A second later, Rishika disappeared.

I blinked, thinking that I must have been mistaken, but she was just *gone.* My heart pounded so hard it felt like it was about to drop out of my chest.

“What the *hell* just happened?” I shouted, turning to the others frantically.

They were all gaping in confusion.

“Guys!” I yelled.

Gabriel spluttered, “She was right there! I saw her, and then—”

“It has to be some kind of magic, right?” Tabitha asked shakily.

“This is—this is insane!” I shook my head, running over to where Rishika had been standing. “Rishika!” I called frantically. “Rishika, can you hear me?”

No response, but then…

A voice came from behind us that made my blood run cold.

“You’ve all had a busy morning, haven’t you?”

We all whirled around toward the sound, and the sickness that hit me at the sight before my eyes could’ve knocked me out. Adéluce, standing there, holding Rishika in front of her. Rishika was stiff as a board, only her eyes moving, fixed on me.

I had never, not once in my life, seen her so powerless.

The panic that crashed over me was razor sharp, my mind going blank with terror.

“Where’s Xavier?” Adéluce hissed, glaring at each and every one of us. “And the girl—where the hell is she?”

Nobody spoke.

The only sound I heard was my heart pounding in my ears. The vampire-witch’s eyes gleamed with an unhinged glee that I could recognize all too well. This was a woman at the end of her rope—I realized that Pierre’s death must’ve caught her by surprise. She’d underestimated us, and her loss of control over the situation had put her off her game.

I couldn’t gloat about that, though. Not when Adéluce’s hand was wrapped tight around Rishika’s throat. Adéluce’s eyes scanned the rest of us. “I suppose they thought they could trick me, didn’t they? Fools. I can find them anywhere they choose to run.”

I watched as she closed her eyes, seeing them shift rapidly under her eyelids. I thought for an instance about getting the jump on her while her guard was down, but before I could rush forward her eyes snapped open again. “Where. Is. Xavier. Evers?”

“Okay, why don’t we all just take a breath here?” Gabriel said. He held his hands up and took a step forward.

With a single look from Adéluce, Gabriel froze in place.

“Did I say you could move?” she snapped. Yanking Rishika closer, Adéluce bent her neck and snarled, “Tell me where he went, or this little wolf dies!”

“No!”

I hadn’t even realized when I’d spoken, when I’d moved. I reached forward, my entire body on overdrive, every inch of me screaming to just *do something.*

To save Rishika, if it was the last thing I did.

Adéluce turned her cold gaze on me. Her voice cut through me as she said, “You killed my sire, only seems fair.”

My head was empty. I couldn’t form a plan of action. I felt like screaming. I felt like dropping on the ground and begging. I felt like exploding into a million pieces, unleashing all the magic vibrating inside me, even if it could destroy everything around me, my friends included.

All that, just to stop Adéluce from touching Rishika.

“Pierre wasn’t supposed to die!” Adéluce snarled. “Now, tell me where Xavier is, and perhaps I may be merciful.” She grabbed a handful of Rishika’s hair and yanked her head to the side. Rishika’s eyes went wide with horror when Adéluce threatened, “Tell me now, or I rip off her head!”

Adéluce lifted her hand, her grip on Rishika tightening—

The sound that escaped me sounded animal.

And suddenly, nothing else mattered other than Rishika’s life.

“*Stop!*” I screamed, stumbling forward. “He’s in Oregon!”

I wasn’t breathing.

And Adéluce smiled, pure evil abyss standing before us. She pulled at Rishika’s hair one last time to hurt her, then dropped her on the ground as if she were nothing.

“Thank you, darling. See how painless that was?”

In the blink of an eye, Adéluce was gone.

She was after my sister. My friends.

The realization landed on me like a crash, making me freeze into place.

I had just doomed them all to save the woman I loved.

# Episode 3338

“Cali!” Xavier yelled as he leapt toward me, scaring the hell out of me.

“Xavier!” I said, taking a startled step back. “What are you doing? What’s wrong?”

“What’s *wrong*?” he bellowed incredulously, his eyes wide with fear. “Look at your hair!”

“Why?” My heart racing, I put my hand up to my hair. “Is there something in it? What?”

But when I moved my arm, I saw that my skin had begun to smoke, and when I looked down at my hair, I saw that it was turning red. The color moved quickly, eating up the brown and replacing it with the color of flames.

“How?” I asked shakily. “Oh, god. How is this happening? What’s doing this?”

I whirled around, like I was looking for an answer. I knew no one had any, at least not one I was sure I even wantedto hear. I was terrified and confused, and I had no idea what to do. My legs felt weak beneath me, and when they buckled, I lost my balance and tumbled down.

Greyson grabbed me, catching me before I hit the ground. He put his arms around me, holding me upright.

“Cali? Are you okay?” he asked anxiously.

“Get away from her,” Big Mac said sharply. “Greyson, step back. It’s the demon handprint, that’s what’s causing it. Don’t touch her.”

“Like hell,” Greyson snarled, tightening his grip on me.

Big Mac gave an exasperated huff. “Well then move, at least.”

She stepped toward me, and an instant later I felt the witch’s cool hand on my forehead, then my neck.

“*Saintatum, medela*,” she murmured, her hands on my burning skin. “*Curatio, sanatio*.”

“What’s happening?” Xavier demanded. “Can you stop this? Big Mac!”

His voice faded as my skin grew hotter and Big Mac’s hands grew colder. *The demon’s handprint*. That was what she’d said. Seluna was causing this, I knew it. I could feel the handprint searing my back, and I knew she was behind whatever was happening to me. But what the hell *was* happening to me? Heat washed over me in waves, and suddenly I felt weaker than ever—I felt drained, and my whole body ached, like I had the flu. What was sapping my strength? Could this be happening because the ashes were near? Was the handprint on my back *communicating* with the ashes of the one who’d given it to me? Was it calling to them, somehow?

My eyes fluttered and began to close, though I didn’t intend it. Everything seemed to be happening against my will. I was just so exhausted, and my eyelids were so heavy. I couldn’t keep them open.

“Cali! Cali, open your eyes, baby!” Xavier said, grabbing my hand. His hand felt ice-cold.

“I’m here, love. C’mon, Cali. Greyson’s arms around me felt like being wrapped in ice. Dimly, I thought that my mates should put their jackets on. They were too cold. They needed to warm up.

“CALI!”

I could hear my mates calling for me, and I opened my mouth to tell them I was fine.

“*Justtired*,” I murmured. “*Fine. I’m fine*…”

My words slurred together. I couldn’t get my tongue around them. And I was speaking so quietly, I couldn’t be sure they’d even heard me.

I tried to speak again, but I was gone, floating away on the soft, warm clouds of sleep.

*No!* I couldn’t fall asleep! I tried to rouse myself. I needed to tell Greyson something, and I couldn’t remember what it was, but I knew it was important.

I struggled to sit up, trying to grab for him, but it felt like I was moving through thick water. There was so much resistance, and I didn’t have the strength…

I blinked my eyes open and looked around. I was in a bed, in a room, and I was alone.

Wait. This room looked familiar. Why did this place look like the safe house in New Orleans? What was going on? I wasn’t in New Orleans. Hadn’t I just been at Crater Lake?

The comforter spread over me was heavy, and I threw it aside and stepped onto the floor, which felt cold beneath my feet.

“Greyson! Xavier!” I looked around the empty room. “Where are you?”

My call bounced back to me, over and over. The house was more echoey than I remembered. As I stepped out of the room, I could see that the furniture was still covered in protective sheets, but they were billowing in the high wind that gusted through the house. The sheets twisted and lifted, showing the wooden table legs and the faded upholstery of the chairs.

I looked around, confused, wondering why the hell it was so windy. But when I looked, I saw that every window in the house had been thrown open and every door stood ajar.

It was so strange. I looked around critically. The house looked fine. Perfect. Undamaged, like there had never been a fire at all.

But…

That couldn’t be right. I *remembered* the fire. I could still feel the fear that had coursed through me as we fought to get away.

Stepping toward an open window, I looked up at the sky, which was a dark, pewter grey. The clouds hung low and heavy, and—as I watched—lightning slashed across the sky. Thunder rumbled so loudly it felt like it was right overhead. I stepped back from the window, my heart racing.

“Xavier! Where are you? Greyson!”

The only answer was the sound of whipping wind and the deep crash of thunder. I stumbled back from the window, looked around, and started to run.

I sprinted down the hallway, looking into every empty room and screaming, “Artemis! Where are you? Rishika! Gabriel! Mikah! Anyone! Can anyone hear me? Is anyone here? Where is everyone?”

I was starting to get winded, and when I looked, I realized that I wasn’t getting any closer to the end of the hallway. It had been stretching on for such a long time, and now I couldn’t even see where it ended.

I stopped, my chest heaving with the effort of running. Hang on, this wasn’t right. I couldn’t be at the safe house. It made no sense. The safe house was gone. It had burned to the ground.

And something in back of my mind reminded me that I wasn’t in New Orleans at all—I was in Oregon.

The handprint began to burn white-hot, and I gasped at the pain of it. Behind me I heard a low cackle, and when I turned, I saw Adéluce in the hallway. She was striding toward me, her hair and clothes billowing in the wind. And with every footstep she took, the ground beneath her erupted into flames.

*Oh god, no. Not her.*

Adéluce drew closer, her eyes furious slits. “Do you think you can run from me? Do you think you can stop me? You pathetic little mortal?”

Her face contorted with fury, twisting and changing until she began to look like Seluna.

When she smiled at me, I screamed. I stumbled back, but what had once been the long hallway was now a solid wall. I looked around desperately, but there was nowhere for me to go. Nowhere to run.

My heart pounded, but I lifted my hands, trying to control my panic. *Not again. Please, god, not again…*

*Fight it, Cali*, a voice in my head urged me. *You know this isn’t real. She’s doing this to you. None of this is real.*

The handprint on my back burned like the fires of hell. It hurt so badly I could barely keep myself upright. Adéluce was only a few footsteps away now, and the fire she’d created had enveloped us, trapping us in a circle.

I looked up into the face before me, the one that continued to shift between Adéluce and Seluna. I stared into it, seeing my two tormentors. Here, in my nightmare, they had become one. And I realized something. I was scared, but more than that, I was suddenly very, *very* angry.

I was *not* going to let this hallucination continue. At least not without fighting back.

Adéluce grinned, and though she was wearing Seluna’s face, her fangs grew as she leaned toward me.

“Now matter where you go, little girl, I will find you,” she hissed, her breath hot like fire on my face. “You can do your little magic tricks, your little masking spells, but I’ll break through. No matter what you do, I’ll win. Every time.”

“Over my dead body,” I ground out. And then I lashed out.

To Adéluce’s—and my own—surprise, my nails scraped across her cheek, leaving a trail of bright red blood.

Shocked, Adéluce backed up, blinking in what I could only imagine was surprise. Then the house began to melt away. The wind stopped blowing, and the thunder quieted.

Then, with a gasp, I woke up.

# Episode 3339

**Artemis**

I dropped to my knees at Rishika’s side, horror flooding through my entire body as I looked at my girlfriend lying twisted and motionless on the ground.

Gabriel roared and pounced at the spot where Adéluce had just been, but he was too late. She was gone.

“Shit! I’m sorry, Artemis. I wasn’t fast enough,” he said.

“It’s okay,” I said, my voice quivering. I’d barely registered what he said, or his presence. All I could see was Rishika lying on the ground in front of me. I still couldn’t quite believe how out of control things had gotten. One minute Rishika had been standing beside me, and the next she was in Adéluce’s clutches.

“Let me have a look at her,” Mikah said, kneeling beside me.

“Can you help her?” I quickly moved aside.

*Is she seriously hurt? How will I ever forgive myself if I brought her here only for her to get hurt? What if this is permanent?*

I couldn’t take my eyes off Rishika. She hadn’t moved an inch, and my heart was thrashing in my chest as thoughts of the worst possible outcome ripped through my mind. Adéluce didn’t care about anyone but herself and her revenge, so what would stop her from doing something irreversibly bad to Rishika without a second thought?

Mikah rolled Rishika onto her back so he could check to see if there was anything visibly wrong with her. “She isn’t bleeding anywhere, thank god,” he said. He smoothed his hands down her arms and legs, checking to see if anything was broken. “From what I can tell, physically, she’s fine,” he said, though his brow was still knitted with worry.

“Rishika! Wake up! Can you hear me?” I could hear the desperation in my own voice, and for good reason—Rishika wasn’t responding, no matter how many times I called her name.

Tabitha and Adair came rushing over. “Is Rishika okay? Is she hurt?” Adair asked.

I looked up at Adair, tears welling in my eyes. “I don’t know! All I know is that Adéluce did this… And now that I’ve told her where Cali is, she’ll probably do the same to my sister.” I couldn’t hold back my tears, and before long, I was sobbing into my hands. “What have I done?”

Looking grim, Adair knelt next to Mikah to help him check Rishika over, then he took me by the shoulders. “Listen, Cali’s got Xavier and Greyson to protect her, and Rishika is going to be fine. Mikah’s right—there’s nothing physically wrong with her. From the looks of it, Adéluce cast some sort of immobilization spell on her, and then the blast from Adéluce blipping away knocked her out cold. That’s all.”

“Are you sure?” I managed. I’d calmed down and wasn’t sobbing anymore, but a single tear still made its way down my cheek. “I mean, that’s never happened before. Is she going to wake up? What if she doesn’t? How do we know that it’s nothing more serious?”

Adair reached up and wiped away the tear. “She’s going to wake up. I promise. She’ll be weak and out of it for a bit, but she’ll be okay—and she’ll need you, so you need to pull yourself together, all right?”

I took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded. *He’s right. I have to get myself together. Everything is going to be okay. I’ll make sure of it. Adéluce is going to pay for this.*

Adair turned to Tabitha. “We need to leave this place, now. It’s not safe.”

Tabitha nodded. “We should start getting the luggage in the car while Artemis and Mikah take care of Rishika.”

I watched Adair and Tabitha go, then returned my gaze to Rishika. A spike of relief raced through me a second later when her eyelashes began to flutter.

“Rishika! Thank god you’re awake.” I took her hand and held it against my cheek, just as her eyes slowly drifted open. *Adair was right! She’s going to be okay!* I nearly dissolved into tears again, but I did everything in my power to hold them back. I didn’t want me bawling all over the place to be the first thing that Rishika saw.

“Artemis,” Rishika murmured. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m here, babe, right here. I’m okay. How are you feeling?” I couldn’t believe that the first thing out of her mouth was a question about whether I was okay when she was the one who’d been tossed around by Adéluce.

“I’m not sure,” Rishika said. She moaned and tried to sit up, but Mikah put a gentle hand on her shoulder to hold her down.

“Don’t move too much just yet,” he said. “The spell you were under affects your equilibrium, and you might not be able to stand straight for a while. Just take it easy for a second so you don’t hurt yourself.”

“When I get my hands on that witch…” Rishika began, her eyes hard.

“You’re not going to do anything. You’re officially done with this fight,” I said. There was no way I was going to let Adéluce anywhere near her. Next time, I would be ready, and she would never get the chance to hurt Rishika again.

Rishika blinked. “Wow, that’s not like you, Artemis. You’d usually be the first one ready to go after her.”

“And I am—but more than that, I need to keep you safe. Whatever I decide to do about the vampire-witch, you can’t be involved.” The image of Adéluce with Rishika in her grasp flashed through my brain, and a chill raced down my spine. I shook my head. “Right now I need to warn my sister, Greyson, and Xavier about what happened.”

Rishika nodded in agreement. I whipped out my phone, hating that my hands were still trembling from all the pent-up adrenaline. I dialed Cali first, but there was no answer. I tried Greyson next, then Xavier, and nothing. *Shit.* I didn’t know where exactly they were, if they had service, or what they were doing. Frustrated, I typed a quick text to them.

*She knows you’re in Oregon*. You need to hurry.

I stuffed my phone back into my pocket as Gabriel came back in. “Car’s ready to go. I’ll help with Rishika.”

Gabriel and Mikah lifted Rishika from the ground and carried her over to the idling vehicle.

I watched them go, anger racing through me as I thought about everything that Adéluce had put us through. I hated that everyone I loved and cared about was in danger because of that sadistic vampire-witch. She’d made a big mistake, putting her hands on Rishika, and I was going to do everything in my power to stop her. *For my sister. For my girlfriend. For the pack.*

I climbed into the car after Rishika, wrapping my arms around her shoulders to support her. Tabitha and Adair climbed into the row behind us, and Mikah took the driver’s seat while Gabriel rode shotgun.

“Are you all planning to come back with us?” I asked as we pulled off.

Mikah gave me a questioning look in the rearview mirror. “What are you talking about?”

“Adéluce is dangerous, but she’s only after people in the Redwood pack. Her vendetta is against Xavier, not any of you.” I fought off the urge to look back at Adair, too afraid to see any sign on his face that he agreed with me and would be all too happy to bail as soon as he could. I took a deep breath and said, “I think you should just drop us off at the airport, and then we’ll go our separate ways. It’s safer that way.”

Tabitha leaned forward from the rear seat and put a hand on my shoulder. “My sister is in Oregon, remember? I’m not going to leave her there. And even if she weren’t, you all saved me. I don’t run out on my friends like that. I’m coming back with you.”

I nodded. “Okay.” I didn’t know what I’d expected, but Tabitha’s words warmed my heart.

Gabriel spoke next. “Xavier can be a dumbass, but he’s one of my best friends. I’m not going to abandon him to whatever that vampire-witch has planned. We gotta stick together.”

“And where Gabriel goes, I go,” Mikah added. He took Gabriel’s hand as his eyes met mine in the rearview mirror.

I nodded again. The warm solidarity happening around me was unexpected but welcome. Back in the Fae world, I’d only had myself to count on, so it was still a little strange to have people around me who really seemed to care about my well-being and were all too happy to help me without expecting anything in return. To see Rogues and vampires and witches come together with no magical reason for their loyalty except friendship was really something.

I shrugged. “Well, suit yourselves. Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” I said gruffly, trying to cover up the quiver in my voice. I couldn’t help but notice that Adair hadn’t chimed in, and I hated that as I took in the sight of his stoic face. I finally met his eyes and cleared my throat. “I totally get it if you can’t come along.”

He stared at me for a long, silent moment before he finally spoke. “No, I’m coming too.”

It was the simplest statement, but it still made my heart leap. I nodded before turning around to face forward again.

I tightened my hold on Rishika. “Then when we all get back, we’ll take out Adéluce Duquette—for good.”

# Episode 3340

**Lola**

“I’m worried, Jay,” I said, anxiety tightening my chest.

“I know,” Jay said, looking somber. “I am, too. It doesn’t seem like that vampire-witch is going to be good for anyone.”

Sage shook her head emphatically as she stared at the fire in the fireplace. “Nope. I don’t like the sound of her *at all*.”

“No,” I murmured. “It’s scary, and I just keep thinking about Cali. I know I just saw her through a screen when they called, but she looked… not good.”

“She didn’t look great,” Jay agreed, though carefully.

“I don’t even know the last time she slept,” I said, rubbing my own tired eyes.

“Not without nightmares, at least,” Jay added.

“But Big Mac and Kira have gone out to meet them, and they’ll know how to help,” Sage offered, trying to help.

“I guess,” I said, but without conviction.

“At least things have been quiet here,” Jay pointed out. “That’s one less thing to worry about. For all of us. Even with all the craziness of the past few months, we haven’t had any trouble from the Samaras. We haven’t even heard from the weirdo Vanguards.”

“They *are* weird,” Sage agreed.

We were quiet for a moment, then she got to her feet.

“Speaking of which, I’m going to head out on patrol. Make sure things *stay* quiet around here.”

“Thanks, Sage,” Jay said, looking distracted. “Let me know if you need anything.”

She nodded. “I will. See you later.”

I scooted closer to Jay on the couch, snuggling into him, anxious to feel some comfort. “What do you think is going to happen?” I asked. “Do you think they’re going to be able to find the ashes?”

“I hope so,” Jay said quietly. He dropped a kiss onto my head. “I hope all this shit with the ashes and the vampire-witch will be over soon.”

“Me too,” I said.

Jay and I lapsed into silence, each of us thinking about the situation we were facing as a pack.

Elle appeared in the doorway and walked toward us.

“Jay, I want to go run!” she announced.

Jay sighed. “I’m sorry, Elle, but now isn’t the best time. Maybe later.”

But Elle didn’t let it go. She planted her feet and glared. “But I want to run. *Now*.”

Jay raised an eyebrow, surprised at her insistence, but got to his feet. “I can probably get Sage to take you out on patrol with her—”

Elle let out an angry growl, and when I looked at her, I was shocked to see she had partially shifted. Without thinking, I leapt between Elle and Jay.

“Whoa!” I said, holding up my hands. “*Elle!* What the fuck? Stop!”

Elle rounded on me, and I swallowed nervously. I’d never had to fight Elle, and I was glad about that. The girl was pretty scrappy, and a fight with her would *not* be a breeze.

But what the hell was going on with her?

“Elle! What’s your problem?” I demanded.

Elle didn’t answer. Her eyes flashed dangerously, but she took a step back, shifted back to her human form, and walked away.

“What the hell was that?” I breathed when she was out of the living room.

“I have no fucking idea,” Jay said, sounding just as surprised. “Where did *that* come from?”

I shrugged, baffled.

Jay frowned. “I don’t get it. She’s been getting along well with the pack. What set her off?”

“I don’t know.” I thought for a moment. “Maybe she’s just acting out because Greyson isn’t back yet? You know how she is about him. She’s just got a thing for the Alpha.”

“Maybe,” Jay muttered.

“You know, I remember thinking Elle had a thing for Greyson when she first got here. Cali might not have wanted to hear about it, but now I’m thinking I wasn’t wrong, and Elle’s just pissed that he’s gone.” I looked out the door Elle had disappeared through. Seeing her like that had really rattled me.

“Listen, I should probably head out on patrol with Sage and the others,” Jay said.

“Do you have to?” I asked, reaching for Jay’s hand. I didn’t want him to leave.

“Yeah,” he said with a small smile. “I should. It’s for the best. If Greyson and Xavier and Cali are coming back here because of the vampire-witch, there’s really no telling what could be coming our way. We have to keep our eyes open. We have to prepare for… whatever.”

I sighed. “I know, I know. You’re right.” I leaned in and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Have I told you you’ve been doing a great job being in charge while Greyson’s been gone?”

He smiled for real. “You might have mentioned it.”

“You’re the best, Jay.”

“No, you,” he said with a grin.

We could have kept going like that, but I wanted to kiss him more than I wanted to tease. He pulled me close, and I slid my hand around the back of his neck, deepening the kiss. We kept at it until we heard voices on the stairs.

“I’m heading out!” Sage called, walking closer to the door. “Zainab! Ravi! You coming?”

“Coming,” Ravi called, and I heard his feet heading toward us.

Jay smiled and gave me one more kiss. “Be good, okay?”

I rolled my eyes. “Excuse you, I’m always good.”

He grinned. “Okay, not too good then.” He winked. “Come open the door for us.”

We were still operating under the Dick Wigbert, don’t-let-anyone-know-werewolves-live-here precautions, so the patrol group shifted to their wolf forms inside the house, then I used my opposable thumbs to open the door and let them out.

They raced out the door, and I stood for a moment, watching as they disappeared into the trees. I was so lost in thought I jumped when I heard a voice at my side.

“Hate to see him go but love to watch him leave, huh?”

I looked over and let out a breath. “Oh, Jacs, it’s you. What are you doing up?”  
 She shrugged. “I know, it’s early. But there’s been so much commotion around here.”

I headed into the kitchen, and Jacs followed, still complaining.

“I heard Violet and Marta talking loudly a while ago and people slamming about the place like it’s a French farce. And what the hell for?”

She looked up, glaring as Violet and Marta came down the stairs and walked past the kitchen.

Violet caught sight of Jacs’s dark look and grimaced. “Sorry, Jacqueline!” she called. Then she and Marta headed out the front door.

Jacs shook her head. “It’s just so damn early. Why is everyone here some kind of psychotic early riser? I swear, I’m going to kill everyone in this pack house.” She stifled a yawn and moved to the coffee maker, glancing at me. “What’s up with you? You look all pinched and tense.”

I sighed. “Greyson, Xavier, and Cali are heading back from New Orleans today. They’re blipping back because of some kind of threat from that vampire-witch, so Big Mac and Kira had to go out to meet them. I guess you need extra magical support when traveling long distances by witchcraft. That probably explains some of the slamming you heard—getting ready for that.”

Jacs rolled her eyes as she measured out scoops of coffee grounds. “I hope it gets taken care of fast so I can get some decent sleep.”

I stared at her, shocked by her reaction. “*Jacqueline*. There are lives in danger here. Our friends’ lives.”

“Yeah, and I haven’t had quite enough caffeine for that, have I?” Jacs said stiffly, flipping on the coffee machine.

I rolled my eyes again. I didn’t even know why I was surprised by her reaction. That was classic Jacqueline.

“Hey, Elle,” Jacs called out. “Do you want some coffee? Or is that going to make you more wired than you usually are?”

I whipped around to see Elle again. She was headed for the front door.

*Shit.*

“Hey,” I called, running to intercept her. “Everyone already left for patrol, Elle. You’re going to have to wait if you want to go out for a run.”

Elle rounded on me, and in an instant, I could see that she’d partially shifted her hand into a paw—with claws—again.

“You will *not* stop me!” she growled, and swiped at me.

I stumbled back to get away from her blow, completely shocked. Elle seemed so… weird. Almost rabid. She came after me again, but a pair of hands grabbed my waist and yanked me out of range.

It was Jacs, and she stood next to me as Elle fully shifted to her wolf form and sprinted outside.

Jacqueline turned to me, her eyes wide with shock. “Okay, there is *definitely* something wrong with that girl. Like, way more than normal.”

Still breathless from the encounter, I nodded. “You’re right about that. That was *not* normal.” Then a thought occurred to me. “Shit.”

“What?” Jacs said.

I started for the door. “We have to bring her back!”

# Episode 3341

When I opened my eyes again, the first thing I saw was Xavier and Greyson, standing on either side of me. They were leaning over me, and despite how bleary I still felt, it occurred to me that while I’d never thought they looked much alike, they had very similar expressions of fear.

“What was that?” I breathed, pressing my hand to my head. I was still so woozy I didn’t feel like it would be safe to sit up.

“You must have had another Seluna hallucination,” Xavier growled. He looked worried and furious and scared. “That’s what it looked like from here.”

“No, it wasn’t that.” I shook my head, but I stopped when it started to pound with the movement. “Well, maybe. I think that’s how it *started*.”

Greyson frowned. “What do you mean?” he asked, confused. “If it started that way, what did it turn into?”

He glanced up at the three witches, who I saw were also standing close by, looking on with concern.

“It started like a hallucination—this crazy dream about the safe house, back in New Orleans. I was looking for you, but you weren’t there. That was how it started, but then I think Adéluce must have infiltrated the hallucination or hijacked it or something.”

“What do you mean she hijacked it?” Xavier demanded.

“She was *there*,” I said, looking up at my mates. “She was with me at the safe house, talking to me. She said she was going to find us, no matter what we did to hide from her.”

Xavier and Greyson exchanged worried looks. Neither of them spoke for a moment, but then Greyson shook his head firmly.

“Listen, that’s not great, but clearly the spell Big Mac cast is working. Otherwise she would have just found us for real, and not horned her way into your dream. So what are we going to do?” he asked, looking around. “Let’s get a plan. We need to start looking for the ashes.”

“Yeah, but we can’t leave Cali,” Xavier said.

Greyson looked annoyed. “I know that. That’s not what I’m suggesting.”

I took a deep breath and pushed myself to sit. “Hey, I think I’m going to be okay. I’m feeling better. And I’m not afraid of Adéluce.”

It felt like the right thing to say under the circumstances, but I had to admit that I didn’t feel *fully* confident about the statement.

“We have to move,” I said. It was like I could hear the ticking of a stopwatch in the back of my head. “We can’t take our time with this anymore—hallucinations or not.” I looked around. “We just need to start searching the lake.”

Greyson nodded. “I agree, but let’s think about it first.”

“We don’t have time to—” I started, but Greyson cut me off.

“Cali, *think*,” he said gently. “If it’s anything like that house in the bayou or the Duquette house, you know Adéluce will have gotten it ready for us. She’ll have set up booby traps to try to slow us down. We need to be smart about this.”

Xavier looked around, taking in the terrain with a grim expression. “It’s a whole damn lake,” he murmured, almost to himself. Then he looked at the rest of us. “How are we supposed to find one tiny container of ashes here?”

Harlow took a step forward. “I think I might have a solution for you.”

Greyson and Xavier looked up at her expectantly.

“What is it?” Greyson pressed.

“I think I have a way to let you know if you have the right ashes, right on the spot. So you don’t have to go looking for someone to verify,” she said.

“That would be good,” Greyson said, looking interested. “What is it? A charm or something?”

Harlow looked suddenly nervous and shifted her weight between her feet. “Not so much a charm as… a beacon.”

Greyson frowned. “What kind of a beacon?”

“*No*,” Big Mac said sternly. “No, that’s not going to work.” She waved a hand, as though trying to shoo the idea away. “Forget she brought it up.”

Harlow turned on Big Mac. “What do you mean, it’s not going to work? How do you know that? It certainly *could* work.”

Big Mac shook her head. “We haven’t been able to locate these ashes through normal magic means, and a beacon will end up having the same result. I’m sure of it.”

Kira nodded, though slowly. “Big Mac might be right, though I’m not completely sure. This Adéluce seems to have concealed the ashes very well. I don’t know if a beacon would do it.”

My head—already spinning—felt like it was going twice as fast as I listened to the witches converse. It was like they were speaking their own language, and I wasn’t sure what they meant. I was feeling dizzy again, and feverish. Part of me wanted to just lie back down, but I could hear the stopwatch in my head, ticking down our time, and I stayed upright.

“Could someone explain what this beacon *is*?” Xavier growled, growing annoyed.

Harlow looked away from the other two witches and over at us. “Something that’s already connected to the ashes could possibly be turned into a kind of divining rod. You could use it to lead the way as you searched.”

Greyson frowned. “What does that mean, something already connected? Connected how?”

Xavier looked worried. “Wait, you want to turn Cali into a beacon?”

I wasn’t sure how that would work, and I was having a hard time thinking it through. I was still pretty unsteady. But one thing stood out to me, and that was what I asked about.

“Would it help us to find them? Fast?”

“I think so,” Harlow said. “In theory. Kind of like playing a game of hot and cold.”

I nodded. “Okay. Let’s do it. I’ll do anything that helps us find the ashes.”

Greyson looked at Harlow. “But what about Cali?”

“What about her?”

“Will there be side effects?” he asked.

Harlow opened her mouth to answer, but Big Mac spoke over her.

“There will most *definitely* be side effects. What this witch,” she said, throwing a dark look at Harlow, “is proposing is to channel the demon magic that’s still inside Cali. It would wake that magic up and—without a doubt—irritate it. And there’s no guarantee that the beacon would work. There’s no way to know if it would act as a beacon in the way she intends.”

“So it’s dangerous,” Xavier said darkly. “Of course it is.”

I looked squarely at Harlow. “What’s the likelihood that this kind of beacon you’re talking about would lead us to the right ashes?”  
 Harlow shrugged, looking tense. “It’s likely, but Big Mac is right. There’s no guarantee. That’s magic for you.”

“Fucking fantastic,” Xavier muttered.

“It’s possible that the beacon spell would draw on the power of the handprint,” Kira put in. “So it actually might keep the handprint from draining more of your energy, Cali.”

“That’s true,” Harlow said. “And in a way, I’d be tapping into the connection you already have and diverting the power away from the way it negatively affects you. It *might* help,” she finished, though she didn’t sound completely certain.

I was weary, and my whole body ached. I was interested in anything that might help rein in the power of the handprint over me. “That sounds like a solution to a few problems,” I said.

“But,” Big Mac said grimly.

Everyone looked at her, but she didn’t go on.

“But what?” Greyson asked with a frown.

“But even if this spell does work—which it might not—once the spell wears off, all the negative effects that have built up from the handprint will probably hit Cali like a ton of bricks. I *do* know about this spell, and there’s a very good reason why I haven’t used it. I’m not reckless with magic. It’s not a silver bullet to solve anything, and I don’t see this spell doing Cali any good in the long run.”

“Look,” I said, shaking my head, “we’re on the clock, here. We could probably debate this for hours, but we don’t have that kind of time. If this spell could help us find the ashes, then we could send them to the demon world and get rid of them forever. That’s going to solve all my problems. And in the meantime, I can deal with the side effects.”

I was speaking with a certainty I didn’t totally feel, but this plan had to work. Because if it didn’t—

*No*. I couldn’t dare think about that right now. Not when I had to focus.

Big Mac looked furious. She pinched the bridge of her nose. “So you want to do it? Even knowing the risks?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. I had to. It was the only way we were going to end this.

Big Mac sighed deeply, then turned to Harlow and Kira. “Then I’ll help you do it.”

# Episode 3342

**Marta**

“Do you think Cali is going to be okay?” I asked Violet as we walked in the front yard of the pack house. We’d been woken up early by a lot of noise downstairs, and I hadn’t been able to go back to sleep.

Violet sighed and stretched. “I think so. Xavier and Greyson are really protective mates. I’m sure they’ll take care of her.”

I couldn’t help but wince at the word “mate.” I still hadn’t had a full conversation with Lilac since I’d broken up with him about Perrie—his mate. Even thinking the word sent a pang through me.

Noticing my expression, Violet winced as well. “Oh shit. I’m sorry, Marta. I didn’t mean…”

I waved her off. “It’s not your fault. It’s a messy situation all around.” The entire pack house was full of mated werewolves. I was going to have to get used to hearing the word if I wanted to survive here, but at this point, I didn’t know if I’d ever hear the word without thinking about what it had cost me.

Violet hesitated. “Lilac really does love you so much. You know that, right? He wants this all to work out. It’s just complicated, you know? It’s hard for him going through this.”

I shook my head. “I know he’s your brother and you’re loyal to him, but I really don’t need to hear about how Lilac feels right now. I’m trying to focus on me and what I need. That’s the only way I’m going to be able to keep myself together.”

“Totally,” Violet said with a nod. “I get it, you need to do your own thing. I support that. I didn’t mean—Lilac’s my brother, yes, but you know that I’m here for you, too, right? Whatever you need.”

I let out a breath and gave Violet a grateful smile. “Thanks. I don’t know what I would’ve done the past few days without your friendship. And speaking of friendship…” I looked toward the door. “How do you think Dani’s doing? With talking to her sister and everything.”

“I think she’s okay,” I said. “Happy, but… it’s all a lot. I knocked on her door, but she didn’t answer.”

“Probably for the best,” Violet said. “Rest helps a lot.”

“True.”

“And you’re right. She’s been so worried about her sister, and with everything going on,” Violet continued, “it can’t be easy for her. Hell, if it were Lilac out there, I’d be kind of antsy, too.”

I nodded distractedly, deciding to ignore the mention of Lilac again. “Yeah, for sure. Come on, let’s walk around the house.”

“Good idea. I need to stretch my legs, big time.”

As soon as we rounded the side of the house, we ran into Lilac.

*Of all the people in this massive place, of course I had to run into the one person I would jump into a pricker bush to avoid.*

“Oh, hey, sis… Marta,” he said awkwardly, his gaze quickly flicking from me to his sister and then back to me again.

“What are you doing outside?” Violet asked her twin. “Were you going for a run? Jay’s going to kill you. We have to shift inside the house still.”

Lilac shook his head. “No, I was just getting some air.”

I grimaced. Awkward didn’t begin to cover how I felt. Was he going outside to see Perrie?

“We were just taking a walk, so, don’t want to bother you,” I said. I tried to move past him, but he blocked my path.

“Hey, um, Marta… Could we talk for a sec?” Lilac had his hands shoved deep into his pockets and looked about as uncomfortable as I felt.

I looked at Violet, who widened her eyes and shrugged. *Well, she’s no help.* I sighed. I’d been avoiding Lilac successfully up until now, and I was realizing that it was easy to pretend you were starting to get over something when you didn’t have to see the source of your angst staring you in the face. *Maybe he just needs some more closure. I guess I can give him that much.* “Go on ahead, Violet, I’ll catch up with you.”

“Okay, I’ll text if I find Dani,” Violet said before hurrying off.

Lilac led me out into the yard for more privacy, kicking at stones as we went. He was looking everywhere but directly at me, clearly as nervous to have this conversation as I was. “So, how’ve you been?” he asked finally.

“Okay.” I started to say more, but I didn’t actually know what else to say. *Should I tell the truth? Tell him that my heart breaks a little more every time I see him? What would that solve? Me telling him that won’t change anything or put things back to the way they were.*

Lilac nodded and produced a weak smile. “Good, good. I’m glad you’re good, that’s great.”

I sighed. This was shaping up to be one of the worst and most awkward conversations I’d ever had in my life—and I used to live with ghosts.

“So… I just wanted to make sure that you were still comfortable, you know, in the pack house and all. With everything going on I just wanted to, you know, check in on you.”

I nodded. “Well, I’ll admit that it’s not ideal, living with your ex-boyfriend, but this is the only place that feels like home right now.” I couldn’t imagine living anywhere but the pack house, so it wasn’t like I could just up and leave because Lilac and I weren’t together anymore—not that it hadn’t crossed my mind.

Lilac winced at the word “ex-boyfriend.”

“Yeah, okay. Well, you know I respect whatever you need right now. Of course… but I guess I was just hoping that this was more of a… break? You’re making it sound so final.”

I sighed. *This is not where I wanted this conversation to go.* “Lilac, I don’t know what part was unclear. I said I was letting you go. That means we’re done. Broken up. It needs to be a clean break, or it’ll only hurt more. You have a *mate*, for heaven’s sake! I think that pretty much ensures that this isn’t just a break.”

“I know, I know, but I just don’t want to think that it’s completely over. There’s so much between us, Marta. I mean, you’re my first love!”

My heart cracked at the desperation in his voice, the pain in his expression. Everything that I’d been afraid of was happening, and I didn’t know how much longer I would be able to keep it together. It was taking everything in me not to burst into tears. “I know that Lilac, and you’re mine, but this is kind of an impossible situation for me. You have a mate now. I’m not a part of your world. I can’t know what you’re going through, and that’s hard for me. So for now, I’m just trying to do what’s best for both of us, and that’s a clean break.” I turned to walk away, but Lilac ran ahead of me and blocked my retreat.

“I’ll do anything, Marta, I’ll overcome the mate bond—I’ll—I’ll… figure it out. Whatever it takes, because I still love you, and I never stopped—I never will stop! We can get through this! I know we can!”

Lilac took my hands in his, and I could feel my heart swaying. I wanted to give in, to say that we could just forget everything that happened and be together, but I shook my head. No matter how much I wanted it to be, that wasn’t the true solution, and I knew it. I pulled my hands away, my heart breaking a little more. “I can’t do it, Lilac. I’m sorry!” I turned and ran, tears blurring my vision as I tried to put as much distance between us as I could.

I was so overtaken by emotion that I wasn’t paying attention and slammed right into Violet on my way up the path to the pack house. Reacting quickly and stopping us from toppling into the grass, Violet grabbed me and held me stable. “Oh man. That bad, huh?”

I swiped away the tears on my cheeks. “Let’s just walk.”

“Okay,” Violet said softly.

I was grateful she didn’t push it any further. I couldn’t take much more of any of this. Walking felt good, the air burning my lungs as we went around the house. When was I going to stop being so affected by Lilac?

*Never.*

I grimaced. Why did I have the worst luck in the world?

Suddenly, there was an audible growl. I turned to Violet, feeling on edge. “Did you hear that?”

Violet turned around. “Yeah. I did. What was that?”

We heard the growl again, this time from the side. Jumping, I turned to see, of all people, Elle.

“Elle?” Violet asked. “What are you doing?”

Elle didn’t respond. There was something about her stance—something that looked off. Broken, almost.

And then without a word she began running toward us, shifting as she leapt.

# Episode 3343

**Lola**

I rushed for the door and looked out, but somehow Elle was nowhere to be seen.

How the hell had she disappeared? She’d *just* been there. I stared out into the snowy world outside the door. There wasn’t even a trace of her—not even a stray track. Okay, that wasn’t good. At all.

I turned. “Jacs, we gotta go get Elle. Now. There was something in her eyes that just didn’t look right.”

“You can say that again,” Jacs muttered, looking annoyed. “What the hell *was* that? What’s her problem? Has she acted like that before?”

“You know she hasn’t. I don’t know what’s going on with her, but I don’t think that was Elle.”

Jacs frowned, confused. “What do you mean by that? Who else would she be?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know! But even if she’s in her right mind and just suddenly a loose cannon, she can’t be going outside and shifting where anyone could see her. We have pack protocols! We have to go bring her back!”

My thoughts went to Jay, who I knew was out on patrol. He was the acting Alpha, and he didn’t know that we had a new, *very* big problem on our hands. He was too far out for me to mind link with him to let him know what had happened, and I knew he didn’t have his cell phone on him, because—as he always said—wolves didn’t have pockets.

I shook my head. “We have to take care of this.”

“Okay, okay,” Jac said, sounding grouchy. “I get it. Let’s go.”

I stepped out onto the porch and looked around. There was still no sign of Elle, so I took a deep breath, searching for her scent.

When I found it on the air, I pointed north. “She’s that way.”

“You sure about that?”

“Definitely,” I said. “Let’s hurry.”

Jacs followed me down the steps. We headed into the woods to the north, scanning the trees and listening hard, but we both froze in our tracks when we heard a scream in the distance.

“Shit,” I muttered, and took off running.

Up ahead, I could see Violet and Marta standing in a clearing. They looked like they’d been on a walk or something. But they’d stopped and were staring in horror at Elle, who—still only half-shifted—was bearing down on them like a wild animal. As I watched, Violet stepped forward, placing herself between the terrified medium and the suddenly rabid woman. Marta was still freaked, and she stepped back to get away, but she lost her footing on the rough ground. She stumbled over a rock and fell backward. She let out a cry as she landed, and Elle reacted to the noise and sudden movement by fully shifting into her wolf.

“That’s not good,” Jacs said blandly.

*No shit!*

This looked like it was about to get really bad, so I leapt toward Elle before she could reach Violet. I shifted mid-air and met Elle as she was lunging for the girls.

*ELLE! What the hell are you doing? Get your shit together!*

Elle didn’t reply to my mind link, but she *did* bite down on my shoulder before throwing me off and taking off down the path toward the pack house.

“GO!” Jacs yelled at me. “Go after her, Lola! I’ll take care of them!” she yelled, moving toward Violet and a very shaken Marta.

I took Jacs at her word and took off after Elle, my shoulder stinging like fire. I couldn’t believe she’d just *bitten* me. What the actual hell?

Up ahead, Elle’s wolf moved through the trees like a reddish-brown blur. She was hella fast, but so was I. I mean, I was a freaking *hybrid*, and that had to count for something—right?

I was just closing in on her when Elle suddenly changed directions. For a moment I wondered what had distracted her, but then I caught a scent on the breeze that made my stomach drop. It was Jay. She was going after Jay. Sage, Zainab, and Ravi were all with him, and Elle was sprinting after them like someone had just announced bottomless mimosas at brunch.

Shit shit shit!

Elle put on a burst of speed, just as the Redwood patrol came into view.

*HELP ME!* I screamed through the mind link. *Elle’s snapped or something! She’s going to attack you! HEADS UP!*

Reflexes on point, Jay rounded on Elle. *What are you doing, Elle? Stop! Listen to me! STOP!*

But she wasn’t listening to either of us. She leapt up, barreling into Jay and pushing him to the ground.

Oh, hell no. That was my mate she was messing with!

Ravi, Zainab, and Sage were closer, and they all leapt forward and pushed Elle back, trying to restrain her from attacking Jay again. But she was nuts, and it took all of them piling on top of her to get her to stop struggling.

Jay had collected himself and now stepped forward, looming over her prone form. *Elle! What’s going on with you?*

Finally, Elle responded, but what she said made my blood run cold. *There’s a witch in my head!*

I stared at her. *A witch?*

Elle struggled again, trying to free herself from the dogpile. *Yes! A witch! She says we will all suffer until she knows where Xavier Evers is.*

The Redwood wolves all stared at each other, and everyone looked as freaked out as I felt.

*Could it be that vampire-witch?* Ravi asked.

*It must be*, Jay said. *Who else do we know who’s after Xavier? You know, currently.*

*So what the hell do we do now?* Zainab asked, sounding frantic.

That was a great question. How the hell *were* we supposed to get his vampire-witch to stop doing whatever crazy shit she was doing to Elle?

Elle whimpered*. I can’t get this voice out of my head. And she’s so loud. And mean! Help me! Please, I don’t want to hurt my pack. What’s happening to me?*

Elle sounded frantic, and it broke my heart. How could she possibly understand what was happening to her? This vampire-witch was a dick for preying on someone like Elle, who was more vulnerable than most.

*She’s using magic on you, Elle!* I told her, moving so she could see me. *I know it’s hard, but you have to fight her.*

Elle seemed to be too busy fighting *us*. She was thrashing, and it was getting harder for Zainab, Sage, and Ravi to keep her pinned down. What the hell was this vampire-witch doing to her?

*Elle, listen to me*, Jay commanded. *We’re your pack. Your family. You don’t want to hurt us. Fight the witch.*

I looked at the other wolves. *We might have to knock her out*, I concluded.

*You took the words right out of my mouth*, Ravi said, straining with the effort of holding Elle down. *Just say the word, Alpha*,he added, looking up at Jay.

Jay looked miserable, but he nodded*. Do it.*

They didn’t need to be told twice. In one swift move, Sage leaned back, braced herself against Zainab, and used her back legs to kick Elle in the head. Elle was out in an instant. She stopped struggling and went limp.

With a huge sigh, everyone else got to their feet and took a step back.

*Well, that feels like shit*,Ravi said, looking down at Elle, who was crumpled on the frozen ground.

*Yeah, I know. I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s going on, but it isn’t good*, Jay said. *Let’s get her back to the house. I don’t want her getting cold out here.*

*Why is this happening?* I asked Jay.

He shook his head. *I* *have no idea why the vampire-witch is targeting Elle specifically, but this was all to make a point. She can infiltrate our pack even without being here*. He looked around nervously. *Let’s get back right now. I don’t like being out here. It feels too exposed.*

Elle had been placed on Ravi’s back, and her head bounced against his side as he moved quickly. I felt for her—I heard how scared she’d been. But I was scared, too. Elle had gone completely rabid. It had taken five strong wolves to take her down, and she hadn’t stopped fighting until we’d knocked her out.

*I can set up the basement for her*, Ravi offered. *In case this vampire-witch or whoever it is tries to use her again.*

Jay nodded. *That’s probably the best solution for now. We’ll do that.*

*But is that going to work?* I asked, fear gripping me.

*What do you mean?* Jay questioned. *Is what going to work?*

*We can lock Elle up, but what makes us so sure this was isolated to Elle?*

*Oh god*, Sage said, looking over at me. *What does* that *mean?*

I looked around at the wide eyes of the wolves around me. *I mean, could one of us be next?*

# Episode 3344

I rubbed my eyes and got to my feet. “Okay. I’m ready. Let’s do this beacon spell,” I said, looking at Harlow.

“Caliana, are you sure you’ve thought—” Big Mac started, but I held up my hand.

“I have. I heard your concerns, Big Mac, and I appreciate them. I know you’re just trying to protect me, but I’m going to be in danger no matter what, and if this could give us the leg up, then it’s what I have to do.”

Xavier looked worried. “Are you *sure* you want to do this, Cali? We can always try something else—”

“There is nothing else,” I said shortly. “If there were, we would have tried it already. No, this is the only way. I’m sure.”

He gave me a long look. *I hate that you have to put yourself at risk for this.*

*I’m already at risk, Xavier. And so are you. She’s coming for us, and I can’t think of anything worse than just sitting here waiting for my doom while people I love are in danger.*

He gritted his teeth, then nodded.

I turned to the witches. “Please. Cast the spell.”

Big Mac looked unhappy, but she nodded and turned to Kira and Harlow. “Let’s get ready.”

I took a deep breath and dug my phone out of my pocket. I needed to try to get hold of Artemis—tell her what was going on. But the reception here was shit, and I had no idea if it would go through.

*Come straight to Crater Lake when you get back here. Love you.*

I sent the message out, hoping I’d eventually hit a spot with enough reception to send it along.

Then I turned to face Greyson and Xavier. The twin worried looks on their faces almost made me smile.

“Try not to look so worried, guys. Three witches are going to perform this spell—that’s got to help the odds, right?”

Greyson blew out a breath. “I hope you’re right about that, love. But whatever happens, I’m behind you. All the way.”

I hadn’t known how much I needed to hear that from him until he said it, but my heart felt lighter, and I smiled at him. I felt good. I was still tired as hell, but I had my team with me. Everyone here was on the same page, and we were all on board to take out Adéluce.

This was going to work. It *had* to.

“We’re ready.”

I looked up when Harlow’s voice broke into my thoughts. I nodded and headed over to where the witches had set up a chalk circle on the frozen ground for the spell. Candles had been placed around the circle and were burning, the heat steaming in the cold winter air. Bunches of herbs were placed at the north, south, east, and west points of the circle.

“This is going to work?” Xavier asked, walking over.

“It should,” Big Mac said. “Ideally, the circle will contain the magic so that it all flows into the handprint. Then it will be able to use the connection to Seluna to create a beacon for the ashes.”

That sounded good to me, but just as I moved to step into the circle, Greyson took my hand.

“Are you *sure*?”

I nodded, then looked over at Xavier, who was watching me, too.

“I’m sure,” I said. “This will work. I know it.”

Xavier and Greyson nodded, and I turned and stepped into the circle.

Big Mac stood at the south-facing point of the circle, cradling a dark blue crystal in her hands. Harlow took the north.

Big Mac began to chant, her voice low and melodic.

Then Harlow came in.

Then Big Mac again.

I took a shaky breath. *Here goes nothing.*

The crystal in Big Mac’s hands lit up, turning almost clear. The candles began to burn brighter, and their flames grew taller. When they were almost a foot high, Xavier and Greyson stepped away from them, looking worried. Kira walked the perimeter of the circle, an herb bundle in her hands. Smoke billowed as Big Mac and Harlow began their chant again. They were calling on something old and nearly forgotten. They were calling on it for me.

The handprint began to burn. I held back a hiss as the pain grew more intense and tried to stay as still as possible. The flames grew even higher, and I felt the heat emanating from them. The handprint had grown so hot, so searing, that I couldn’t hold back a shocked cry of pain.

Xavier stepped toward me, but before he could step into the chalk circle, Greyson grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

“You’ll mess up the spell,” he said quietly.

Xavier shook off Greyson’s hand. He didn’t look happy about it, but he stepped back.

The pain was now radiating through my body, and I gritted my teeth to keep from screaming. I could feel a resistance from the mark, like it was pulling skin-tight. Like it was trying to protect itself. I felt it trying to grab hold of anything to fight off the witches’ spell. I jumped when I felt it touch my own Fae magic.

*Oh no you don’t*, I thought to myself, and pushed back as hard as I could. I wasn’t going to let this evil mark try to feed off my own magic to resist this. I pushed hard, clenching my fists with the effort.

There was a tiny voice whispering in my head. It wasn’t the voice of just one person—more like a chorus of voices. *How dare you?* I wondered if it was Seluna speaking to me, or maybe even Adéluce. Or maybe it was both, at this point. I didn’t know. The resistance was strong, but I pushed against it, fighting as sweat beaded on my brow.

Big Mac continued the spell. Her voice had gotten lower and huskier as she cast the spell.

Harlow wasn’t looking at anything but the crystal in Big Mac’s hands as she continued the chant.

Then they all spoke in unison.

I felt something fill me. It was hot and bright, like a glowing light. My back arched involuntarily, and I let out a cry of surprise. And pain. It felt like electricity flowing through my limbs. My whole body shook, and my muscles were tight and strained.

Just when I didn’t think I could take it a moment longer, the feeling began to abate, and I fell to the ground like a ragdoll. My breath came in spurts, and sweat trickled down my neck.

I heard pounding feet, then felt hands on me, turning me onto my back.

“Cali? Are you okay?” Greyson asked me.

I blinked my eyes open. “Yeah, I think so,” I said. “Did it work?”

Greyson let out a relieved breath. “I’m not sure.” He looked up at Big Mac. “Well? Did it?”

“You won’t know until you’re in range of the ashes,” she said. She looked grim. “But when you know, you’ll know.”

I got to my feet with Greyson’s help. “Thank you. All of you.”

The witches all nodded. They looked pretty exhausted from the casting.

“Well,” I said, turning to Greyson and Xavier, “let’s go find those ashes.”

“The beacon spell will only last for twenty-four hours,” Harlow cautioned.

“All that for one lousy day?” Xavier said under his breath.

“And once it wears off, the stored effects of the handprint will hit you all at once,” Big Mac added. She gave me a sharp look. “So be prepared.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “Twenty-four hours. Got it.”

“And the cloaking spell we cast before won’t last long,” Kira added.

“That’s true,” Big Mac confirmed. “And the vampire-witch will likely try to break through it.”

“Okay, we got it,” Greyson said. “You should go back to the pack house and send backup.”

“Yes, do,” I said. “Artemis. Rishika. When they get there, tell them to come help.”

Big Mac nodded. “We will.” She stepped toward me and handed me my jacket. “Don’t lose this. You’re going to need it, girlie.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking it. I looked over at Harlow, who was looking pale and exhausted. “And thank you, for everything.”

She nodded with a small smile. “You got it. And call me if you’re ever in New Orleans again, okay?”

I smiled at her. “I will. I promise.”

The three witches stepped back and—all at once—blipped away. One second they were there, and then—with a rush of wind—they were gone.

I turned to look around. I took in the snow-covered mountains on one side, and the lake on the other. It was vast and still and a frigid, dark blue color. Crater Lake was beautiful, but I could barely notice. What stood out most of all was how very, very alone we suddenly were.

I looked at my mates. “Well. Where should we look first?”

# Episode 3345

**Marta**

I was still feeling really shaken as Violet and I headed back to the house with Jacs. I couldn’t get the image of Elle snarling at us out of my head. Why had she done that? What did she have against us? Or was it not about us at all? She hadn’t seemed in her right mind.

“Does anyone want coffee?” Jacs asked as we walked up the porch steps into the house. “I was just making some when we ran after Elle. It’s probably done by now.”

“Sure,” Violet said wearily, and I followed the two women into the kitchen.

Still feeling a little jittery after what had happened, I pulled myself onto a kitchen stool and took a deep breath as Jacs poured coffee into three mugs. She pushed one over to me, and I accepted it gratefully. I wrapped my hands around the cup and tried to absorb some of the warmth into my freezing hands.

Mrs. Smith appeared in the doorway and smiled at us, but it faded as she looked around at our faces. “What happened? You all look so pale. Does anyone want a white chocolate mocha?”

I’d just taken a big sip of Jacqueline’s coffee, and I almost spat it out. It was *terrible*. How had she managed to make it so *watery*?

Pushing the cup off to the side, I nodded at Mrs. Smith. “I’d love a mocha.”

Mrs. Smith moved into the kitchen, took one look at Jacqueline’s pot of coffee and poured it down the drain, then set to work making her white chocolate mocha.

She’d just handed out the mugs when the front door crashed open. I leaned over in my stool and saw Jay, Lola, Ravi, Sage, and Zainab walk in. Ravi was carrying an unconscious Elle across his back.

Once inside the house, they all shifted back to human, and Ravi lifted Elle into his arms. She hadn’t woken up.

Seeing her, I felt a wave of guilt. I still didn’t know what had happened, but I felt terrible about the turn of events.

“Is there something wrong with Elle?” I asked as the group walked into the kitchen. “She didn’t seem like herself.”

“Yeah, there’s something wrong.” Lola sighed, sounding worried. “But we’re not sure what it is. Not yet.” She looked at me. “But what about you two? Are you all right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. I was just startled. I mean, at this point, I’m pretty used to strange things happening around here.” The only thing that had really spooked me was my own reaction—I’d wanted to use my magic. I had my bracelets off now, but I hadn’t used my magic in battle since I’d been mentored by Okorie. But, if Violet hadn’t stepped in to defend me against Elle, would I have been able to defend myself without killing Elle? I wasn’t sure.

Violet was nodding at Lola. “Yeah, I’m fine. Nothing too horrible.”

Jay looked over at Ravi. “Will you take Elle downstairs and get her settled?” He looked around at the rest of the group. “We need everyone down here.”

“Why?” Violet asked, confused.

Jay looked grave. “There’s a possibility that the pack is being targeted.”

“By who?” Violet asked.

“The vampire-witch,” Jay said.

Then, before anyone could say anything more, there was a loud pop, like a bursting balloon, and everyone jumped.

There was a moment of general freak-out where I gasped, Violet let out a cry, and Jay swore loudly and looked around, searching for the source of the noise.

Then Big Mac and Kira appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Big Mac asked, annoyed.

“You surprised the hell out of us,” Lola said, her hand over her heart. “We didn’t know you were coming back.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Any of you heard from Artemis?”

Ravi reappeared in the kitchen, this time without Elle. “No. Artemis and Rishika aren’t back yet.”

“Why are you looking for her?” Jay asked.

“We’ve got a situation at Crater Lake,” Big Mac said. “Greyson, Xavier, and Cali are all out there, looking for the ashes. They need help. They need any of you who want to go out there and help, but blipping all of you…” She trailed off and looked around at everyone. She suddenly looked tired, and very worried.

Kira put a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll get it done,” she said softly.

“Yeah, well, I’ll see your problem and raise you one more,” Jay said.

“What do you mean?” Big Mac asked warily.

“The vampire-witch might be targeting us now. She was in Elle’s head, and she’s looking for Xavier,” Jay told them.

Big Mac shook her head. “This has to be happening because we put a cloaking spell on the others. She’s looking for them, and she’s pissed that she can’t find them. This isn’t good.”

Jay set his jaw. “I want everyone in the living room,” he said. “Now. We need to check and see if anyone else has been affected.”

I slid off my chair. “I’ll go get Dani.”

Violet nodded. “I’ll get my brother.”

We both headed upstairs, and I knocked on Dani’s door. “Dani? Are you there?”

When there was no answer, I pushed the door open. I knew it was inconsiderate, but Jay had seemed serious, and I’d apologize later.

But when I stepped into the room, I saw… nothing. At all. Dani was gone.

I felt the blood drain from my face. I whipped around and sprinted downstairs. “Dani! *Dani!* Where are you?” When I got back to the kitchen, I looked around wildly. “Has anyone seen Dani?”

“No,” Jay said.

“Dani!” Lola called, looking outside the back door.

There was no answer from anywhere in the house.

“Well, that’s not good,” Lola said flatly.

“We’re going to have to find her,” Jay said.

“Agreed,” Big Mac said grimly. “If the vampire-witch were to find out what Dani’s capable of…” She trailed off, leaving us all to imagine what this being would do with Dani’s powers of magical amplification at her disposal.

“Let’s go!” I shouted, heading toward the front door. Lola was behind me, and I turned to talk to her. “She couldn’t have gone far, could she?”

“I think it’ll work best if we split into groups,” Jay said.

Lola shook her head. “I don’t think so. We just need to go. Come on.” She shifted into her wolf form, and so did Violet.

I climbed onto Violet’s back, and the three of us took off through the back door. I held on tight as Violet leapt off the porch and looked around the snowy yard, scanning for any sign of Dani.

After a moment, Violet lifted her nose into the air and sniffed, as though she were catching a scent. I just prayed it was Dani’s.

“Oh! Violet!” I gasped. “Look!” I said, pointing to a set of footprints.

Violet saw them and took off. As we drew close to them, I saw a distant figure of a girl walking down the road. She had her hood pulled up, so it was sort of hard to tell, but I was pretty sure it was Dani.

“Dani!” I called as Violet hurried toward her. “Dani! Is that you?”

I slid off Violet’s back when we reached the girl. She turned, and I saw it was Dani. And she was frowning.

“What are you two doing here?” she asked.

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least she seemed to be herself. I rushed toward her and threw my arms around my friend. “What are you doing here?” I asked. “We were so worried about you!”

Dani looked confused. “Why? I was just taking a walk. I wanted to clear my head.”

“We thought something might have happened to you,” I told her. “The pack is in danger right now.”

Dani’s eyes went wide. “What? Are you serious?”

“We need to hurry back. I’ll explain later. Everyone’s gathering. I’m so glad we found you.”

Dani and I climbed onto Violet’s back and held on tight.

“Why were you out here alone?” I asked her.

Dani sighed. “I was thinking about Tabby. I just wish she was here. I’ve been waiting to see her for so long.”

“You’ll get to see her soon,” I told her. “I promise.”

Violet was running back toward the pack house. I turned and took Dani’s hand in mine. “I know that you’ve gotten used to being alone, but you’re not anymore. You have your pack. And you have me.”

Dani gave me a small smile and squeezed my hand back.

We arrived back at the pack house and found everyone gathered in the living room. We left Violet to shift back to human and joined everyone else.

Big Mac winked at me as I walked in with Dani, and I smiled back. We dropped down to sit on the floor, and Jay stood up in front.

“I have good news, and I have bad news. The good news is that we’re all here—”

Lola cut in, “And that bad news is that one of us might be under a spell.”

# Episode 3346

**Xavier**

I took in the sight of the high, snow-covered mountains. Not wanting to waste any time, I used my werewolf senses to take in the entire area while I primed myself to face any immediate threats. Greyson seemed to be doing the same.

“You sense anything?” I asked him.

Greyson shook his head, his gaze still darting around as he lifted his nose to the air, trying to pick up any scents that might be lingering on the wind. “No, but let’s stick together. Adéluce is probably on her way here, too, and we only have twenty-four hours before that beacon spell wears off. We have to make good use of our time.”

I nodded. I was happy to do a little recon before the others arrived, but I was relieved that we’d have the backup. I had no clue what type of fight Adéluce was going to bring to us, and being overprepared was never a bad thing in these types of situations. I could admit that Adéluce was powerful and would probably push us to our limits, but I was confident in our ability to face Adéluce on our own too.

I’d rip her apart myself.

“We should shift,” Greyson said. “The snow is going to be too much for Cali, or any of us, to handle on foot.”

“Fine,” I said. “Cali should go with you.” Even as I said it, I hated it. “Adéluce is targeting Cali and me. We shouldn’t make it easier for her.”

“Good idea,” Greyson said.

My brother shifted first, and I helped Cali onto his back, our feet sinking into the deep snow. “Good up there?”

Cali nodded, giving me a shivering thumbs up.

“I”ll watch for the beacon.”

After I shifted, we started toward the lake. I could see a big island just off the shoreline we were walking along.

*Is that where Adéluce hid the ashes? Those things could really be anywhere. Good thing Big Mac put that spell on Cali. I don’t know how else we’d ever be able to find those ashes in this place.*

I turned my attention to Cali. The sun was glaring down on us, glinting off the snow and shining off her back. It was unnaturally bright, but the amount of snow here was absurd. *There’s no way the jacket is reflecting like that.* Then it hit me.WhatI was seeing wasn’t a reflection from the snow at all—her back was literally glowing!

*Cali, your back! It’s glowing!*

“It is?” Cali asked aloud.

I told my brother the same. *Are you sure?* he asked.

*Yes.*

Then to Cali, I told her again. *The beacon spell worked.*

Cali spun around so that she could see her back herself. She quickly peeled off her coat, and sure enough, the handprint was emitting a soft glow.

*The witches’ spell worked.* This fact calmed down a little. Cali didn’t seem to be in any pain, and it *was* a beacon spell after all—it kind of made sense that she was shining like one.

“Great, so what, am I a glow stick now?” Cali said.

*The cutest glow stick ever*, I teased.

*Where to next?* Greyson’s mind link interrupted me.

*Should we go check out that island over there?* I asked. *Looks like a good hiding spot to me.*

Isn’t it called Wizard Island? Greyson asked.

Well that certainly seems like a place a witch would hide something.

We made our way toward the island, and I kept an eye on Cali’s back so I could see if the glow changed in intensity at all.

The mark’s glow didn’t change much, and I let out an exasperated huff as we reached the shore. I didn’t know if the glow meant that the ashes were close or not. *Are we hot or are we cold? It’s hard to tell. I hate how unpredictable magic is. It should come with an instruction manual.*

When we reached the edge of the lake, Cali slid off Greyson’s back. We both shifted back to human. The wind was cold, but thankfully being a werewolf had its perks. I stepped closer to Cali so she could get some of my warmth.

Cali frowned, looking at Wizard Island. “So, how are we going to get over there, anyway?”

We all stood there staring at it for a moment, lost in thought.

“Maybe we could swim?” I suggested.

“Seriously?” Greyson scoffed. “Great idea—definitely the quickest way for Cali to freeze. Good one.”

“Don’t start with me, Greyson,” I said, turning to face him. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Why don’t we use that?” Cali said before Greyson and I could square off. She pointed to a small boat that had been dragged onto shore. It looked pretty old. The wood was warped and knotted. It had probably been abandoned a long time ago.

“Looks like a park ranger service boat,” Greyson said.

I walked over to it and nudged it with my toe. “Not sure if it’ll hold up under our weight.” I looked back at them. “Maybe I should go alone?”

Greyson shook his head. “Remember what I said—we have to stick together out here.”

I looked back at the boat. I really wasn’t sure if it would be able to hold our weight, but I knew that Greyson was being cautious for a reason, even if almost everything he said got under my skin.

“Well, let’s give it a try,” I finally said.

The three of us dragged the boat into the water.

“It floats… for now,” I said.

I climbed in carefully. The boat creaked and groaned under my weight, but it held steady. I used one of the gnarled oars to hold the boat still while Cali stepped in. The boat swayed a bit, but it didn’t tip or sink. *So far, so good.*

Greyson stepped in last. The boat was now so weighed down with all of us that the water lapped just an inch or so from the top edge.

“We need to be really careful and steady as we row, or this thing is going to take on water,” I said.

Greyson nodded. “Agreed.”

Greyson and I rowed as slowly as possible. Some water splashed into the boat, but it wasn’t enough to worry about.

Cali picked up a can that was tipped over at her feet. “I can bail with this.”

She started scooping out the water and throwing it over the side as Greyson and I kept rowing. We started to get a little rhythm going and picked up speed.

I looked toward the island. “I think we might actually make it.”

We were about three quarters of the way there when something slammed against the side of the boat, sending it off-kilter so that a rush of water flowed in over the top before it righted itself again. Now, there was about two inches of water sloshing around in the bottom of the boat.

“I’ll go faster!” Cali said, picking up bailing speed.

“What the hell was that?” Greyson kept his posture straight as he peered into the water, trying not to throw us off balance.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But let’s keep going. We can’t stop now.”

Before I could dip my oar back into the water to keep rowing, something slammed against us again, and the boat rocked, allowing more water to flow in. Now, there was about five inches of water at the bottom of the boat, and it had sunk even lower in the water.

“It’s not looking good,” Greyson said gruffly. “The water is right on the cusp of overtaking this thing.”

Copying Greyson’s form and moving slowly so as not to upset the boat, I peeked into the water and saw long, sleek shadows swimming beneath the surface. I frowned and leaned in to look a little closer.

“I see them, too,” Greyson said, catching my eye. “What the fuck are those things?”

“I’m not sure,” I muttered, not taking my eyes off them. I leaned in even closer to get a better look—just as one of the shadows leapt out of the water, slapping me in the face before it dropped into the bottom of the boat, writhing.

Cali let out a bloodcurdling scream. “It’s an eel!”

An *eel*? These couldn’t be native to the lake… Was this Adéluce’s doing? Had she already broken through the cloaking spell? Or was this a trap?

Another eel jumped into the boat, and then another, and another. They slithered around our feet, emitting high-pitched screams that hurt my ears.

“They’re still coming!” Cali screamed as two more eels jumped into the boat, followed by another two. They were weighing the boat down dangerously low—water was now pouring in quickly over the sides.

Greyson was trying to catch the eels and throw them back over the side, but they were too quick and too slippery.

Cali had dropped the bailing can and had her hands over her ears to block out the creatures’ earsplitting screams.

I tried to grab my oar so I could use it to beat back the eels that were still jumping into the boat, but it was no use. The boat sank out from under us, spilling us out into the ice-cold water.

# Episode 3347

I struggled to tread the freezing water. I’d never been in water this cold. Somehow though, I wasn’t feeling as cold as I should’ve been. I should’ve been a block of ice at this point, but I merely felt chilly. The only thing I could think of was that the beam from the beacon spell must’ve been pushing heat through my body, kind of like the handprint did.

It was keeping me from freezing, but it certainly wasn’t keeping me afloat.

“Xavier, Greys—” My cries for my mates were cut short as my head dipped down under the water. Treading water was proving to be difficult. My eyes went wide as I saw dozens of eels swarming around me in the darkness. I swiped my arms out in front of me and let out an underwater scream, sending out bubbles that clouded my vision and accidentally swallowing a mouthful of water in the process. The icy water sliding down my throat shocked my system into action and gave me a burst of adrenaline that sent me kicking back to the surface.

I coughed and spluttered as I tried to catch my breath, my muscles burning with fatigue. I didn’t know how much longer I was going to be able to keep this up. *How long before I drown? Or until the cold pushes through the beacon heat and I freeze to death?*

I turned to see something huge making its way through the water toward me, and I almost screamed again before I heard Greyson’s voice in my head.

*It’s me! Cali, don’t worry, it’s me!* He’d shifted and was wolfy paddling his way over to me, his thick fur no doubt protecting him from the icy cold water. He swam alongside me, and I grabbed ahold of his fur, too weak to pull myself onto his back. He turned in the water and made a beeline for the island, pulling me along while I kicked my legs lazily, trying to take some of the burden off him.

When we reached the shore, I heaved myself out of the water and stumbled forward. My legs were weak from exertion, and I collapsed beside Greyson’s wolf on the rocky beach. I slapped my wet hands together and rubbed at my arms, trying to warm myself up.

Greyson was panting hard next to me, exhausted from the swim and from having to tow me such a long distance. I looked back toward the water, searching for any sign of Xavier. It didn’t take long for me to spot his wolf paddling to shore.

Now that I knew both of my mates were safe, I allowed myself to relax. “Let’s not do that again,” I said, still gasping for air. I lay back and coughed, trying to get the last dregs of icy water out of my system.

Greyson had shifted back to human and was panting as he lay on his back. “Yes, agreed.”

He’d somehow retained his winter jacket, and even though it was soaked through, he wrapped it around himself. Xavier did the same as he stumbled onto the beach and collapsed next to me.

I sat up and pulled off my jacket, which weighed a ton now that it was filled with water. I stood up and tried to wring it out as best I could, but then I just gave up and draped it over a boulder to dry while I took a look around. I wasn’t counting on it, but I hoped that the sun would dry it out just enough for it to be useful later.

“Can you see the mark? Is it still glowing?” I asked, twisting around so that my mates could see it clearly.

Xavier looked up from where he still lay on his back, panting. “It’s no brighter than before,” he said.

I nodded as I stepped toward the trees. I peered between them and could just make out a trail. “People must come here when it’s warmer,” I said. “I think I see a hiking trail.”

It snaked away into a thicket, but if I walked a little farther, I’d be able to see where it went.

“What the fuck!” Xavier suddenly shouted.

I turned to see that Xavier had leapt to his feet and was pulling at something on his legs. I ran over to get a closer look and then reared back in absolute horror. He had at least a half dozen leeches attached to him, maybe more. Was this Adéluce’s doing? It had to be.

“Xavier, stay still, I’m going to get them off you!” I dropped to my knees and began to pull at them, but as I grabbed one of the tiny, slimy bodies, my skin began to burn. “What is this?” I pulled away and rubbed my burning fingers along my pants. “It’s burning me!”

Greyson came over and tried to pull some of them off, but he immediately jumped back. “Those aren’t normal leeches! They’re covered in some kind of toxin!”

“No shit!” Xavier shouted. “Get them the FUCK off me!” He started scraping at them, grimacing with pain as he managed to pull one off and throw it to the ground.

Wanting to help him, I pulled my soaking wet sleeves down to cover my fingers and grabbed one of the leeches. I could hear the sizzle of the toxin burning through the fabric of my shirt, but I didn’t let go. I got one off, then another, hissing with pain as the toxin again made contact with my skin. Ignoring the pain and shifting my shirt again to the parts that hadn’t been burned away, I kept pulling them off to reveal bruised, burnt skin everywhere the leeches had been.

Greyson was doing the same, except he was just using his bare hands. “Who knew that leeches could get any worse than they already are?” he said, wincing against the pain as he pulled them off one by one.

Xavier, thoroughly exhausted now, fell to his knees. He was panting still, and his skin was covered in mottled bruises and blisters. “I hate poison leeches,” he panted.

While he sat down and tried to recover, I busied myself with stomping on the leeches that we’d thrown to the ground.

“Adéluce has to be behind this,” Greyson said with a scowl as we watched all the leeches begin to melt into smoking, sizzling goo.

“When I find that witch…” Xavier muttered, too exhausted to even finish his sentence.

I nodded in agreement, then dropped to the ground and propped myself up on my elbows. I looked at Greyson. “What now?”

“I think we should still stick together. Let’s wait for Xavier to get his strength back, then we’ll go explore more of Wizard Island.” Greyson was lying beside me on his stomach, his face still flushed from our little adventure. His breathing had evened out, but he was still soaking wet and looked like he could use a long nap.

“I’m not going to argue with that,” I said, falling back onto the ground and closing my eyes for a few beats before I got up and walked back toward the tree line. I peered into the dense forest again, observing the terrain. I was trying to see where the trails might lead so I could figure out where we should go next. I was counting on the beacon spell to help us, but we still needed to figure out which direction to take.

There was something about this island that tickled at the back of my mind. It was almost like I had a lost memory of the place, even though I knew I’d never been here before.

“What are you trying to tell me?” I whispered into the wind. It was almost like I could talk to the trees, like my mother could. Wind rustled through the leaves, and for a moment, I thought that the trees were talking back to me. As they continued to rustle, I realized that it was just a coincidence.

“What was that?” I zeroed in on a flash of movement beyond the tree trunks. There was some sort of figure in there. I squinted at it, trying to get a better look.

*Is someone else here? Is it Adéluce? Is she watching us? Trying to see if her leech-and-eel attack deterred us enough to give up?*

“Do you see something, Cali? What is it?” Greyson called out from behind me.

“I don’t know yet. I’m going to get a little closer.” I took a step closer to the trees, holding my breath and stooping down a bit.

“Cali, be careful!” Greyson said. “Don’t get too far away from us. You need to stay close.”

I nodded and took another step. Something was pulling me forward, and my legs seemed to be moving all on their own.

“Cali! The mark!” Greyson called out.

I stopped and twisted around to look at it. It was glowing brighter than ever.

*That can only mean one thing. The ashes must be close!*

# Episode 3348

I looked swiftly around, almost as though I was expecting to see the ashes straight away, but I should have known it wasn’t going to be that easy.

“I think we should use my beacon powers to find the ashes,” I ventured. “I don’t know how we’re going to find them otherwise. They could be anywhere. They could be hidden. Hell, they could be buried. It’s not like we can start digging up the whole island.”

Greyson nodded, though he looked somber at the thought. “We might have to do exactly that.”

I glanced back toward the tree trunk that had caught my eye a moment ago. I wondered what it was that I’d seen. If it was anything at all, or just a bit of light refraction from the lake. It was going to be dark soon, and once night fell, I wasn’t going to be of much use. My night vision was basically non-existent, so we were going to have to rely on my mates’ enhanced vision.

Xavier hadn’t responded, so I looked over at him. I was relieved to see that the mottled leech wounds on his legs looked a bit better. They weren’t oozing anymore, and the bruising seemed to have gone down. He was healing quickly and looked a little less shaken.

“What do you think?” I asked him.

“Maybe you should try moving around,” he suggested.

“What?” I wondered. “Why?”

“That’s how we can use the beacon. We can use you like the witches said,” he said. “Play a game of hot and cold. We’ll watch, and whenever the handprint gets brighter, we’ll know we’re getting closer. When it starts to fade, we’ll change direction.”

I remembered playing that with my dad when I was a kid. He would hide something in the house—a package of fruit snacks or a new book—and then I would walk around, looking for it. He would give me clues, telling me I was getting warmer when I got closer, and calling out, “Cold! *Freezing* cold!” when I was going in the wrong direction.

I sighed as I craned around, trying to see the mark on my back. I wished I could see or even just *sense* the beacon.

Greyson seemed to like Xavier’s idea. “Let’s form a line with Cali in the middle.” He looked at his brother. “One of us can look out for danger ahead, and the other can keep an eye on the beacon.

Xavier nodded. “That sounds about right. I’ll keep an eye on the beacon. You go ahead.”

I thought Greyson was going to argue, but to my surprise, he only nodded. “That’s fine. I’ll take the lead, and you stay behind Cali.”

Xavier smirked. “That’s no problem. I always have Cali’s back.”

I glanced at Greyson, but he didn’t react to this bait, as usual. He started out, taking the lead, and glanced back at Xavier and me over his shoulder.

“I’m going to try to stick to the center of the path as best I can,” he said. “I’m going to go slowly. Try to stay close.”  
 I nodded and looked around. The world around me was dark and foreboding. I looked up into the sky, hoping the moon would be bright tonight. That would be our only illumination as we moved. If only the handprint had been on the front of my shoulder—then it could’ve worked like a flashlight and let me see better in the dark.

“Are you ready?” Xavier asked me, stepping next to me. He must have seen some of the worry on my face, because he gave me a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Cali. We literally have you covered. Front and back. And if you feel sick or weak or anything, all you have to do is let me know. We’ll do whatever we need to. Okay?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“There’s no point in finding the ashes if anything happens to you while we’re trying to get them,” he added.

I thought back to the overwhelming fatigue I’d felt when I’d succumbed to the nightmarish encounter with Seluna/Adéluce earlier. But then I took a deep breath, reminding myself to have faith in the witches’ spell to protect me. I knew Xavier and Greyson were looking out for me, but I also knew it wouldn’t be at all practical for me to be rendered immobile or too weak to walk. Not now. We had to be able to move around freely on this island.

I hurried to catch up to Greyson and stuck close to him, afraid to let him move more than an arm’s length away from me. I wanted to be able to reach out and grab him if I needed him.

The path before us was unwelcoming. It was steep and rocky, but the rocks were loose and rolled under my feet as I stepped on them. I stumbled on my third step and felt Xavier’s hands on my hip and shoulder, steadying me so I didn’t fall.

Greyson looked over his shoulder. “You okay, Cali?”

I nodded.

“It’s only going to get steeper from here,” he said grimly. He gave me a hard look. “Are you sure you feel up for this?”

“I have to be,” I muttered. “Let’s just keep going.”

Greyson didn’t look happy, but he kept walking.

“Use this to step,” he said, pointing out a flat rock. “And watch out for this,” he said, pointing to a small patch of thorny bushes. A little while later, he pointed out a handhold along a rock scramble. “Use that.”

The light was fading, so I appreciated his help.

As I jumped down from a rock back onto the path, I felt a twinge in the handprint. I stopped for a moment, thinking. Was it just my imagination, or had the handprint just gotten warmer?

I was about to ask about this when Xavier spoke.

“Cali, I think the beacon is getting brighter. That must mean we’re headed in the right direction.”

I felt a surge of hope. The island hadn’t looked that big from the shore. And if we were headed in the right direction, how far away could the ashes really be? We had to be getting close.

We trudged onward, and the path began to slope upward. It was steep, just as Greyson had promised. I was starting to feel light-headed, but I wasn’t sure if it was because of Seluna or just the air getting thinner at this elevation. The lake was over a mile above sea level. The pack house was only at about five thousand feet, so this was a big change, and I could feel my whole body working harder to keep up. I couldn’t imagine what it was like to climb mountains with even more elevation, like Mount Everest.

When I couldn’t keep going a moment longer, I paused to catch my breath.

“Greyson,” Xavier barked. “Hang on a minute.”

Greyson turned. “Cali, are you okay?”

I nodded. “I’m fine. I just need to catch my breath. I’m not acclimated to the altitude.”

“We can stop for a second,” Greyson said, but I shook my head.

“No, I want to keep moving,” I insisted, sucking in a breath. I caught the look Xavier and Greyson shared over my head. They were worried. “I’m fine,” I assured them. “I really am.”

“Okay,” Greyson said with a sigh. “Let’s keep going.”

We kept walking. I knew Greyson and Xavier were moving slowly for my benefit, so I moved as quickly as I could. We reached a particularly steep patch. There were rocks buried in the trail, and it felt like climbing a ladder. I was breathing hard, and sweat poured down my face as we crested the top of the trail and looked out. The lake was visible, and it looked inky black in the darkness.

Xavier looked down at me. “The beacon is really bright. We have to be close.”

I looked around at the scrubby bushes along the trail. What had Adéluce done to hide the ashes?

“Why don’t we rest for a minute?” Greyson said with a sideways look at me.

I didn’t argue this time. I was too tired. I needed a break.

Xavier came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me. “We can go slower,” he murmured.

I wanted to argue, but I couldn’t. I was breathing too hard. It was hard—I kept sucking in air, but it was like breathing through a tiny cocktail straw.

“A few minutes either way isn’t going to make any difference,” Xavier added.

“I don’t know,” I gasped out. “Who knows how much longer we have before Adéluce breaks the cloaking spell?”

Xavier looked worried. “Is the handprint bothering you?”

I tapped my shoulder. “It’s warm, but not painful. Big Mac’s spell is still working.”

“Thank god for that.”

“We should keep going,” I said, straightening. “I’m feeling better.”

We continued to walk, and before I knew it, we reached the top of Wizard Island. I turned, taking in the expanse of the lake below. I took another shaky breath. *Now what?* Where were we supposed to go?

I looked at Xavier, about to ask him when behind me, there was a dull thud. When I whipped around, it felt like my heart had stopped.

Greyson was gone.

# Episode 3349

**Greyson**

The fall surprised the hell out of me. It happened too fast for me to gauge how far I had fallen, but it was straight down. I hit the bottom—a hard, flat surface—before I really knew what had happened. Acting on instinct, I didn’t let myself react to the pain of the impact, but I immediately braced myself. Had I just fallen into some kind of trap from Adéluce?

“Greyson? Oh my god, Greyson! Where are you?” Cali screamed.

“I’m here!” I called back. “I’m down here! But be careful coming over! There’s a hole in the ground!”

A moment later, Xavier’s head appeared over the edge. “You okay, man?”

“I’m okay,” I said. Looking around, I could see that the hole I was in was only about ten feet deep.

Xavier heaved half his body over the side and reached for me. “Grab hold. I’ll pull you out of there.”

I was about to reach up and grab for his hand when I felt something strange. It was a breeze, but the smell of it was odd. Deep and dank, and a little mossy. I looked around, confused. I was in a ten-foot hole in the ground. Where could that gust of air be coming from? Something seemed off.

“Hang on,” I called up to Xavier. “I’m going to look around real quick.”

I crouched down and scanned the bottom of the hole carefully. It was dark, so even with my extra strong wolf vision, it was hard to see detail. The hole itself was pretty tight—maybe only eight feet in diameter. It was your basic hole in the ground—dirt, rocks, and a couple of spiders. So where the hell was that breeze coming from?

Then I saw it. It was shadowy, so I wasn’t surprised that I’d missed it at first. There was a hole in the dirt wall. I put my hand up to confirm—yep, that was the source of the breeze.

It was fairly large, and I poked my head inside to see better.

Holy shit. It wasn’t just a hole—it was a tunnel.

“What’s going on down there?” Cali called. “Greyson? Are you okay?”

“I found a tunnel,” I yelled back up. I looked into the darkness of the passageway. I had no idea where it could go, but maybe—just maybe—it would lead us to the ashes.

“What’s going on with the beacon?” I shouted.

“It’s still bright!” Xavier called down.

I thought about that for a moment. “Maybe you two should come down here and we can follow the tunnel. See where it leads.”

We were in the crater—the Witch’s Cauldron. Could this be where Adéluce hid the real ashes? A bit on the nose, but if we were right, I would fucking take it.

There was a beat of silence as Xavier and Cali considered this plan. Then, a moment later, I saw Cali’s face over the edge of the hole.

“I’m coming down!” she called.

I held up my hands as Xavier lowered her down to me. I caught her easily and lowered her to the dirt floor. A moment later, Xavier jumped, landing with a grunt.

“So we’re doing this, huh?” Xavier said, looking around the hole.

I looked at the handprint on Cali’s back. There was no doubt about it—it looked brighter. This could be it.

I gestured toward the tunnel. “Stay close,” I said. Then I dropped down and entered the tunnel.

It was damp inside, and water dripped down the sides. The dirt under my hands felt wet and soft, and it was slow going. The dank smell I’d caught in the hole was stronger in the tunnel.

“It smells terrible in here,” Xavier complained as soon as he climbed in. “It smells like something rotten. Like vampires. Are we sure this isn’t a trap?”

No, I wasn’t sure, and I wished to hell that Cali didn’t have to be here for this, but I knew she did. Without that beacon on her back, we wouldn’t have any idea where to look.

We kept crawling for a long while, not speaking much. Finally, the top of the ceiling sloped upward enough that I could stand. I looked around, then down at the soft earth.

“Are those footprints?” I asked quietly, speaking mostly to myself. Was it possible that Adéluce had left such an obvious trail?

I knew the answer to that question. It was possible, but not likely. The idea that this was all a trap haunted me. I looked over my shoulder to where Cali and Xavier were both getting to their feet. Was I leading us all into a worse situation?

That question, I couldn’t answer. But we’d already come this far, so I just kept pressing ahead.

Behind me, I heard Cali suck in a little breath, and I looked over just in time to see her shudder.

“Are you okay?” I asked quickly.

She nodded and wrapped her arms around herself. “I’m okay. I’m just getting cold.”

“It *is* cold,” Xavier agreed. “But it feels like the cold is coming from behind us.”

We all turned to look behind us. The tunnel was dark, but Xavier was right. It was cold. I could feel a chill enveloping me. The water dripping down the walls was slowing, and turning to ice.

“Fuck,” Xavier swore. He yanked his foot up. He had been standing in a puddle, and ice had formed around it. He pulled away before it sealed him in. “What the hell is happening?”

“I have no idea,” I said, looking around, “but whatever is causing the temperature to drop below freezing is coming from that way,” I said, pointing beyond Xavier. “And if we don’t get ahead of it, we’re all going to freeze.”

I turned and looked in front of me. Whatever it was that lay in that direction, we were going to have to face it. There was no turning back now.

I reached for Cali’s hand. It was cold and clammy. I gripped it tight and started moving as quickly as I could, breaking into a run. All I could do was hope we could outrun whatever dark spell seemed to be after us.

Xavier would’ve had no problem keeping up with the pace of my normal run, but I knew Cali would struggle. My instincts were fighting against each other in that regard—I wanted to get away as fast as I could, but I was already worried about the effects of altitude and the damp cold on her. It was a tough balance, because even with that, I had to push her, so we all didn’t end up as cave popsicles.

As we hurried forward, I noticed the ground beneath my feet was getting rougher. I wasn’t having a problem with it, but I kept up a running commentary, letting Cali know when the ground sloped up suddenly, or if there were rocks that she could trip on.

“Watch for that,” I said, pointing to a stone jutting out from the side of the cave wall.

Cali nodded but was too winded to reply.

The tunnel began to curve, and as I rounded it, I saw that we were about to reach a dead end. The passageway just stopped in a flat, rock wall.

I stopped in my tracks, which caused Cali to run into me, then Xavier into Cali.

“What the hell?” Xavier barked. “Why the fuck did you stop? We have to move.”

I gestured forward. “Move where? There’s nowhere to go.”

Xavier looked up and scowled. “What are you talking about?” he demanded.

I stared at him, then at the wall.

Xavier huffed and slipped past Cali, then pushed roughly past me. Then he walked forward, going right through the wall.

I was stunned. How the hell was that possible? What had I just seen?

I didn’t have time to answer any of those questions before Xavier called back to me.

“I’ll take the lead, since walking down a passageway seems to confuse you, Greyson. Come on, Cali,” Xavier called.

“Are you okay?” she asked me as she passed by.

I looked ahead at the rock wall—the dead end—but it was gone. Xavier was standing in the passageway where once there had been *no* passageway. What had I just seen? Maybe it was some kind of magic spell created to fuck with my mind. If that was the case, it had been effective as hell.

“I’m fine,” I said quickly. “Let’s go.”

As I started after Cali, I could see that the beacon on her back had grown brighter.

Xavier pressed ahead, but I turned back, half-expecting the wall to reappear and close us in.

“Greyson!”

Busy looking behind me, I bumped into Cali. I grabbed for her before she could tumble forward. “Sorry, love.”

Looking up, I saw that Xavier had stopped and was looking around.

We’d reached a fork in the tunnel, and there were two passageways leading in opposite directions, both shrouded in darkness.

“Shit,” Xavier said, turning to look back at us. “Which way?”

# Episode 3350

**Xavier**

I stood still for a long moment, looking between the two tunnels. To be honest, neither of them looked like good options. Both were dark and damp, and that goddamn rot smell was everywhere—sweet and sickly all at once. There wasn’t much difference between the tunnels—the left passage was smaller than the one on the right, but the right one seemed to smell worse. It was a devil’s bargain, no matter how you looked at it.

Turning, I looked back at Greyson, then beyond his shoulder, wondering if whatever was freezing the tunnel was close to closing in on us. My foot was still cold from the icy puddle, and I had a bad feeling that if we made a wrong turn here, we could be trapped.

I thought quickly, going over our options. In another situation, I might’ve suggested we split up so we could cover more ground, but with the freeze closing in on us, we didn’t really have the time. Besides, Greyson and I had agreed not to let Cali out of our sight. Even if she stayed with one of us, it wasn’t the same as having both of her mates watching out for her.

She stepped ahead of me and peered at the tunnels, looking into one, then the other. The beacon on her back was bright now, pulsing with light. But even with that compass to guide us, I couldn’t tell which tunnel to use. It didn’t have a turn signal.

“I have an idea,” she said suddenly, turning to me. “I’ll start down one of the tunnels, and you stay here.”

“*What?*” I demanded. “Are you kidding me?”

“You watch to see what happens with the beacon,” she explained. “If it loses some of its brightness, then we know that’s the wrong way.”

“I don’t know…” I said, feeling uneasy. “I don’t like the idea of you heading down the tunnel by yourself.”

“I’ll only be going a few steps,” Cali assured me. “That way, we’ll know which way to go.”

“I know, but I just don’t like it. What if—”

“We have to hurry,” Greyson said urgently with a glance over his shoulder. “Xavier, why don’t you walk with Cali on your back a ways, and I’ll keep an eye on the beacon from behind?”

“Okay,” I finally agreed. “As long as I’m with Cali and we don’t go so far that you lose sight of us. We all have to stay together.”

Greyson nodded in agreement, and I bent lower so Cali could jump onto my back. She clung to me, and I was shocked by how cold she felt. I hugged her close, trying to pass some of my natural warmth on to her.

“Which one do you want to try first?” I asked her.

“When in doubt, go left,” Cali said, pointing.

“You got it,” I said, turning into the smaller tunnel.

The top of the tunnel began to slope immediately, and it got low enough that I had to crouch down to avoid hitting my head. It was uncomfortable right away, and it made me really hope this wasn’t the way we needed to go. Trying to walk in a crouch was only going to slow us down.

Cali and I had moved about ten feet when Greyson called out to us.

“Turn around! The beacon’s fading. That isn’t the one.”

Relieved, I walked Cali back to Greyson, and we started down the tunnel on the right. We’d only gone a few feet when I heard Greyson’s steps behind me, catching up.

“The beacon?” I asked, looking back at him.

He nodded. “It’s getting brighter. This is it. Keep going.”

I nodded, though I didn’t feel excited about this. I wanted to find the ashes, of course, but wandering through a tunnel we’d found at the bottom of a hole seemed destined for danger. But I kept my mouth shut.

This tunnel was taller, which meant I could walk normally, but it was also narrower. So much so that I had to put Cali down so she could walk on her own. Her legs on either side of my waist were too wide for the slim passage. But I kept her hand in mine, even as I picked up my pace. Cali was still tired and drained from everything she’d been through, and I hated pushing her like this, but at least I could keep her hands warm and make sure she stayed close to me.

The tunnel moved like a serpent, twisting and turning, sometimes so much that it felt like it was backtracking on itself.

“The beacon?” I said tensely. “Can you still see it?”

Greyson nodded. “It’s working. It’s getting brighter.”

Cali looked around at the indistinct rock walls. “Maybe we should be leaving some kind of a marker for ourselves?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I don’t want us to get lost or not be able to find our way back on the way out. The tunnel could fork again or even loop around. Maybe we should leave a trail, like Hansel and Gretel,” she said.

I frowned. “Didn’t the birds eat all their breadcrumbs and leave them to get caught by the witch?”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“I think we should worry about getting out after we find the ashes,” I said, looking forward again. “And I don’t think it’s going to be hard to retrace our steps if we end up turning around. It’s just one passageway.”

Plus, I didn’t know if we were going to even be able to go back the way we’d come. It seemed unlikely, with that strange cold spell chasing us along the passageway. We might have to find another way out, but I didn’t mention that. I didn’t want to worry Cali about it.

Suddenly, I felt the ground move beneath my foot as I stepped down. I stumbled and—my hand still on hers—nearly dragged Cali with me before I had the presence of mind to let go of her just in time for the ground to fully open up under me. I shifted my hand into a paw and used my claws to catch myself on a small crevice on the tunnel floor before I could plummet downward.

Cali gasped and teetered on the edge of the sinkhole for a terrifying moment before Greyson reached out and yanked her back as more of the ground crumbled away.

“FUCK!” I swore, looking around. I was dangling from the edge of a deep crevasse. There was something below me—far below me—hissing. I had absolutely no interest in finding out what was making that sound.

God, that had been stupid of me. I’d let myself be distracted. I hadn’t been paying attention to the path, and I’d almost dragged Cali into a pit.

I scrambled to get a foothold, then clawed my way up and pulled myself over the edge. Panting, I looked across the crevasse and saw Cali and Greyson on the other side.

“Are you okay?” Cali called to me.

I looked down at my arms. There were a few scrapes, but nothing serious.

“I’m fine,” I called back. “But how are you going to get over this?” I gestured vaguely at the chasm between us.

Cali looked it over. “I could get a running start and just—”

“No way.”

“Absolutely not.”

Greyson and I had spoken at the same time, shutting down Cali’s plan.

Cali threw up her hands. “So what do you—”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Greyson announced. And before I could even start to question that statement, he’d whipped off his coat, tossed it to me, and shifted. He then crouched down, allowing Cali to climb onto his back.

I glanced up at the stone ceiling. “Keep your head down, Cali,” I warned, understanding what Greyson was about to do. “The top of this place isn’t high, and if you’re not careful, you’re going to hit your head.”

Cali nodded. “Okay.” She wrapped her arms tightly around Greyson’s neck.

I felt a twinge of envy, wishing she was wrapping her arms around me. But I didn’t have time to dwell on this, because Greyson stepped back, then jumped the distance of the chasm.

Cali had lowered her head to Greyson’s back, but even still, her hair brushed against the top of the tunnel as Greyson easily cleared the crevasse.

He landed with a thud, and Cali, looking slightly shaken, slid off his back. Greyson shifted back, and I tossed him his coat as I moved to Cali.

“Are you okay?” I asked, running my hand over the top of her head, making sure she hadn’t been hurt in the jump.

But Cali didn’t answer me. She wasn’t paying any attention to me. Her eyes were fixated on something over my shoulder.

“Cali?” I asked tensely. “What is it?”

Her eyes were wide. “What *is* this place?”

# Episode 3351

**Lola**

The living room had gone quiet, and everyone was looking around at everyone else in obvious shock. I heard whispers of the word “spell,” everyone clearly confused about what that could mean—and who among us might be affected.

Jay looked uncomfortable but resigned as he cleared his throat, then addressed the pack. “Yes, what Lola said. We think we’re dealing with a spell. It’s possible that the vampire-witch who’s after Xavier is trying to take out her grudge on the pack.”

There were gasps throughout the room.

Jay continued. “It’s looking like Elle is under a spell, and that’s why she’s been trying to attack us. She said there was a witch in her head, demanding to know where Xavier was.”

I shuddered, remembering the fear in Elle’s voice when she’d explained what was happening to her and what she’d been hearing. I couldn’t imagine what that must have felt like—to have some other being’s voice whispering to you from inside your head, hijacking your will. It must have been terrifying.

Ravi had put Elle downstairs in the secure holding cell where we kept pack members who needed to be… contained. There were chains down there, and he’d had to restrain her while she was still unconscious. I wondered, though, if that was even going to be enough. I remembered how hard it had been to subdue Elle when she’d tried to attack Jay. It had taken all of us to pin her down. Elle was strong under normal circumstances, but she seemed even stronger with this vampire-witch in her head. And we had no idea what this vampire-witch was capable of. Evil things, obviously, but could she somehow give Elle the strength to break out of the cell? The chains were silver, so it was unlikely she could, but if she tried to get out, there was a chance she’d hurt herself in the process.

Big Mac got to her feet. “We can check to see if anyone else is under the influence of the vampire-witch with the spell we’ve used before. But this woman is crafty as hell, so it’s possible she’s made it untraceable. Just in case, let’s make sure everyone sticks around here for the time being.”

“Yeah, then if someone goes AWOL, it’ll be easy to figure out what’s going on,” Ravi said.

“Okay, everyone on your feet,” Big Mac ordered, looking around at the worried faces of the pack. “Line up. We’ll scan you all.” She nodded to Kira.

Watching everyone move into place, I was reminded of when Cali had been possessed by Seluna, and we’d had to do this same kind of magic checkup for traces of a curse. It wasn’t a good memory.

Big Mac and Kira started at either end of the line of werewolves, and by the time they met in the center, everyone had come out clean. Which was a relief.

“Okay, I’m going to go check Elle,” Big Mac announced.

Jay nodded. “I’ll take you down there.”

“I’ll come too,” I offered.

When we reached the door to the basement, I turned to Big Mac. “What happens if Elle *is* under a spell from this vampire-witch person?” I asked her. “What do we do about that?”

Big Mac peered at me. “*We* do nothing. You let me worry about that.” Then she followed Jay down, and I went after them both.

Jay stopped at the bottom of the basement stairs and turned to Big Mac. “I want you to be prepared when we go in there. We knocked her out, but it’s been long enough that she might be awake again. And if she is…” He pressed his lips into a tense line. “Putting a werewolf into restraints goes against their nature.”

“You can say that again,” I muttered. “I can’t imagine she’s going to be happy to wake up to find herself chained up. And she’s already kind of a wild card, so there’s really no telling how she’ll react.”

On cue, we heard a low, angry growl from behind the door to the cell. The three of us looked at it for a moment in silence. Then Jay put his hand on the doorknob, hesitated for just a second, then pushed the door open.

Elle was sitting inside, perched on the edge of the cot. The room was bare—intentionally so—with only the cot, which was bolted to the floor. There wasn’t even a window. She looked up as we walked in, watching us with dark, wild eyes.

“How are you feeling, Elle?” Big Mac asked her softly, sounding more friendly than was typical of the gruff witch. I admired her business-like tone. She was speaking like nothing was wrong.

The feral look left Elle’s eyes, and she smiled at us. The expression caught me off-guard.

“I want these chains off, please.”

*Ugh, I feel so bad for her. It’s not her fault! But still, she needs to be here, for her own safety as well as all of ours.*

Big Mac shook her head. “We can’t do that right now, Elle. I’m going to cast a spell on you to see if the spell you’re under is still affecting you. It’s not going to hurt. You won’t feel a thing. All right?”

Elle nodded placidly, but as soon as the witch took a step closer, Elle’s expression changed and she lunged, snapping at Big Mac. She only stopped when the chains jerked her back.

*Oh shit.* Okay, *that* had been the wrong move.

Big Mac took a quick step back, but she looked unfazed. “*Circumspicion, excutio, praetempto*,” she intoned. She dropped her head but kept her eyes open and fixed on Elle.

*Okay, what are we going to do if she* is *still under the spell?* I asked Jay through our mind link, glancing nervously over at him. *It sure seems like she is, otherwise she wouldn’t dare snap at Big Mac like that.*

Jay rubbed a hand across his eye. *I don’t know, but if she is under some kind of spell, we’re going to have to keep her down here. And tell Greyson.*

*God, I hope it doesn’t come to that*, I said, truly hoping it wouldn’t. *The last thing we need around here is another possession. I think we all had our fill with the last ride on that merry-go-round.*

Big Mac’s voice grew louder with her chant. Elle glared at the witch, and it wasn’t a pretty sight. Elle’s beautiful face was contorted with fury, and it scared the shit out of me.

Finally, Big Mac stopped chanting and looked up.

“Well?” I asked anxiously.

The witch shrugged. “There’s still some residual magic in her.”

“What does that mean?” Jay demanded.

“It means that there is some there, but I can’t tell if it’s influencing her, or if it’s just leftovers.”

“So what should we do?” I asked.

“Keep Elle down here,” Big Mac said, though she looked like she didn’t enjoy giving the advice. “Keep her away from everyone else so she can’t hurt them, or herself.”

Jay pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he nodded and looked at Elle. “I’m sorry about this, Elle, but that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Elle took a deep breath. “I understand. I do not want to hurt the pack.”

“I know,” Jay murmured.

“You’re really brave, Elle,” I told her. “I know this is tough, but hang in there, okay? I’ll bring you anything you want—snacks, drinks, magazines, whatever. Okay?”

Elle gave me a small smile and nodded. “Okay. Thank you.”

Jay stepped forward and reached for the silver chains around Elle’s wrists and ankles. He was probably intending to make sure they were secure before we left, but as soon as he got close, Elle’s smile dropped, and she lunged at him.

The room exploded into a flurry of commotion.

“Get out of here!” Jay bellowed. “Both of you, go!”

He was talking to Big Mac and me, but I ignored him. I lunged for Elle, trying to push her away from Jay and pin her shoulders to the cot. But, quick as a flash of lightning, Elle shifted to her wolf form and the chains broke, crumbling around her legs.

“*What the hell?*” Jay exploded.

I stared down at the broken chains. That wasn’t supposed to happen. I had feared it, but I hadn’t thought it would actually be possible. Those things were solid silver. Was that part of the vampire-witch’s spell?

But I didn’t have time to think it through, because Elle was snapping and lunging and was heading right for me when Big Mac shouted.

“*PRAESIDIUM*!”

I’d heard her use that spell before—it was a protection spell—but it didn’t seem to have the intended effect. All it did was turn Elle’s savage attention to Big Mac, and she body slammed the witch to the ground. Then Elle leapt over her prone form and bolted out of the room.

# Episode 3352

Xavier turned to look at me, but I wasn’t paying attention to him. I was transfixed by something else.

“Is this *real*?” I whispered to myself.

I stepped forward into a clearing. It was about thirty feet wide, circular, and completely flat. It was surrounded on all sides by rock that went up and up, all the way into the sky. I could see the moon and the stars spilled across the darkness.

I looked around in total wonder. How had a tunnel under the ground led us *here*?

The clearing was fascinating, but the structure standing in the middle of it *really* caught my attention. The stone monument was tall—five feet or so—and oval in shape, kind of like an egg standing straight up. But, unlike an egg, the sides weren’t smooth. It was made of rough-hewn rocks stacked up against each other, built to create the oblong shape.

Greyson, who was still standing back by the edge of the crevasse, looked around. “Whatever that cold was seems to have stopped at the mouth of this opening.”

Xavier looked around nervously. “You’re sure about that?”

“I think so.” Greyson pointed to the other side of the chasm. “Look. The walls over there have icicles frozen in drips down the walls. This side is still dripping. No ice. I think we’re okay.”

Xavier looked at both sides and nodded. Then he turned his attention to the clearing. “That rock formation looks like some kind of cairn.” When no one responded, he continued. “It’s basically a monument. They’re used as trail markers, or sometimes memorials. They’re used in places where the navigation becomes difficult, and to mark the trail when it could be lost—”

“Yes, professor, I know what a cairn is,” I said, waving my hand to stop his lecture. “I’ve seen them used as trail markers. I just don’t get what the hell one is doing here in this seemingly impossible clearing.”

“It’s calling to us,” Xavier said cryptically.

“What?” I asked, baffled, whipping around to look at him.

Xavier tapped my shoulder, where the handprint from Seluna was burning hotter than it had since we’d arrived on the island. Even though I couldn’t see it clearly, I could sense that it was faintly pulsing with light. “It’s calling to us.”

I looked at Xavier, then at Greyson. “Should we?” I asked, nodding toward the cairn.

They exchanged a worried look, but they both nodded. We walked forward and looked at the structure, silent for a moment, before Xavier spoke, sounding annoyed.

“Okay, so we found this pile of rocks. Now what?”

“Why the hell are you asking me?” Greyson retorted. “It’s not like I led us here on purpose.”

“I just don’t know what we’re supposed to do now,” Xavier bit out. I could tell he was nervous because he always masked that with annoyance. “Are we supposed to make a sacrificial offering—”

Greyson sneered. “Are you volunteering?”

I rolled my eyes. Listening to the two of them bicker was usually like white noise to me, but their voices echoed around the rocky clearing and bounced back, as though the sharp echoes were speaking to each other. The effect was eerie, and I shuddered as an icy chill ran up my spine.

I shook it off, and, sick of listening to them going at it, I walked forward and reached for one of the stones of the cairn. Before I could reach it, I felt a hand on my arm, hauling me back.

“Cali!” Xavier looked at me, shocked. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I just wanted to see if something’s inside it,” I explained.

Greyson eyed the stone structure. “I’m not sure we should be touching it.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“It could have some kind of magic attached to it,” Greyson said, eyeing the thing warily.

“Or it could be a booby trap,” Xavier pointed out. “Didn’t anyone here see *Indiana Jones*? Literally *any* of the movies. I mean, who knows what Adéluce has up her sleeve? My guess is it’s not candy.” He shook his head. “No, we shouldn’t disturb it.”

I looked at the cairn again. “Well, it’s not going to do us much good just to stand here and stare at the thing.”  
 “Cali,” Greyson started, but I didn’t want to listen.

“We’ve come all this way,” I said. “We have to see what this is.”

“I really don’t think—”

“I promise I’m just going to touch one of the stones,” I swore. “Just one.”

Before anyone could argue with me, I extended my hand and pressed my palm to a stone. It felt loose, and I tugged on it a little bit. The next thing I knew, the whole rock cairn tumbled down in a shower of rock and gravel.

Xavier and Greyson each grabbed an arm and pulled me roughly back. We went flying back with such force that we all fell to the ground in a heap.

I scrambled back to my feet and looked around. “Look!”

The rocks of the cairn had fallen away, revealing an urn at its center.

I couldn’t believe what I was looking at, and I was almost afraid to ask. Could it be? Could this really be the urn that held Seluna’s ashes? A silver urn with scrolling engravings was certainly a step up from a garbage bag.

I wanted to pinch myself. Had I actually just found *the* ashes?

Then, as though it was some kind of confirmation, I felt a strange tingling sensation. The space lit up around me, and after a moment I realized the light was coming from the beacon on my back. The light was so bright that it threw up eerie shadows on the walls, and my mates looked at them in wide-eyed wonder.

“Do you think it could be…?” I didn’t need to finish the question. We all knew what we were here for, what we’d risked so much for. This was potentially a huge moment for us, and it seemed like we were all thinking the same thing.

Xavier walked slowly around the urn, eyeing it carefully. “It could be,” he muttered. “It looks about the right size.”

“Be careful,” Greyson warned.

“Careful of what?” I asked.

Greyson shrugged. “Of anything. There could still be alarms or traps protecting it.”

I stepped closer. “Should I pick it up?”

Greyson and Xavier were silent for a moment. Then Greyson moved forward and slipped his arm around my shoulders.

“Love,” he said quietly. “I think we need to operate under the assumption that this isn’t going to be as easy as it looks.”

I stared at the urn, feeling a nearly overwhelming urge to reach out and touch it. It was a strange feeling, and I couldn’t tell if I was motivated by the discovery of the ashes and all that could mean for me, or if something else was driving me to touch the urn. Something outside myself.

Xavier looked around the clearing. “There’s got to be a stick or something around here we can use to test it out. See if it’s going to explode if we touch it or something.”

“I don’t know if that would work,” Greyson started to say, but I stopped listening.

All I could feel was a pull toward the urn. It was like a magnet, drawing me forward. Enticing me to pick it up. My fingers twitched, and I reached out for it, but Greyson caught me by the wrist.

“Cali, no,” he said firmly.

Xavier walked over to us. He’d found a fallen branch, and he reached it out to touch the urn. We all held our breath as the branch made contact with the object, but nothing happened. He nudged the urn with the stick. Nothing happened again.

He tried a third time, and this time the urn started to wobble.

I acted on pure instinct. If the urn fell and smashed to pieces, the ashes could be lost—forever. So I pulled free of Greyson and leapt forward to grab the urn, catching it before it could fall.

My mates stared at me in total shock.

“Cali! *No!*” Greyson called out, but it was too late. I was already holding the urn.

When I’d first seen the ashes that Artemis had pulled out of the bayou, I’d been struck by how unaffected I’d been. I’d looked at them and felt nothing at all. But this was different. Holding the urn in my arms, I could feel the handprint heating up, running an electric current through my body. The beacon must have brightened, because Greyson and Xavier squinted against the light. Greyson shielded his eyes.

I didn’t need a nature witch to confirm this for me. I had no doubt in my mind as I turned to my mates and held up the urn. “These are Seluna’s ashes.”

# Episode 3353

**Greyson**

My heart beat fast as I stepped forward, ready to snatch the urn from Cali’s hands. It looked big in her small hands, and given everything we’d already encountered in search of these ashes, I was terrified that just holding the thing was going to have some kind of negative effect on her.

“These are Seluna’s ashes.”

The confidence in her voice stopped me in my tracks. We’d run into so many red herrings along the way, and I’d been sure that this was another one, but when Cali spoke, the tone of her voice was so sure, so certain, I could see that she had zero doubts. And in an instant, I believed her, too. If she said the urn held Seluna’s ashes, then it held Seluna’s ashes.

Xavier looked less convinced. “Cali, I know we’ve been looking for them, but how do you know *these* are the right ones? Or even if there are ashes in there at all. I mean, remember, we thought we had them once before, and we were wrong about that. This could be another of Adéluce’s tricks.”

But Cali was shaking her head. “No, Xavier. No. I can *feel* it. These are the ashes. My body is reacting to them—”

“Listen,” I interrupted, “I think we just have to go on the assumption that these are the ashes we’re looking for, until we’re proven wrong.”

“I just think—” Xavier started.

“The important thing is that we get the hell out of here as quickly and as safely as possible.” I looked around the strange, quiet clearing. “The longer we stay here, the greater the risk that Adéluce finds us.”

Xavier ran a hand through his hair. “That’s true,” he admitted. He looked back the way we’d come, and at the passageway on the other side of the chasm. “But how are we supposed to get back? Remember that cold front? We had to go pretty fast to escape that. How are we supposed to get through it going back?”

*Shit.* I looked back through the freezing passageway. Icicles still decorated the cave walls, so I knew the pressing cold was still there, waiting for us. I also knew that the cold would be too much for Cali if she tried to walk back through it. She was already too tired and weak.

I blew out a breath, thinking hard. “What if you and I shifted?” I said to Xavier.

“Why?” Xavier asked, confused. “How would that help?”

“Cali could ride on my back, and with both of us running, we could get through it faster,” I said. “At least until it becomes too narrow.”

Xavier thought about that for a moment. “I guess that might work.” He looked at Cali. “What do you think?”

She shrugged. “I’m willing to give it a try,” she said. She looked over at me. “As long as you know that I’m not going to be able to hold on as tightly as usual because I’ll be holding this,” she said, holding up the urn.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. “It should be fine. Here, take this to wrap up the urn,” I said, offering my coat.

Cali took it, wrapped the urn, and stepped back while I shifted. The crack of bones echoed off the stone walls all around us, and Cali flinched at the loud sound.

Xavier removed his coat, tied it around Cali’s waist, and shifted. Then Cali climbed carefully onto my back, holding the urn tightly in her arms.

*Are you ready?* I asked her.

“I’m ready,” she said out loud. I felt her tighten her grip on me, felt the urn pressed against my back. The feeling of it reminded me of how much was at stake here, and I felt my resolve strengthen.

I turned and started back toward the crevasse, and I’d just crouched to leap across it when I felt a rumbling beneath my feet. Seconds later, a blast of heat engulfed me, and I jumped back just as an explosion of flames burst from the crevasse like it had opened the gates of hell.

On instinct, I backed away from the intense heat and looked around. Whatever this was, it didn’t look good. Even without Cali on my back, there was no way Xavier or I could survive passing through that fire. It shot up—almost to the ceiling of the tunnel. Going back the way we’d come was no longer an option.

*We’re going to have to find another way out*, I said to Xavier.

*You think?* He was already moving back toward the clearing. *We’re going to have to climb out of here.*

I looked up. The open sky was far above us. It wasn’t ideal, but Xavier was right—it was a way out. I looked around for the best place to start. There was a pile of rocks to the right of where the urn had been. The rocks were piled, almost like stairs, but I could see that they would only get us so far, and everything beyond the rocks was daunting as hell. Nothing but a sharp ascent up rough stone walls.

*Ready?* I asked Cali.

*Ready*, she said, but I felt her tighten her grip on me as I started up the rocks, Xavier on my heels.

As much as I wanted to sprint up the rocks, I knew I had to pace myself. The rocks gave way under my paws as I climbed, and I didn’t want to do anything that would endanger Cali or cause her to slip off. Using my claws, I scraped my way upward, but when I felt her slipping down my back, I paused.

*Love, are you okay?*

*I’m okay*, she said. *I just had to readjust my grip. Keep going, I’m fine.*

I took a deep breath and kept climbing. I was keeping my eyes up, using the sky above me as a guide. I was getting closer, and if I could just keep moving, I’d be able to make it out in a few more minutes.

But then a large rock—basically a boulder—gave way beneath my paws.

*Fuck, Greyson! Watch out!* Xavier bellowed at me. *You almost hit me!*

*Sorry*, I muttered. I tested the surface as I stepped again. I got a grip, but as I took the step, I heard Cali gasp. Her grip on me loosened, and an instant later the urn fell from her hands.

“Oh no!” she screamed.

I turned to see it falling toward Xavier, and his instincts were lightning fast. He trapped the urn between his body and the surface of the tunnel. But there was a problem, and we could all see it—he couldn’t grab it, and if he shifted back to human, he’d risk letting it fall and shatter below.

“Stay still,” Cali said breathlessly. “I’m coming to you.”

I gripped the steep rock slope more securely with my claws as I felt her shift her weight and slide off my back. Then she began to edge her way down toward Xavier. I watched her, my heart pounding in my throat, and wished there was something more I could do. It was agony to watch her, knowing that with one wrong step, she could lose her footing and fall… Possibly to her death.

I held my breath until she reached Xavier, then watched as she bent for the urn. She almost lost her footing, but she managed to stand up again, holding the run closely against her chest.

Finally breathing again, I mind linked instructions. *Get onto Xavier’s back and follow me.*

Cali—pale and breathless—nodded and climbed onto Xavier’s back. We started moving again, and I was even more careful where I stepped, trying to avoid raining rock and trail debris down on Cali and Xavier.

But, even being as careful as I could, there were a couple of close calls.

*Watch it*, Xavier growled as he sidestepped a shower of stones I’d sent down by accident.

*Sorry.*

Finally, we reached the very top of the tunnel, and I pulled myself up over the rim. I turned back to help Xavier and Cali, and when we were all on flat ground again, we fell back gratefully.

“I can’t believe we made it,” Cali said, her voice shaking. “I can’t believe we found the ashes.”

I was looking up at the night sky, willing my heartbeat to return to normal after that climb, when a dark figure appeared in my line of vision, obscuring the sky above me.

It took a moment for my brain to process what was happening, but when it did, it came to me in an instant.

Adéluce was standing above us, looking down.

“I think you have something of mine,” she said quietly, and reached down for the urn.

# Episode 3354

As I stared up at the figure towering above me, my mind struggled to understand what I was seeing. I was so tired and dizzy, I wasn’t sure if the figure was real or just a figment of my exhausted imagination. It was only when I felt hands closing around the urn, and it being pulled from my arms, that I realized this was real—Adéluce was really there.

*No. God, no. Not now. Not after all this.*

I pulled back on the urn, rolling to one side and curling myself around it, using my body to shield the ashes from the vampire-witch. All I could think about was how hard we’d all worked to get these ashes—how much we’d sacrificed and risked. There was no way in hell I was handing the ashes over to Adéluce.

My mates seemed to feel the same way, because within seconds, they’d both leapt to their feet and were lunging for Adéluce.

Anyone else would’ve been a wolf’s dinner after that, but Adéluce was fast. God, she was so fast, and all Greyson and Xavier managed to do was snap at her swirling clothes before she stepped easily out of their reach.

*Cali! Take the ashes and go!* Greyson bellowed at me. *Get out of here. NOW. Meet us by the lake. Get somewhere safe. We’ll deal with Adéluce.*

I hesitated. My instinct was to push back on this—I didn’t want to abandon my mates—but then Xavier’s voice was in my head.

*Cali! Go!* he called to me. *We’ve got this. Get out of here! NOW!*

Tightening my grip on the urn, I backed away. I still wasn’t sure if this was the right thing to do, but—truth be told—I had no idea what the right thing was. But I knew I had to protect the ashes.

Adéluce’s attention was on Greyson. She tried to blast him with magic, but he managed to jump out of the way before she could hit him. Xavier took advantage of her distraction and leapt onto her back, causing them both to tumble to the ground.

*Cali! GO!* Greyson yelled.

I turned, praying my mates would be okay, and started running. I wanted to sprint—I wanted to run as fast as I possibly could—but the ground was slippery with ice under my feet, and it was just so damn dark. I couldn’t see, and I knew that if I fell, I could shatter the urn. I couldn’t risk that, not after everything we’d done to get it.

So I forced myself to slow down and tried to block out the vicious sounds of fighting behind me—though the grunts and screams and heavy thuds of blows landing bored into my brain. I had to focus. Up ahead, I saw the outline of trees in the distance. That had to be the slope that led down to the lake. I pushed on, but the trees were getting too close, too fast.

I frowned. Something wasn’t right. The trees were *moving.*

I remembered thinking something similar when we’d first arrived on the island. At the time, I’d thought it was a quirk of the light, or my mind playing tricks on me. But now I saw it was no trick. Something was moving toward me. Fast.

I backed up, almost slipping in my haste. I could hear the sound of voices moving toward me. Those weren’t trees. So what the hell were they? What was happening? I was shaking—my whole body was trembling—and I felt weaker than ever. I gritted my teeth, trying to summon my magic. I had to try to blast them away, but I didn’t have the strength. I was too weak to gather it from the air around me, and there was nothing inside me.

I squinted as the figures drew closer. I thought I recognized one.

“*Henri?*” I asked weakly.

It was Henri Duquette. He was marching toward me, his arms held out as if he were reaching for the urn.

“Give me the ashes,” he murmured. “Give them to me.”

Behind him was a collection of ghostly figures. They seemed to be moving slowly through the air, but their approach was steady and relentless.

I looked around, desperate, but there was no way out—no way to escape the approaching ghostly squadron. I knew I had no choice but to turn back and return to Greyson and Xavier… and Adéluce.

Waiting wasn’t an option, so I turned and broke into a run. I tripped and skidded over rocks and holes I couldn’t see in the dark, but I kept a tight hold on the urn. My whole focus was on protecting the ashes inside. My strength was nearly gone. Every few seconds, I’d get a rush of adrenaline as I looked over my shoulder at the ghosts, but it dissipated quickly, leaving me more exhausted than before. I wasn’t sure I was even going to be able to make it back.

But I was getting closer. I’d just heard Xavier’s low growl when a cold, strong hand clamped down on my shoulder, nearly sending me tumbling to the ground.

“*Give it to me*,” a demonic voice hissed in my ear.

I didn’t even bother looking back to see who—or what—had spoken. With a cry, I tried to break free, but I wasn’t strong enough. A chill ran down my body, but my head was burning hot. I felt feverish and like I was going to throw up. More ghostly hands were grasping for the urn. I held it tightly, even as I fell to my knees. I knew I couldn’t keep running, but I wasn’t going to give up. They weren’t going to get it away from me.

My whole being was focused on the urn, but a loud howl drew my attention away. I looked up to see something large and furry rushing past me, slamming into the pack of poltergeists like a bowling ball into smoky pins.

I looked up as Xavier began to attack the creatures with a vengeance. He ripped one in half even as several more of them climbed onto his back. He was going to be overwhelmed by them soon, so I struggled to my feet and grabbed a large rock. It took every bit of strength I had, but I threw it at a creature that was sprinting toward me. Miraculously, my aim was dead-on, and the rock smashed into the creature. It fell to the ground and writhed in agony, its screams shaking my bones. Then it rose to its feet again.

Dammit. More creatures, more rocks, more sticks—whatever I could find, I flung it at the marauding poltergeists. Behind me, I could hear Greyson fighting Adéluce. I looked back over my shoulder and saw that she’d started using the poltergeists as shields.

*Coward.*

A greasy-looking poltergeist came at me, but I kicked at it and swiped at it with a stick I’d picked up. The creeper backed off, and I looked down at the stick in my hand, thinking hard and fast. It was smooth and sharp at one end—the thing looked like a stake. And I wondered if I could *use* it as a stake. Could it stop a vampire-witch like Adéluce?

There was only one way to find out, but was I going to be able to do it? I was trying to stay on my feet, but it was a struggle. I was swaying, and my head was spinning. There was a buzzing in my ears, and I didn’t know how much more energy I had left in me. But I only needed one chance to stake Adéluce.

I turned around and headed toward Greyson, stumbling toward him as I raised the stick and took aim.

But, like she could sense I was coming, Adéluce turned to face me. For an instant, she looked genuinely surprised, like I’d caught her off-guard, and I thought I saw a flicker of fear cross her eyes. That was all the encouragement I needed. That fear told me that Adéluce was afraid the stake might work.

I lunged for Adéluce and aimed for her chest, using all my body weight to plunge the stake in.

Immediately, I was hit by a tremendous blast of freezing cold air, so strong it knocked me backward onto my ass. My thoughts were still focused on the urn, and I covered it with both arms to protect it. I curled onto my side, my face pressing against something cold and wet.

I opened my eyes to see… snow? I looked up to see that the world around me had disappeared, and now everything was consumed in a blinding blizzard.

# Episode 3355

**Xavier**

I looked up in disbelief. A fucking *blizzard*? What the hell? Hadn’t we had enough of this shit before? As I looked up into the swirling whiteness, I started to have flashbacks to the snowstorm that I’d gotten lost in. That had been with Ava, and it had been a fucking nightmare. No part of me wanted to live through anything like that again.

Where the hell had this even come from? Just a second ago, I’d been able to see stars in the sky, but the storm was so thick and dense that now, I couldn’t see more than a foot in front of me.

*Dammit.*

I took out my frustration on another poltergeist, tearing the thing in two and sending it flying through the air. Snow or no snow, storm or no storm, my objective was still the same: to get to Cali. I had to make sure she was safe. But… Where the hell was she?

After dispatching another poltergeist, I looked around wildly, turning toward the last place I’d seen her. And I felt my stomach clench with sudden panic. I could justbarely see Cali, and she was lying on the ground, with something moving toward her.

*Holy shit.* It was Adéluce.

With an earsplitting howl, I lunged toward her, slamming into Adéluce with all my might. I’d been aiming right for her midsection, and the blow landed true. It sent us both skittering along the ground, which was extremely slippery and icy in the sudden storm. The snow wasn’t sticking to the ground—it was melting, then turning immediately to ice, which made digging in for a fight a lot harder. The ice also made it hard for either of us to gain the upper hand, though Adéluce and I fought hard for it. We grappled as the snow fell down on us. She swiped at me, and I ducked only just in time. Magic whistled by my ear. I retaliated by kicking her hard with my back legs, and I relished in the satisfaction of hearing her groan in pain. We rolled and tumbled until we reached the ridge. Then we rolled over the crest and fell back into the tunnel.

I hit the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of me. I gasped for air as Adéluce rose from the ground.

Oh god, no. I crawled forward on my knees. I couldn’t give up. I had to keep attacking. There were no other options.

But Adéluce was already on her feet, and she raised one hand.

“*Volare*!” she screamed.

I was lifted up and slammed back against the rock wall of the underground clearing. I groaned and tried to blink the blow away, but as I did, I heard something moving quickly and quietly along the wall behind me. It was a slithering sound, and a second later I felt something scaly wrap around my neck. I tried to pull away, but the thing had me trapped fast.

It went around my wrists next, then my middle.

I let out a cry of frustration and bit into the living bond around my neck. The taste was foul as I tore into it, and blood spurted into my mouth. I gritted my teeth, tried not to gag, and bit again. I worked until I’d freed my head and front legs.

Blood was running freely from the creature where my teeth had dug in, but I didn’t care. I was just starting to attack the creature holding around my middle and back legs when I saw something strange happening. The blood flowing from the creature was hitting the ground, but it wasn’t sinking in. The blood beaded, then pooled, then combined pools until it formed another slithering snake-like creature that began to move toward me.

I could feel myself starting to panic, but Adéluce only laughed when she saw the fear in my eyes.

That did it. With her evil laugh echoing in my ears, I bit at the last of the bonds holding me and broke free before the creature could reach me. I lunged for Adéluce, but when I snapped my teeth together, they closed on nothing but air. She’d blipped away, just as I reached her.

I didn’t waste any time. I flipped around, moving quickly toward Cali and Greyson. This time, I didn’t have time to worry about having Cali slip off or lose the urn while I climbed—I could be as reckless as I wanted, which was freeing in its own way.

But as I started up the wall, one of the snake creatures appeared from a crack in the rock and coiled around my rear leg, holding it fast.

*Fuck.* I pulled hard, stretching the creature until it snapped in half. The thing was disgusting, and it began to spew blood everywhere. I knew there were going to be more of the creatures trying to intercept me, so I started moving faster. I had to keep going.

A low rumble made me pause. It felt like the air was getting warmer, and I looked around. It was the fire from the crevasse—it was advancing on me, slowly moving along the ground like some kind of terrifying creature. It was burning everything in its path—including the slithering snake things.

That was no loss, but I had no intention of letting myself become part of Adéluce’s perverse barbecue, so I scrambled upward, ignoring the cuts I was getting in the soft parts of my paws from the sharp rocks.

I looked up at the opening, the snow falling down into my eyes. *How* had I only made it halfway? The fire was getting closer, and I was getting hotter.

Up ahead, I saw a bit of ledge jutting out from the rock. If I could reach it, I might be able to jump the rest of the way. I clawed my way ahead until I reached the outcropping, but just as I was about to jump for it, something struck me hard in the jaw.

I whirled around to attack whatever that had been—

*Holy shit!* *Bats?*

Within seconds, I was absolutely *swarmed* by bats. And they weren’t just flying *near* me. These fuckers were flying into me with such force that I was having trouble staying on my feet, and each blow they landed sent me closer to the narrow ledge.

But I wasn’t going to go down without a fight. I bit as many as I could as they flew at me, flinging them away, but more and more were attacking. I was only inches from falling, so it was time to make my move. *Now.*

Using all my strength, I leapt upward. And I almost made it, but I misjudged the distance and fell just short of the edge. I tumbled back onto my ledge and looked around. The fire was licking the walls around me, and the smell of singed fur was in the air. It was mine, of course. The air around me was thick with smoke, making my lungs and eyes burn. It hurt to breathe, because of both the heat and the acrid smoke.

The bats had started after me again, but some of them burst into flames just before they hit, so they came at me like little firebombs.

It went against my instincts to turn my back on the fire, but I knew I had to ignore it if I was going to try to jump again. I had to focus. I scrambled to my feet and looked up, seeing exactly where I wanted to land. Then I used my back legs to dig into the wall and propel me over the edge as the fire singed my fur, burning down into my skin.

I made the jump, but I didn’t have time to celebrate the victory. I fell to the ground and rolled in the freezing snow. This was both to extinguish the fire and to soothe the burns I could feel on my skin. But even that was cut short. I jumped to my feet and looked quickly around, ready to face Adéluce, or more of the poltergeists.

The first thing I needed to do was find Cali. I had to make sure she was safe, and that the vampire-witch hadn’t gotten to her. But where was she? The blizzard made it hard to see, but I couldn’t even spot any shadowy figures.

*Cali?* I tried to mind link her. *Can you hear me? CALI?*

No answer.

*Greyson? Where are you? I’m looking for you, man!*

But there was no response from my brother, either.

*Dammit.*

My head was spinning, and the burns on my skin still stung like fire, but I gave my head a shake to clear it. I had to focus. I looked around, taking in my surroundings. Immediately, I registered three facts.

I was at the top of the island.

Everything around me was covered in snow.

I was all alone.

# Episode 3356

**Artemis**

Rishika had fallen asleep on the car ride back from the airport, but I hadn’t been able to close my eyes. I was too eager to get back to the pack house. I wished I had the ability to blip like a witch and forgo the whole *traveling* part of travel. Besides, going through airport security back in New Orleans had been a pain in the ass. I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that the TSA was staffed entirely with vampires.

I glanced down at my phone. There were no new notifications, but just the sight of it reminded me of the text I’d gotten, informing me that Cali, Xavier, and Greyson had gone to Crater Lake on an ashes-finding mission. I’d been worried ever since I’d received it—it was hard not to feel like I should be with them.

I glanced over at Rishika as she slept. She was looking a lot better—much more like herself.

“Gabriel, hurry,” I urged. “Can’t you drive any faster?”

“I *could*, but either we’d all die in a fiery wreck, or I’d get a giant ticket. I’ve already got too many points on my license, and I’m going as fast as I can,” was Gabriel’s uncharacteristically tense answer. “We’ll be there in a few minutes. Just relax.”

Relaxing wasn’t really a possibility, but I sat back and glanced over at Adair. I wondered what he was going to think of the pack house, and how long he was planning on staying with us.

Then I looked at Tabitha, who was cuddled up next to him. I supposed the length of his stay depended largely on her. I was fairly certain that the only reason he’d agreed to come along at all was because of Tabitha. I didn’t think it had anything to do with me.

Tabitha sighed as she dropped her head back against the seat. “I still want to go to Crater Lake with the others.”

“Why?” Adair asked. “Why would you want to expose yourself to more danger? Especially since none of this involves you.”

I scowled at Adair, wondering if he had any idea how freaking selfish he sounded. I mean, yeah, he was looking out for Tabitha, but was it right to avoid danger for yourself when you could be saving someone else? That just wasn’t the way the pack worked.

I wondered if my father was like Adair, but somehow, I doubted it. I didn’t have any evidence of this—just a feeling. It was the way my mother described Kadmos, too. The way she talked about how much she loved him… It just made me doubt that someone as empathetic as my mother would fall for someone so cavalier about the well-being of others.

“See!” Gabriel said, breaking into my thoughts.

I looked through the windshield to where he was pointing. The pack house was coming into view.

“I told you. We’re almost there,” Gabriel said.

I smiled when I saw the familiar house in the trees. We’d made it home.

I was scrambling to get out of the car almost before Gabriel pulled it to a stop. I was anxious to get to Crater Lake as soon as possible, but I stopped to gently wake Rishika and help her out of the car.

“I’m okay,” she said blearily. “I’m fine. And I’m going to go with you to Crater Lake.”

I looked at my girlfriend. She was pale and swayed a little when she stood on her own, but she was willing and ready to go. She wanted to help me help my sister. I shot another glance at Adair, amazed at the difference between my uncle and the rest of the people I cared about. Everyone else wanted to help.

My arm around Rishika, I hurried us both inside. Many of the pack members were gathered in the living room, including my mom and Tom. They rushed over to us and hugged me close, and my mom had tears in her eyes.

“I’m so glad you’re back safe,” she whispered.

“Me too,” I answered honestly.

Tabitha had been loitering by the door, so I stepped away from my mom and grabbed her hand. “Everyone, this is Tabitha.” I introduced her to the pack members present, listing off their names. “And this is Adair,” I added as an afterthought, gesturing to my uncle.

Everyone smiled and said hello, but Tabitha’s attention went to the stairs, where Dani had just appeared, white-faced. She gasped, flew down the stairs, and launched herself into Tabitha’s arms.

Rishika squeezed my hand as the sisters embraced, and my mom wiped more tears from her eyes. I could only imagine how much joy Tabitha and Dani were feeling. They were both so overwhelmed that neither of them could speak—they only held each other tightly.

Finally, they pulled back and Tabitha held her sister at arm’s length and looked her over. “I’m so sorry for being away,” she said through tears.

Dani shook her head as her own tears streamed down her face. “It’s not your fault,” she said. “I’m just glad you’re back. I never gave up hope, you know. I never stopped looking for you.”

I glanced over at Adair, who was watching the sisters. His expression was closed, giving nothing away. How the *hell* could he not be moved by their reunion? I wanted to say something to him—confront him. If he had *any* feelings for Tabitha—which I was pretty certain he did—how could he not be moved to tears, seeing her reunited with her sister?

Tabitha wiped her eyes with the back of her hand as she looked around. “Well, we should be thanking Gabriel and Mikah. And Artemis and Rishika and all the others. They’re the ones who rescued me.”

Dani hugged her sister again. “I hope it wasn’t too awful for you.”

Tabitha smiled against her sister’s shoulder. “I never gave up hope, either.”

Rishika took a step toward the stairs. “Maybe we should give the sisters a little space,” she suggested quietly to me. “You and I can pack for Crater Lake.”

I nodded and followed her toward the stairs, but we stopped when Lola and Jay busted into the foyer from the basement stairs.

“Has anyone seen Elle?” Lola demanded, looking around urgently.

Everyone shook their heads, and Lola looked panicked.

Next to me, Rishika took a deep breath. “Okay, we need to lock down the house,” she said. “If she’s still inside, we have to make sure it stays that way. Then we need some patrols to—”

“Rishika,” Jay said, cutting her off. “I know it’s in your nature to take charge, but you and Artemis have to get to Crater Lake. I’ll take care of the Elle situation.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. I’ll organize a search party.”

“What’s been going on with Elle?” I asked.

Jay looked grave. “She’s been acting really strange lately. She tried to attack multiple pack members, and then she told us there’s a witch in her head asking about Xavier. We think it must be the vampire-witch.”

“Shit,” Rishika said. “That has to be Adéluce. We need to get to Cali and the others.”

I nodded, and the two of us headed upstairs.

“Artemis, wait,” came my mom’s voice from behind me, and I turned around. She’d followed us up the stairs and was looking at me, wringing her hands.

Rishika gave me a soft smile. “I’ll start packing,” she said and disappeared into our room.

My mom stepped forward and put her arms around me, hugging me tightly. “I know you have to go. I’m just so glad you’re home,” she said again.

Usually emotions came to me slowly, one at a time, and only in small doses, but in that moment, I felt nearly overwhelmed and hugged her tightly back. She was my family—she was my mother.

“Please bring Cali back,” she whispered as she hugged me. “I need you both.”  
 “I’ll bring her back,” I promised. “I need her, too.”

My mom pulled back and looked at me, smiling as she looked me over.

“Did you talk to Adair?” I asked her.

The smile disappeared from her face as worry clouded it. “I’m a little anxious to,” she admitted. “I haven’t spoken to anyone from Kadmos’s family in years.”

“Well, I wouldn’t get your hopes up if I were you,” I warned her. “I suspect that Adair is a far cry from your loving husband.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “That wasn’t a nice thing to say. Cali would be annoyed with me. But I went looking for Adair because I wanted to learn more about my family—and about my father—but Adair hasn’t offered much in either category.”

“Oh, Artemis,” my mom murmured, looking distressed.

I wished I could hide my disappointment about Adair better, but it wasn’t easy. The loss of what I’d imagined would happen when I met him had hit me hard.   
 “I should get packed,” I said distantly. I stepped away from my mom and into my room.

“I’m done,” Rishika said, slinging a full backpack over her shoulders. “I packed for both of us. Now let’s go,” she said, turning me around and pushing me back out the door. “We have to get to Crater Lake as soon as we can.”

We headed back downstairs and found Mikah and Gabriel in the kitchen. Gabriel was surrounded by a dozen dishes of Tom and Torin’s Christmas leftovers, while Mikah looked on with amused disgust.

“We’re ready,” Rishika announced to them.

“Let’s roll,” Mikah said.

Gabriel grabbed a turkey leg for the road, and we started for the door, but we hadn’t even made it outside before Tabitha hurried toward us.

“I’m coming with you!”

# Episode 3357

The snow stung my eyes like fire as I squinted into it. It was blowing with such force that I could barely move forward. I was crawling on my knees, trying to keep my body low to the ground so I wouldn’t fall again. I was amazed the urn hadn’t shattered from the fall I’d taken, and I wasn’t going to risk it again. Not after everything we’d already gone through. I couldn’t lose it now.

Blindly, I felt around for the stick I’d used to stake Adéluce. When I found it, I gripped it tight, thinking back on the past few moments. Could I dare to hope that I’d actually killed her? Or at least injured her enough to weaken her? Was it possible I’d missed her, somehow? I found that hard to believe, because I’d felt the resistance of Adéluce’s body when I’d made contact with the stake. It had been like punching into a side of beef. I’d had to use all my strength to do it. So what the hell had just happened?

I struggled to my feet, bracing myself against the powerful force of the blizzard. I was practically leaning at a forty-five-degree angle, but the wind was strong enough to hold me up. Which, in a way, was good. I felt so weak and tired, I wasn’t sure if I could have held myself up at that point.

Untying Xavier’s coat from where he’d put it around my waist, I pulled it on over my own coat, praying it would stop my shivering. Where was Xavier? And Greyson? Where had they gone?  
 *Xavier? Can you hear me? Can you see me?*

*Greyson? Are you there?*

*Anyone? Can anyone hear me?*

There was no response. The only sound was the whipping wind, thundering in my ears.

It just didn’t make any sense—they’d both *just* been there. Hadn’t they? My mind felt as blurry as the world around me, so I thought back, trying to remember the details of the past few moments before everything had gone white. Then I remembered—Xavier had jumped onto Adéluce, and then they’d both disappeared. I spun around, my heart pounding with horror as I realized that Xavier and Adéluce must have fallen into the tunnel.

But where *was* the tunnel? I couldn’t see anything. Everything was obscured by the swirling snow.

I started into it, but I could tell that I was just wandering blindly. And I knew that if I kept going, I’d risk falling into the tunnel, too.

I clutched the urn tighter against my body and stared as hard as I could into the snow. Then, suddenly, there was a shimmer in the air in front of me. And—just for a flash—I could have sworn I saw Greyson just up ahead, standing in the clear air.

“GREYSON!” I screamed. The wind picked up my voice and carried it away, and the next moment the flash disappeared. The snow was back, and I was alone again.

Something wasn’t right about any of this. I could feel it in my bones. How could there be snow one instant, and then no snow the next? I didn’t understand. Unless… Was this even real?

It *felt* real. The snow stung my skin, and I was freezing. But—was it really a blizzard? Maybe this was just another trick, another of Adéluce’s illusions. I wanted to believe that, because that would mean less danger. But the snow just kept falling, whipping into my face, and the cold wound around my bones.

I wondered if everyone was experiencing the same blizzard. If this was just a trick, maybe it was different for all three of us.

Mustering all my determination, I walked toward where I thought I’d spotted Greyson.

“Greyson!” I called desperately. “Greyson! Can you hear me?”

There was no answer, but within five more steps, I ran into something warm and furry. It was Greyson’s wolf.

I stumbled back, shocked, and around me, the snow flickered, then stopped.

Greyson turned to me. *Cali? Where were you?*

I stared at him in surprise. “*Where was I?* I’ve been here the whole time!” I shook my head as the pieces came together. “Adéluce must have used a spell to make us all think we were lost. But we have to help Xavier—he fell into the tunnel.”

Together we turned around and saw Xavier—in his human form—standing at the opening of the tunnel.

“Cali!” He had his hands cupped around his mouth, and he was shouting into the tunnel. “Cali! Where are you?”

“Xavier!” I called, tears springing to my eyes. It broke my heart to hear the devastation in his voice as he called for me. “Xavier! I’m here!”  
 Xavier didn’t respond. He didn’t even look up, like he couldn’t hear me.

I ran to him and took him by the shoulders. I shook him hard. “Snap out of it. Xavier! I’m right here!”

Xavier looked wildly around, like he couldn’t see me, couldn’t feel my hands on his shoulders. Then, finally, his blue eyes focused on me and widened in surprise.

“*Cali*,” he whispered and pulled me into a tight embrace.

His skin was icy cold, and I realized he had to be freezing. I pulled his coat off and handed it back to him. He slipped it on as Greyson shifted back to human.

I unwrapped his coat from around the urn and handed it back to him. He needed it more than the urn did.

Greyson looked around as he pulled on his coat. “Okay, we need to get the hell off this nightmare island.”

Xavier looked past Greyson at the horizon. “God, I hope it isn’t part of the illusion, but I swear the lake is frozen.”

I turned to look, too, and thought I could make out the surface of the lake in the moonlight. “It sure looks frozen,” I said. “But how can we know for sure?”

Xavier shrugged. “There’s only one way to find out. We have to get down from here. If the lake is frozen, we can just walk the fuck out of this place.”

He started down the slope to the lake. I followed, and Greyson walked alongside me.

“How are you?” he asked quietly.

I thought before I answered. “I’m feeling weak again,” I admitted. “But the idea that we might be able to get out of here is giving me strength.”

Greyson smiled. “I know what you mean. But I don’t want you to push yourself too hard. Do you want me to shift so you can ride on my back?”

I looked down at the urn in my arms. I’d been having a hard enough time keeping it safe already, so I shook my head. “I’m pretty sure I can walk.”

Xavier turned to us. “Keep your eyes open for Adéluce. I have a feeling she isn’t going to just let us walk away without a fight.”

I shivered at that—he was right. I started scanning the land around us.

We moved together. I held the urn close, flanked by my mates. I was comforted, having them close, but every shadow still made my heart skip a beat, and every tiny sound made me flinch. The reality was that Adéluce could be anywhere. And Xavier was right—she wasn’t just going to let us walk away.

The snow was deep, and we trudged through it without speaking. The amount of snow made it slow to move through, but it also gave me hope that the lake *was* frozen.

As we moved closer, I saw the smooth surface of the lake through the last of the trees. I couldn’t help it—I broke into a run toward the frozen water. I found myself unexpectedly choked up. The frozen lake reminded me of winters in Minnesota, which—in this moment—I found I missed more than I could have imagined. Seeing the quiet winter lake reminded me of going ice skating with my parents, back when things used to be simpler.

“Cali! *Wait!*” Greyson called after me.

I stopped and looked back at him. “What? Why?”  
 “We should test it. Hang on a second.” He walked forward and tapped his foot on the surface. Then he stepped carefully onto the ice. The ice groaned in that low, mournful way, but there were no cracks.

Greyson walked a little farther, but all we could hear was the wind whipping through the trees. The ice didn’t crack.

“It’s solid,” Greyson announced. “It’s safe.”

Relief flowed through me, and I moved toward the lake.

“Let’s go slowly,” Xavier warned. “Just in case.”

I nodded. “I’ll go slowly.” I stepped off the rocky shore. Just as I put my foot down on the ice, the urn was ripped from my hands.

I screamed and whirled around. “NO!”

There, standing next to me, was René Duquette. The child looked up at me, his black eyes glowing like coals. And the ashes were in his hands.

# Episode 3358

**Greyson**

Cali’s scream sent chills down my spine that had nothing to do with the snow. *Shit! Did she fall through the ice?* I’d thought I’d tested it. I’d thought it was safe. But maybe I’d thought wrong.

I spun on my heel and lurched toward her, realizing belatedly that she wasn’t in the ice. She was standing upright, still seemingly secure, and was waving her arms frantically.

“He’s taken the ashes!” she shrieked. “The ghost kid took the ashes!”

Next to me, Xavier followed suit, stepping out onto the ice toward Cali, but his gaze moved past her—and then I saw what all the commotion was about.

The ghost kid, René, was running across the frozen lake at an alarming speed, and cradled in his hands was the urn containing Seluna’s ashes.

*Fuck!*

We’d come all this way—there was no way in hell we were going home without those ashes in tow. Cali’s life depended on it.

I took one last look at Cali to make sure she was okay. Our eyes met, and even without mind linking she must have understood what I intended to do, because she nodded and screamed, “Go! Get him!”

She didn’t need to tell me twice. I took off after the kid, whipping off my coat, and shifted. My claws dug into the slippery ice, giving me some much-needed traction. Maybe it’d give me the advantage—René was fast, but he was struggling to keep up his pace across the ice while holding tight to the urn.

If that little shit dropped the urn and we lost those ashes, I’d bring him back to life just so I could kill him all over again. But, no—he wasn’t going to drop the urn because I wasn’t going to let that happen. He wasn’t going to escape, either. Not after the complete and utter hell we’d been through to get those damn ashes. Not after the weeks of torture Cali had endured.

This was only going to end one way—with a stake through Adéluce’s heart, and Seluna’s ashes back in the demon world where they belonged. With Cali finally being free.

I was closing in on René when the sounds of paws beating against the ice caught my attention. Xavier put on a burst of speed to draw up beside me.

His voice slipped into my mind. *How do you want to do this? Obviously we can’t let that brat lose or steal the ashes.*

*Obviously.*

I didn’t have to say it out loud to know that if anything happened to those ashes, neither of us would forgive ourselves.

*I’ll go left, you go right?* I suggested. *We come at him from each side, and whoever gets the ashes hauls ass back to Cali?*

*I think we haul ass back to Cali either way. It’s not like we can stick around here.*

*It’s a plan.*

We both picked up the pace to close the gap between René and ourselves, but as we closed in on him, something hit the ice and shattered across the surface of the lake just ahead of us. We had to dart around the obstruction to avoid tripping over it.

We slowed, looking around for some sign of what the hell had just happened.

*Where the hell did that come from? And what was it?*

I looked up. The sky was grey, but there was nothing overhead. Frozen lake stretched out for hundreds of feet in just about every direction. I glanced back at the shore, where Cali was waiting for us. She was still alone. Nobody was around except me, Xavier, and the fucking ghost kid.

*BAM!*

I was nearly knocked over by another explosion of ice.

*What the…?*

BAM!

Xavier jumped out of the path of another explosion, and then, as I looked back up, I realized what was happening.

Gigantic, sharp icicles were raining down on us.

*Oh, fuck me.*

I tried to dodge the onslaught, but another large icicle struck me in the side and knocked me to the surface of the frozen lake. The ice was slick, and even with my claws, I had trouble getting a grip.

There was no stopping me as I skidded and spun and collided with Xavier, and we slid around the ice in a pissed-off tangle of limbs as more deadly icicles speared the ground around us. A few made contact, and I growled as one left a long cut down my shoulder.

*Fucking Adéluce and her spells!*

We finally scrambled to our feet, and I mind linked with Cali. *Get under the cover of the trees!*

I didn’t have time to look back to see if she’d made it to safety.

Xavier mind linked with me again. *We have to keep going—René is getting away!*

I blinked rapidly, trying to track where the kid was now. I couldn’t spot him. Between the darkness and the strange icicle storm, my vision was limited. Icicles kept pelting down as we moved and tried to dodge them, but several of them had pierced my skin. The icy air felt like hell on the cuts, but I tried to ignore the pain.

We’d both heal. But if we didn’t get those ashes, there would be nothing we could do for Cali.

We were picking up our pace, trying to catch up to René, when another huge icicle slammed into Xavier’s head, driving him into the ice. His wolf yelped in pain, and he went spinning across the surface of the lake, leaving a trail of hot blood in his wake.

The metallic scent of it filled my nose, and I screeched to a stop. *Are you okay?*

He snarled. *Jesus—fuck!*

That had to be a good sign, right? He wasn’t too injured to be pissed off and cursing.

*Don’t worry about me! Just get René! I’ll catch up!*

I burst into a sprint across the ice. If Xavier were truly hurt, or if he truly needed assistance, he would have said so. And he was right—our focus right now had to be getting those ashes back. The icicles were nothing more than a distraction, albeit a deadly one.

Movement up ahead caught my eye, and I finally spotted René. The little bastard clearly hadn’t slowed down when Xavier and I took that tumble. I’d have to put everything I had into catching up with him.

My paws slammed into the ice, my claws puncturing the surface to give me extra leverage and speed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so pissed off and desperate, and my anger only built with every step that brought me closer to René. Adéluce and her psychotic band of dead family members had gone too far, and we weren’t going to put up with this bullshit any longer.

It was time to put a pin in this.

As I finally started closing the gap once again, a powerful, bone-chilling, *breathtaking* blast of air slammed into me. It was like I’d hit a brick wall. It was all I could do to curl my shoulders, hunker down, and dig my claws into the ice to keep from being thrown back across the lake.

*What fresh hell is this?*

I scraped at the ice, my paws ripping and bleeding onto the lake’s surface. I had to slam my eyes shut to protect them from the freezing, howling wind that was trying like hell to kill me where I stood.

There was definitely something supernatural going on, what with the icicle spears and the freezing wall of wind.

*Is this more spell work from Adéluce?*

It had to be, right? It was just too convenient for nature to keep getting in the way every time we were finally making progress.

I got as low to the ground as possible, advancing forward one maddening, painful, *freezing* step at a time. I could just make out René’s dark shape through my slitted eyes, moving farther away. Apparently, the wind had no effect on *him*.

*Fuck! I can’t let that ghost boy get away!*

My paws were starting to freeze to the ice. Something brushed against my side. Xavier had finally caught up to me.

We pressed ahead, fighting the wind.

I tried to mind link with Cali, but I couldn’t get through. I hoped to hell she’d taken my advice and sought shelter back on land.

Xavier mind linked, *He’s getting away!*

*No shit.* We couldn’t move as fast as a ghost, not in this windstorm. But we had to keep trying, if only for Cali’s sake.

Suddenly, the wind stopped, and the last of the icicles smashed to the ground. We didn’t hesitate.

We both jumped up and broke into a sprint, side by side. I had no idea why the wind had stopped, but I wasn’t about to question it. Maybe we could catch up with René and reclaim the ashes after all.

Suddenly, a loud *crack* echoed across the lake, followed by a rumbling. The ice beneath me shook, and I crashed to the lake’s surface as my feet flew out from under me.

Xavier helped me stand again, but another crack echoed, and fractures spread across the ice like a series of veins.

*Shit.* The ice was cracking beneath us.

I glanced back toward the shore. It was too far away, and if I tried to go back now, I’d lose René and the ashes.

A sharp cry drew my attention back to the lake, and I watched as René disappeared beneath the surface.

# Episode 3359

My teeth rattled as I shivered under the protection of a cluster of trees at the edge of the lake, wrapping my arms even tighter around myself. I’d never wished to be a werewolf more than right now.

I squinted out at the lake, trying to see if Xavier or Greyson had caught up to René. But my half-human, half-Fae eyes couldn’t pierce the dark cloud cover. I knew my mates were out there somewhere, but I hadn’t been able to reach them via mind link since they’d taken off after René.

I cupped my aching, ice-chilled hands around my mouth. “GREYSON? XAVIER?”

My voice was consumed by the wind. *I* couldn’t even hear it over the howling rush of air.

This was worse than facing René and Adéluce myself, or joining my mates out in the seemingly subzero weather conditions. At least then I’d have known what was going on—even if I ended up with hypothermia. Back here, I was useless. And had no idea what was happening. If they’d caught René. If they had the ashes. If they were in trouble. If—

*No, don’t think about that.* I tucked my chin in tight against my chest in a futile attempt to ward off the winter chill. *Xavier and Greyson are fine. They’re the strongest fighters you know. And they’re working together. They’re basically unstoppable.*

Except so was Adéluce. That revenge-driven vampire-witch had been ten steps ahead of us from the moment she’d stolen the ashes. She was smart, powerful, and—maybe most importantly—we were on her turf.

I swallowed roughly as another wave of nauseating anxiety threatened to tear my insides in two. What if something had gone terribly wrong? What if they needed my help? How long could I wait here, shivering in the cold, before I did something?

Or before Adéluce came to finish the job? And if something happened to Xavier and Greyson, there was no doubt in my mind that Adéluce would come for me.

My body made the decision before my mind was fully aware of it, and I took a tentative step toward the lake, bracing against the wind and ice.

Then, suddenly, it stopped. It was still cold—far too cold for Oregon, at any time of year—but I at least didn’t have to fight an uphill battle against a wall of freezing wind. I picked up my pace and stumbled out onto the frozen lake. I still couldn’t see either of my mates.

My first full step on the icy lake threatened to knock me on my butt, and I had to throw my arms out to catch my balance. *You can do this.*

I pulled in a deep breath and steadied myself before cautiously continuing onward. Two steps later, I stumbled over a long branch. The wind had blown all sorts of debris across the lake.

My instinct was to keep moving, but then I thought twice. *It couldn’t hurt to bring it along.* Maybe it could help me keep my balance and stay steady in the wind. I had a sneaking suspicion that, against odds like these, any little bit would help.

I picked up the branch, fighting the cold that still clung to me like a second skin, and kept walking in the direction I’d seen Xavier and Greyson take. It was slow going across the lake’s surface—I kept tripping over all these thick shards of ice sticking up from the lake.

*What caused all this?* I’d seen my share of frozen lakes in my life, but I’d never seen anything like this before.

Some distance from the shore, something farther out on the lake’s surface caught my eye. Something, or someone, was lying motionless on the ice just up ahead.

My chest hitched. “Xavier! Greyson!”

Neither of them responded, and I pushed myself as fast as I could go without face-planting on the ice. My worst fears consumed my mind as I hurried over to the still form.

*Who is that? Were they injured by the ice? Are they okay? Are they breathing?*

As I got closer, relief washed over me. It wasn’t Greyson or Xavier. It was their coats.

*They must have shifted to chase René.*

I grabbed the coats and threw them over my arm. When I found them, they’d need to shift back eventually. My mates ran hotter than an average human, but they could still get hypothermia.

I stumbled again, my arms full with their coats and the branch.

“Greyson!” I called out. “Xavier! Hello?”

The eerie silence of the frozen lake answered back, so I tried mind linking with each of them. Again, I got no response.

I hefted the weight of the items I was carrying. *Maybe I should drop the branch? The ice does seem pretty solid…*

I set it down, then tested the ice in front of me with tentative steps. Then, as I continued forward, the wind picked up again, pushing me back. My feet threatened to slide out from under me.

*What the heck? Where did this storm come from?*

It felt like the wind was circling me, spinning me around like a top, faster and faster. I held out my arms to keep from falling, and then groaned as a strong wave of nausea slammed into me. That was just what this nightmare needed—projectile vomiting.

Then, just as quickly as the wind had picked up, it died down. But it still felt like my head and body were in motion. Everything around me spun, but I couldn’t seem to orient myself.

*Which way is the shore? Where did Xavier and Greyson go?*

“CALI!”

I stumbled a little as I turned toward Xavier’s voice, somewhere to the left. I couldn’t see him, but his voice sounded urgent. *Is he in danger?* I had to do something. Anything. Standing here wasn’t an option.

I started toward him. “Xavier! Where are you?”

“CALI!”

I froze. That was Greyson’s voice. Coming from the opposite direction.

Shit shit shit.

I turned around. “Greyson?”

Neither of them responded when I called out, and dread curdled in my belly.

*No. This can’t be happening. What do I do? Who do I help first?*

Adéluce’s voice swirled around in my head. *Which one do you save? You can’t save them both, can you?*

I slammed my eyes shut with a growl. I shouldn't have let go of the branch—I could have used it as a weapon. After all, Adéluce was a vampire. There was a possibility that she might be difficult to kill… Witch or not, she’d probably die if she got staked hard enough, right?

Her voice continued to whisper in my ear. *Of course, if it’s too difficult to choose just one, you could always* not *make a choice. Let them both perish.*

“Shut up!” I snapped. “I’m tired of your mind games!”

She was trying to use the *due destini* to trick me. Who *hadn’t* tried that method by now? I reached into my well of magic, hoping to summon enough to blast the vampire-witch to the other side of the lake, but I couldn’t draw on it. Either I was too drained from the curse, or something was blocking me from accessing my full magic.

Suddenly, a figure appeared in front of me. I didn’t hesitate. I lunged at it, ready to fight tooth and nail against the vampire-witch who had made my life hell for so long. I would fight her, I would get my mates back, and I would do it all myself.

But there was nothing there.

I hit the ice with a grunt, my chin splitting on the cold, unforgiving surface, and Adéluce’s laughter echoed in the distance.

*Make a choice, Caliana. Or I will make it for you.*

I wiped blood from my chin as I regained my footing, only to immediately trip and fall again. This freaking lake was going to be the death of me.

Then I realized what I’d tripped over. It was the branch.

“Hello, friend,” I whispered.

I grabbed it and swung it wildly in the direction of Adéluce’s voice—and caught nothing but air.

“*Where are you?*” I screamed in frustration. Meanwhile, both Greyson and Xavier were still calling my name. But now, their voices were coming from the same direction.

“Cali!” Xavier called.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked.

I turned toward them, the branch held out in front of me. It *was* them—*really them*. There was always a chance that this was just another of Adéluce’s illusions. But if it wasn’t…

“I’m here!” I took a step toward them, waving my arms. “I’m here!”

I dropped the branch and stumbled forward, desperate to see my mates, to know they were safe. Three steps in, an earsplitting crack echoed across the lake, followed by a low rumble.

I looked down in shock at the fractures spider-webbing beneath my feet. I barely had time to draw in a breath before I plunged into the frigid waters of Crater Lake.

# Episode 3360

At first, I didn’t feel anything. And then the shock of the freezing cold water hit me like a punch to the stomach.

*Again? Seriously?*

Icy darkness wrapped around me, and I didn’t know which way was up. For a split second, fear sank deeper than the cold, holding me immobile, whispering all about how this lake would become my grave. Somehow, after everything I’d already been through, this was how I would go.

*No! You’ve worked way too hard to break this curse to die now! Focus, Cali! Don’t panic. Figure out how to get out of this. Your mates need you!*

Then I noticed the bubbles—the ones that were coming from my mouth. They were going up. Toward the surface.

I kicked my legs to follow them to the surface of the lake. I didn’t have any time to lose. The cold—not the lack of oxygen—was what would kill me the fastest. Realistically, I’d last seconds in this cold water. Not minutes.

Light penetrated the dark water, a sign that I was close to the surface. I reached a hand up, and just as my fingers broke through the opening in the ice, something slimy wrapped tight around my leg and pulled me down.

Shock and horror had bubbles spilling out of my mouth.

*What the—*

I kicked at the thing, trying to break free, and another slimy, slithering thing coiled around my neck. And then I realized that this wasn’t just some tangled lake algae—these were living creatures. Without my desperate need to get to the surface, fear might have taken over. But my survival instincts were running the show, and I didn’t stop to wonder what the hell these things were, or what they’d do with me, or how horrifying they looked.

I fought back.

I clawed at the thing as it tightened its hold around my throat. I snapped my eyes shut, focusing all my strength on breaking its chokehold.

My fingernails dug into its slick skin, and I wrenched it away from my neck with all my might. Then I kicked its friend off my leg and burst toward the surface.

I was inches away from breaking through when a sudden warmth spread over me, starting with my shoulder. Even in the chilled water, it didn’t feel good. It *burned*.

I opened my eyes, but instead of icy, dark water, I was surrounded by fire. A hellish landscape of fire, pain, and death. I blinked, horrified and confused.

*What’s happening? Why aren’t I underwater anymore? Am I dying? Has Seluna won?*

The burning in my skin, the pressure in my lungs—none of it could compare to the dread that settled over me. Every trial and horror I’d been through… Had it all been for nothing?

Someone moved through the flames. The outline was familiar, in a way, but I couldn’t make out any discernible features. They hovered just beyond my reach and extended a burning hand.

“Take my hand,” the figure said, their voice somehow darker and more chilling than the depths of Crater Lake. “Let me help you.”

I recoiled and stumbled back, crying out when flames licked across my back. I was trapped. There was nowhere to go, and my lungs were ready to burst.

*I can’t hold my breath anymore.*

With a broken wail, I screamed my last breath.

My defeat seemed to unlock something. It triggered a ripple effect, and just as quickly as they’d appeared, the flames vanished. The slimy creatures uncoiled from my limbs. That icy, final darkness returned.

This lake was to be my grave after all.

Then, warm fingers wrapped tight around my wrist, lifting me up, up, up. Darkness gave way to ambient light, and the cold water slipped away, replaced by even colder air.

“Dammit, Cali, breathe!” Something thumped against my back, and I spat out what felt like a gallon of icy water. I coughed and gagged and gasped, and another set of hands eased me down onto my back.

“Open your eyes,” a familiar voice said.

I did, and I found myself staring up at Tabitha’s face. She hovered over me, her brow creased with worry. “Are you okay?”

All I could do was wheeze. A new kind of cold set in, different than the water, and my body shook so badly I couldn’t speak around my chattering teeth.

Then, I heard my sister’s voice. “Pull her in!”

I was so, so confused.

*What happened? Am I dead? Why are Artemis and Tabitha here if I’m dead? Are they dead too?*

I sucked down oxygen and lifted my head to look over Tabitha’s shoulder. Artemis was standing behind Tabitha, her arms outstretched in either direction. She was holding Tabitha’s hand on one side and Gabriel’s on the other.

“Is she dead?” Gabriel called. “Because Xavier will *kill* me if—”

“Jesus, Gabe!” Mikah scolded from behind him. “Has anyone ever told you your bedside manner is atrocious?”

“Just you. Repeatedly.”

I squinted to make out this strange arrangement of familiar faces. Gabriel and Mikah were linked by their hands, too. And Mikah was holding Adair’s hand, and Adair was anchored in place by… Rishika?

I blinked, and several long seconds later the realization hit. I wasn’t dead. My friends and sister were here, and they were forming a chain to safely pull me back from the break in the ice.

Tabitha had pulled me out of the water, and through their teamwork, they’d saved my life.

Tabitha released her grip on Artemis just long enough to grab a blanket that had been wrapped around her like a poncho and wrap me up in it. Then she took both of our hands again.

I pulled the blanket tight around me, though I was still so cold. Too cold to feel the difference right away.

“How did you find me?” I asked, my voice weak.

“We got the text!” Artemis called. “We got here right in time. It wasn’t hard to make out the ice storm when we arrived, and then we heard your screams, and here we are.”

“Where are Xavier and Greyson?” Gabriel asked.

“The last time I saw them, they were chasing down that ghost kid from the Duquette mansion, René,” I said. “We got the ashes—they’re in an urn—but René stole them.” I craned my neck to look around. “I think they’re close by. I heard them calling out to me right before I fell through the ice.”

Tabitha helped me to my feet, and I more or less draped my body over hers. I was still so weak and cold from the lake.

Tabitha gasped, her eyes locking onto something behind me, and I turned to see the hole in the lake closing up and freezing back into a solid block.

A shudder ripped down my spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

*If they hadn’t pulled me out when they did, I would have been trapped under the ice.*

“So that was another Adéluce trap?” Tabitha asked as we slowly made our way over to Artemis and Gabriel, where the ice was thicker.

I shook my head. “Honestly, I don’t know. Probably? I was attacked under the water by eels or something, and then I had some kind of hallucination, and then everything suddenly stopped and they all disappeared.”

“Maybe my negating magic drove them away,” Tabitha said.

Adair rushed up to us and attached himself to Tabitha’s side, like always. “What about the ashes?”

“I don’t know,” I said again. “I hope Greyson and Xavier have gotten them back.”

“Ask them yourself,” Rishika said, pointing behind me. “They’re coming this way.”

Still shivering, with the blanket wrapped tight around me, I turned to look. I could just make out the shape of Xavier running toward us. He wasn’t more than a few hundred yards away.

I frowned. *Where are Greyson and René?*

I started toward him on shaky legs, and my knees almost buckled. The lake had sapped all my energy. Artemis and Rishika rushed to either side of me, holding me upright as we started forward.

Within seconds, Xavier’s wolf was loping up to me. I wrapped my arms around him.

*Oh my god. Are you okay?* His voice slipped through my mind. *You’re freezing. I was so worried about you.*

I sank into the warmth of his fur. I’d never been more grateful to be mated to a werewolf.

“I’m just cold and tired—but what about Greyson and the ashes?”

*René fell through the ice with the urn. I heard you screaming, so I came to help you. Greyson’s still trying to get the urn.*

I swallowed roughly. I knew firsthand just how dangerous the water could be. Plus, what if the urn spilled into the lake? How could we get the ashes then? Also, I didn’t love the idea of Greyson going up against René and god only knew what else all by himself.

“We have to help him,” I said. “Where is he?”

# Episode 3361

**Greyson**

I fucking hated this. Every goddamn second spent going after René was another lash to my insides.

I knew Cali was in trouble. I’d heard her crying out for me. But Xavier had taken off after her, promising me he’d save her, and I’d known then that the best thing *I* could do to save her was get the ashes from that damn ghost kid. I had to trust my brother to save Cali, and I did.

It was, perhaps, the only thing I could ever truly trust him to do—but in this moment, it was the only thing that mattered.

So I went after René, slowly approaching the edge of the ice where he’d fallen in, careful not to further compromise its integrity and fall in myself. I kept my eyes trained on the spot where René had fallen.

*I swear if that kid spilled the ashes in the lake, I’m going to end him. And I’ll make it hurt.*

I had to be careful—new large gaps in the ice had opened up, and more than a few times I nearly plunged downward when a crack suddenly opened up at my feet. Only my werewolf speed and my ability to distribute my weight more evenly across the ice than a human saved me from falling in.

After an annoying amount of troubleshooting, I finally reached the spot where René had fallen through the ice. Already, the hole was starting to freeze back up.

*Not today, Satan.*

I clawed at the thin ice covering the gap and smashed the hole back open.

From there, I didn’t have the first idea what to do next. It wasn’t like I cared what happened to René. I didn’t even know if ghosts could drown. Probably not, since he didn’t exactly breathe. But even if he *could* drown, I just wasn’t particularly interested in saving the little bastard who’d caused us so much grief.

The urn was my prize—and the only part of this fucked-up version of ice fishing that I cared about.

I looked over my shoulder, back in the direction Xavier had run. Back to where Cali was.

I hoped like hell that my brother had found her, that she was safe now. Once we got the ashes back, all we needed was Cali and the strength to haul ass away from this lake.

I looked back down at the hole in the ice. It was already trying to freeze over again. *Fucking Adéluce and her spells.* No naturally occurring ice could freeze that fast. This was some sort of trap, and that meant that I didn’t want to dive in. If I did, the ice would likely freeze over and I’d be stuck underneath and would either die from hypothermia or drowning—whichever took its toll first.

I had to be careful, because I was on my own out here. Xavier was off helping Cali. If this went sideways, nobody was going to be around to save me. Hell, they wouldn’t even know where I was or how to find me, if the ice froze over quickly enough.

I growled as I racked my brain for a solution. I wanted those ashes more than just about anything, but was the chance of collecting them worth jumping into Adéluce’s death trap?

I glanced back around the lake, looking for any sign of Xavier. Or anyone, really, except Adéluce and her psychotic ghost crew.

No such luck.

*Maybe I can wait for Xavier to come back, and I’ll keep breaking the hole in the ice to keep it open in the meantime. That way, if I jump in, I’ll have someone there to make sure I have a way out.*

But each second that passed weighed heavier on me than the one before it. It was all too easy to imagine the urn sinking lower and lower into the darkest, deepest depths of the lake. Crater Lake was the deepest lake in the country—I didn’t even know for sure if I could make it to the bottom and back up to the surface *without* whatever magical interference was running wild here. Sure, I was a werewolf, but could my body withstand the cold, or the change in water pressure? Would I even be able to *see* the urn in the dark depths of the lake?

There were a million reasons not to jump into the lake, and only one reason to do it. Cali.

And she was the most important reason to do just about anything.

Even though the odds were complete shit, I’d have to try. For Cali’s sake.

I used my claws to etch a deep arrow in the ice that pointed to the hole I was about to go through. Hopefully Xavier would be able to see it, and when he did, he’d know what it was.

I looked back, howled as loudly as I could, and dove beneath the surface of the lake.

The water was every bit as soul-bitingly cold as I’d expected. It shocked my system, and my nerves went from feeling nothing to feeling a thousand icy needles plunging into my body. I ignored the pain and swam downward. René couldn’t have gone very far. Hell, it was possible he’d let go of the ashes and left. I didn’t know if a ghost was capable of feeling the icy lake water, but I definitely wouldn’t stick around if I were in his shoes.

I wished I could use my sense of smell to track the urn, but that obviously was a nonstarter underwater.

Something brushed past me as I swam lower. *The fuck?*

Then I remembered the eels I’d seen, back when we were on the boat. *No fucking dice*. If they tried to mess with me, I’d tear them to shreds.

I paused, looking around to get my bearings. It was dark and eerily silent down so deep, and yet I heard something. A scraping sound of some sort.

I tried to find the source of the sound. Nothing was easy to make out, but something was moving along the surface of the ice just ahead of me. I caught a glimpse of the shape, and I knew. It was René—the ghost boy was still holding the urn, floating along just beneath the surface of the lake.

I swam toward him. If it were just me versus him, he could easily pass through the ice and leave me here. But he wanted to keep the urn, and that meant he needed a hole to escape through just as much as I did.

I focused all my energy into my slowly-freezing muscles and darted forward. I overtook René, and he realized his mistake a moment too late. By the time he noticed me in the water next to him, I’d already snatched the urn out of his grip and locked it carefully between my teeth.

René screamed in rage, and despite the fact that we were underwater and he sure as shit didn’t have oxygen in his lungs, the sound echoed.

*What a crybaby.*

He tried to grab onto me, but I was always swimming away from the kid and back toward the opening I’d jumped through. I hoped to god it hadn’t frozen over already.

His voice was shrill as he called after me. *It doesn’t matter what you do. Mother will find you.*

I hoped so. I still wanted nothing more than to rip her to pieces

I smacked the underbelly of the ice with my snout—the hole had to be around here somewhere.

Cali’s voice slipped through my mind. *Greyson?*

Relief flooded through me, for a moment blocking out the icy pain. If she was calling out for me, she had to be safe. Xavier had saved her.

*I have the ashes, but I can’t find my way out.*

Nearby, ice shattered and Xavier’s human hand plunged into the water.

I raced toward the lifeline and pressed the urn into Xavier’s hand first. It was the most important piece of this puzzle, after all. Xavier took the urn, set it aside, and reached down to pull me out of the water.

I shook water from my fur as I gasped for air. It seemed colder out here in the open, somehow—probably the product of the cold air hitting my wet fur.

Cali rushed over to me and wrapped her arms around my neck. “I’m so glad you’re okay! I was so worried!”

Xavier stood, the urn clutched tightly in his hands. Artemis, Rishika, Tabitha, Mikah, Gabriel, and Adair stood nearby too.

*Guess the whole gang’s here now.*

“Thank you for getting the urn.” Cali kissed my head.

“Can we please get the hell off this lake?” Rishika asked. “There are still cracks opening up, and, Cali, I’m worried you’re going to get hypothermia.”

I glanced at her. Her hair was frozen into icy strands, and her lips were turning purple. She held a blanket tight around her body. Has she fallen through the ice too?

I wished I could take her on my back and run her to the shore, but the group had gotten a lot bigger, and we’d be safer traveling with everyone nearby.

I shifted back to human, wincing at the cold. “I agree. The sooner we get off this lake, the better.”

Xavier tossed me my coat. “What are we waiting for?”

I offered the coat to Cali, but she shook her head. “You need it more. I’m starting to warm up, anyway.”

I put an arm around her, and we started heading toward the shore.

We made it a few steps before the ground started rumbling.

A large crack splintered the ice ahead of us, and within seconds we were trapped on a floating island of ice. The gaps of water surrounding us on all sides seemed too wide to jump across.

The water began to bubble and rise, forming a shape. Adéluce. She appeared just across the gap, standing on another floating section of ice.

“What the hell is going on?” Xavier snarled.

I had the same question. It was always something with this witch. She just never let us catch a break.

Adéluce’s gaze locked onto Xavier. “I’m going to destroy everything you hold dear.”

She raised her arms to cast a spell.

# Episode 3362

**Xavier**

Fucking hell. This witch just would *not* give up. It wasn’t enough that we’d tracked down the goddamn ashes across two states and made our way through all her puzzles and mazes and death traps just to get our hands on the urn—now she’d locked us on a fucking iceberg and was raising her arms to cast a spell at us?

*I’m so fucking tired of this shit.*

I moved in front of Cali to block her from whatever spell Adéluce was about to cast. I clutched the urn tight against my body. Nothing and no one was going to take it away from me. It was Cali’s only hope, and we’d worked too damn hard to get the ashes back just to lose them now.

But even as I held tight, I could feel the urn slipping from my grasp. There was nothing I could do to hold onto it. With a cry of horror, I watched the urn break from my grip and fly across the ice and water into Adéluce’s welcoming arms.

“You bitch!” I screamed.

She laughed and held up the urn. “Why, thank you for returning it to me. You’re always so helpful.”

My vision went red, and for the first time since we’d arrived at this goddamn icy lake, I didn’t feel the cold. All I felt was murderous, boiling rage.

There was no way in hell I was going to let her take off with the ashes to who the hell knew where. I’d get those ashes back. I’d save Cali. No matter the cost.

Fury fueling my movements, I raced toward Adéluce, jumping over the water. I crashed *hard* onto her block of ice, my legs splashing into the icy water as I pulled myself up. I took two steps forward and lunged, shifting in mid-air. Adéluce turned tail and ran, the fucking coward.

No matter. I was gonna love hunting her down and tearing her apart. I burst after her, pouring my strength into hunting her down. She was fast, sure, but I was running on pure rage. And when all of this was said and done, I’d have the urn, and Adéluce’s throat would be ripped out and gushing across the surface of the icy lake.

There was no other acceptable outcome.

I had no idea if anyone else was following me, and I didn’t care. I’d take her down myself if necessary. I only hoped that someone was keeping Cali safe and warm back on that floating ice sheet.

And, in a way, it was better for me to do this alone. Adéluce had made it clear that the hell we’d all been through—Cali most of all—was because of me. This was a personal matter between Adéluce and me. Just the two of us. And so it was only right to end it that way.

I was going to make her pay for everything she’d put Cali through. And if I didn’t put her down here and now, I knew she wasn’t going to stop. She’d never stop coming after me and the people I loved.

It was time to end this.

Adéluce stumbled as she reached the edge of her own ice block and almost dropped the urn into the lake again. Horror froze my limbs for a split second, but she righted herself just in time and leapt onto another ice block. The urn was still clutched tightly in her hand.

I recovered quickly from the jolt of almost losing the urn and put on another burst of speed. I didn’t know if it was rage or adrenaline or desperation fueling me at this point, because it sure as shit wasn’t my own strength. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this tired. Once this was over, I was gonna drop like a rock.

Adéluce’s rotten vampire scent fresh in my nose, I leapt across the ice. This time I cleared it easily and didn’t miss a beat as I kept running after her. Slowly but surely, the gap between us was closing.

Adéluce stopped suddenly and raised a hand. The ice between us splintered, sending shards and snow into the air. I slid to a stop as the ice gave way to a group of hideous poltergeist creatures who moved toward me, hissing and snapping their teeth.

*This witch and her fucking mind games. Are these monsters even real, or are they a trick?*

Someone slammed into me from behind and sent me careening across the ice and into the wall of creatures. I caught a glimpse of silvery fur skittering off to the side, heading straight for another part of the barrier of poltergeists.

*Thanks a lot, asshole*, I said to Greyson through the mind link.

*Obviously it was an accident! You stopped so suddenly! You should have warned me!*

*How the hell was I supposed to warn you?* The creatures wasted no time slashing and grabbing at me, and immediately I was on the defensive. *I didn’t even know you were here! Who’s protecting Cali?*

*The six other people on that sheet of ice. Who do you think?* Greyson growled and snapped at the poltergeists that were climbing over him and slashing into his fur.

Any doubt I might have had about the creatures being real was quickly eliminated when one of them sank its teeth into my leg. I let out a yelp of pain and tore into the creature, ripping it in half.

Nearby, Greyson ripped the head off another monster.

It felt like the slowest fight of my life, but gradually we managed to tear through the wall of monsters until a gap appeared.

*Go!* Greyson called to me. *Get that witch! I’ll finish these assholes off.*

I didn’t hesitate. I bolted after Adéluce and immediately was knocked to the side when another creature landed on my back. We tumbled to the ice, and it bit my shoulder before we fell into the water.

Cold water wrapped me in its embrace as I chomped down on the creature’s arm and tore it clean off. It was a truly hideous beast, and its face spat air as it thrashed in agony before it was pulled away by the dark eels that lived beneath the surface of the lake.

I took advantage of their distraction to pull myself onto the ice. My shoulder was dripping blood, and my leg hurt like a bitch. I winced as I lifted myself to stand on all fours, scanning the horizon for Adéluce.

*There!*

She was on another ice float, closer to the shore. I couldn’t let her escape with that urn.

I looked back at Greyson, who was standing in a gruesome pile of dead and dying creatures and tearing into the few who remained. Behind him, the rest of the group was coming to help. Clearly, they’d found a way to cross the gap in the ice.

*Get the ashes*,Greyson mind linked. *I’ll take care of the rest.*

I cast one last look at Cali, who was being helped along by Artemis and Tabitha. The sight of her was enough to fill me with new resolve. She never should have been pulled into this.

And now, I was going to make sure she was set free.

I turned and darted after Adéluce. She seemed to have given up her games in favor of hauling ass to the shore. I leapt across two more ice floats, then slipped on a third and was caught between it and another float when they crashed into each other. Bones cracked, and I howled in pain before forcing myself to claw my way out of the water. I couldn’t give up. Couldn’t stop. Not until Adéluce was dead and I had the ashes.

She was only one block away now. She’d stopped, and it looked like she was scanning the ice to try to find a narrower break to jump over.

This was my chance. I barreled toward her and slammed into the vampire-witch. The urn fell from her hands and slid across the ice, stopping just at the edge of the float. My options were clear: Attack Adéluce before she attacked me, or stop the urn before it fell into the water.

I chose the urn.

But Adéluce was just so goddamn fast. She blasted me with a spell, which sent me careening to the opposite edge of the ice. The powerful blast rocked the whole ice float, and the urn tipped dangerously toward the edge.

I shook off the blast and jumped to my feet. There was no way in hell I was going to lose that urn.

But Adéluce was already moving toward it. I leapt at her, and we crashed to the ground in a tangle of thrashing limbs. In the struggle, the urn slipped over the edge.

*NO!*

I kicked Adéluce with my rear paws, then, using her body as a springboard, I lunged for the edge and caught the urn in my mouth.

Then, just like earlier, invisible magic tugged the urn away. It flew back into Adéluce’s hands, and I crawled to my feet as she stepped back, holding the urn over the open water.

“You know, I could just empty this now and dump the ashes into oblivion,” she mused. “Maybe that’s not such a bad idea.”

I lunged forward, but I hit an invisible wall—another spell. I watched on, helpless, as Adéluce opened the urn.

# Episode 3363

My heart panged with anxiety. Up ahead, Xavier was facing Adéluce alone. Greyson was busy dealing with a horde of monsters. I gasped as Adéluce sent a blast of magic at Xavier that knocked him across the ice.

I leaned more heavily on Artemis. “We have to hurry.” She was basically supporting most of my weight, but she pushed forward a little faster, and I stumbled alongside her.

Adéluce was reaching down for something… My chest hitched. It was the urn!

Xavier was back on his feet now, and he leapt at Adéluce, then stopped short.

*Why isn’t he going after her? He knows we can’t let her have the urn.*

“Xavier!” I yelled. “Stop her!”

We finally reached the carnage Greyson had left in the wake of his battle, namely dozens of shredded poltergeist monsters. Their black blood oozed onto the ice.

Suddenly, Artemis shoved me behind her, and I almost hit the ground. A poltergeist creature bore down on her, but she was ready, and her dagger sliced through it effortlessly. Rishika was at her side in a heartbeat, leaping at another creature. Mikah and Gabriel jumped into the fray while behind me, Adair shielded Tabitha—though she wasn’t really in danger.

There were only stragglers left, and they were beyond outmatched with Greyson, Artemis, Rishika, Mikah, and Gabriel tearing their way through their ranks.

I stumbled toward Xavier, but he was a couple of ice blocks away. With Adéluce, who was opening the urn.

My heart dropped down somewhere near my stomach. *What is she planning to do? Why is she opening it?*

And then, as her hand tipped the edge of the urn ever so slightly toward the water, a horrifying realization sank in. She was going to dump the ashes in the water. They’d be washed away. Impossible to collect.

There would be no hope for me.

“NO!” I screamed. I couldn’t let that happen.

I mind linked with Xavier. *Don’t just stand there! Stop her!*

But even though he wasn’t far away, Xavier acted like he couldn’t hear me. It was like he was frozen in place.

I rushed to the edge of the ice float. Could I cross the gap? I knew I was hopelessly outmatched, an exhausted, cursed half-Fae against a powerful vampire-witch. But I had to do *something*. I’d wrestle her on the ice if that was what it took to keep the ashes in that urn.

The distance between the ice floats was too great for me to cross on my own. If I wasn’t careful, I’d fall back into that icy, eel-infested hellhole. Even if I got a running start and executed the jump perfectly, I didn’t think I had the strength or athleticism to cross the gap.

*What do I do?*

Someone pushed past me and leapt across the gap. It was Adair! He landed effortlessly on the other side of the ice.

*Screw it*, I thought. I gulped, then stepped back a few paces to give myself more room. I ran forward and made the jump, flying through the air. But almost immediately I knew I wasn’t going to make it. I closed my eyes and was preparing for another plunge into the icy lake when strong arms caught me and spun me around.

When I opened my eyes, I was standing upright on the ice float. Or, rather, Adair was holding me upright. He must have caught me. Stopped me from hitting the water.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

For a split second, there was an expression of relief in his endlessly blue eyes. I’d seen that look before, on Artemis’s face. But just as quickly as it appeared, it vanished, and he rolled his eyes. “That was foolish. You could have drowned.”

He turned and raced toward the ice block with Adéluce and Xavier, and all I could do was run after him.

Adéluce had almost removed the top of the urn when Adair shouted, “Stop, witch!”

She turned to face him with a triumphant grin. “You’re too late! You’re all too late!”

She opened the urn and let the top fall to the ice with a *thunk*.

“NO!” I screamed. “Don’t do this! Please!”

Adéluce turned her gaze on me, and that was when Adair struck.

He leapt across the ice, and before I fully understood what was happening, he summoned what looked like a magical whip and snapped the urn out of her hands.

I watched in horror as the open urn fell toward the water.

A silver, growling blur rushed past me as Greyson leapt onto the ice block. He slid across the surface of the float, shifting to human and catching the urn upright in his hands. And then the momentum of his body carried him off the edge of the ice and into the open water.

“NO!” I burst into a sprint toward Greyson and the urn.

Meanwhile, Adair’s assault had caused Adéluce to lose her concentration, and Xavier was freed from whatever spell she’d cast on him. He, too, scrambled to the edge of the water where Greyson had fallen, his expression devastated.

I leapt onto the ice block and raced over. Greyson was holding the urn above the water.

“Oh, thank god.” I could have cried.

Xavier grabbed the urn from him as I reached them, snagging the cover from the ice on my way. I plunked the lid back down on the urn with probably more force than was strictly necessary, but seeing as how my future depended on those ashes not spilling, or blowing away, or, say, getting dumped in an icy lake, I was sure nobody would blame me.

Xavier pulled Greyson from the water as Adéluce turned to us. She looked absolutely unhinged. “Maybe I was wrong… I wanted Xavier to suffer, to force him to watch as each of his loved ones suffered. Just like I did. But I see now that wasn’t the right call. You all must die.”

Adéluce raised her arms, but whatever spell she was about to conjure never came to fruition. An arrow zinged past me and sank into her arm, and she reeled back with a howl. I looked over my shoulder. Artemis was standing on the other ice block, her bow raised in front of her.

Her gaze narrowed on Adéluce. “The next one is going into your heart.”

*That’s my murder-happy sister!*

The vampire-witch ripped the arrow out of her arm and raised her hands—

Xavier slammed into her before she could hit us with a spell. She lost her footing and, screaming, fell backward into the open water of the lake.

I rushed over to the edge with my mates. Xavier was ready to jump in after her, but Greyson grabbed his arm. “We have the ashes.”

I watched in horror as Adéluce surfaced and splashed toward the ice. She was visibly struggling in the water, which was rough and choppy from all the fighting on the ice floats. She swallowed gulp after gulp, trying to get a grip on the ice but slipping each time. Her eyes started to roll back, and she finally sunk beneath the surface, completely disappearing underwater.

Bubbles rose to the surface. Adéluce didn’t.

“Oh my god.” My stomach lurched.

“Let go of me!” Xavier snarled, trying to break free of Greyson’s grip. “I’m not stopping until I know for sure that she’s dead. Until I kill that bitch myself!”

“Xavier.” I put a hand on his other arm. “We have what we came for. We should go.”

But he wasn’t listening. I wasn’t even sure he could hear me around his rage. He jerked out of my grip and tried to dive into the water, but Greyson yanked him back, and he fell hard on the ice.

“Enough!” Greyson snapped, his tone pure Alpha. “I almost drowned down there. You don’t need to be next.”

“I almost drowned too, and it’s horrible,” I added. “There’s no way I’m letting you jump in. Adéluce is getting what she deserves." Hopefully a watery grave. “We have the ashes. The fight’s over.”

Xavier wouldn’t look away from the water, so I stood in front of him and forced him to meet my eyes. “We’re not done. We have to get these ashes back to the demon world, remember? I’m not out of the woods yet. You vowed to help me return the ashes. Are you really going to break that promise to go chase after revenge?”

He swallowed roughly, then shook his head. For a moment, we all stood at the water’s edge, looking down into the icy darkness.

“She’s really gone,” Greyson said.

“We won.” Gabriel let out a dry laugh. “About damn time.”

“Good riddance,” Xavier muttered.

“Let’s get out of here before everyone freezes,” Artemis said.

We started toward the shore, and I looked back at the ice blocks and the island. We’d been through absolute hell, but now we had the urn and the ashes, and Adéluce was gone for good.

*All we have to do now is return the ashes to the demon world, and I’ll be free.*

# Episode 3364

**Lola**

“The next time I see Elle, I’m grounding her for life,” I muttered to Jay as we searched through the forest for our missing pack member.

“It’s not her fault,” he said mildly. “She’s still pretty new at being human. I’m sure she was in no way prepared to get hit by that spell. Just think of all the times you lost control when you were turned into a vampire, or when your shifting was out of whack.”

“Okay, okay, Mr. Empathy.”

Jay, Jacs, Charlie, Violet, Lilac, and I had been wandering the forest around the pack house for what felt like hours. Sage and Zainab were following another scent through a different path in the woods, though I privately thought the trail was too old to be Elle. Ravi had stayed back at the pack house to make sure someone was around to protect it, should anything else crazy happen.

“Are you picking up Elle’s scent?” Jay asked. “I’m pretty sure I have it.”

I breathed deeply and nodded. “That’s Elle, all right. But what the hell would she be doing all the way out here? It’s fucking freezing, and we’re in the middle of the woods. The pack house has to be at least a few miles back.”

He shrugged. “Maybe the vampire-witch is affecting Elle again? If that’s the case, it’s to her credit that she ran off instead of endangering others.”

I didn’t love the idea of that witch messing with Elle’s head. She was unpredictable on a good, boring, non-magical day, and I hated to think of her being driven through the cold for miles by some cruel spell.

“Do you think she came out here looking for her old pack? They were around here before they moved, right? Maybe she missed her dad.”

“Could be.”

“I just hope she isn’t having second thoughts about being turned,” I continued, more to fill the silence than anything else. All this hoofing it through the woods was boring as hell, and we’d stayed in our human forms for Jacqueline’s benefit. “I know it all moved really fast, and she probably didn’t fully understand what she was getting into, but I don’t think there’s much we can do for her if she wants to return to her old pack. Once you go werewolf, there’s no turning back.”

Jay shook his head. “I don’t think that’s what’s happening here.”

“I know one thing for sure,” Jacqueline grumbled. “If she *is* being affected by the vampire-witch, Greyson’s going to be pissed that Elle got away. You know he’s extra protective of her. Plus, our one job was to keep her safe while he was away.”

“It wasn’t my fault!” I huffed. “Or, at least, it was only a little bit my fault. How was I supposed to know she’d be strong enough to break through the chains and escape?”

Jay pressed on. “Don’t worry about that right now. Our main focus needs to be getting Elle back. If we bring her home safe and sound, there will be nothing for Greyson to get upset over, right?”

“But what are we supposed to do once we find her?” Charlie asked.

Jay paused and threw him a confused look. “We’re going to bring her back home, like I said.”

“And I get that,” Charlie continued, “but we haven’t really discussed how we’re going to bring her back. What if she refuses to come with us?”

“Don’t worry!” Jacqueline dug around in her bag and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. “I came prepared.”

I grimaced. “Are you serious right now?” I asked. “Do I even want to know why you have those?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

I shook my head. “Definitely not. Just… put those away, okay? They probably won’t work on her anyway. We’ll have to try talking Elle into being sensible and coming back home.”

Jacqueline held tight to the cuffs. “I’m not so sure that’ll work any better. There was nothing sensible about the way she was acting. The witch seems to have a strong grip on her.”

Violet stopped short. “Everyone, shut up.”

Lilac craned his neck to look back at her. “What are you—”

“Shut *up*. I hear something.”

Charlie slipped an arm around Violet’s shoulder. “What is—” Charlie began.

Violet pressed a finger to his lips. “Listen.”

And then we heard it. Something was moving through the woods ahead of us. Jay used a series of silent gestures to suggest we split into two groups. Jay, Jacs, and I were in one group, and Charlie, Lilac, and Violet were in the other.

Each group moved out into a semi-circle to try to close in on whatever was moving up ahead from both sides.

Then a loud howl ripped through the forest, and my heart tripped over itself. It was definitely Elle.

She was fully shifted and standing in a small clearing.

Jay took a step forward, but I put a hand on his arm to pull him back.

“Wait,” I whispered. “Let me try to talk to her.”

He nodded. “If I hear trouble, we’re going in.”

Cautiously, I moved toward Elle, trying to be quiet enough not to scare her, but also loud enough that she could hear me coming. She turned to face me and snarled in warning.

But I wasn’t frightened. I knew Elle. I loved Elle, and I couldn’t imagine her intentionally trying to hurt me.

*Of course, it is entirely possible that she can’t help it right now*.

“Elle?” I called. “Is everything okay? What are you doing all the way out here?”

She growled in response, her hackles rising and her lips peeling back to expose her teeth.

*Cool, cool, cool. She’s definitely not her most chill self right now.*

“Lola, be careful,” Jay called. “You don’t need to be a hero about this.”

I knew that, but it didn’t change the fact that I felt responsible. I was supposed to keep an eye on Elle, and I’d failed her. I wasn’t gonna fail her again.

“Hey, Elle, why don’t you shift back so we can talk?” I suggested.

She stared back at me, her gaze feral to the point where I had to wonder if she even knew who I was. Had that spell tapped into some wilder side of Elle? Was she truly a wolf right now?

But that didn’t make sense either, because normal wolves knew about us and were generally non-confrontational.

Then the wild look faded away, replaced by something like recognition, and then confusion. Elle shifted back to human. “What am I doing out here?”

I moved forward, though not too fast. I still wasn’t entirely sure what was going on. “Do you remember what happened before? How you’re under the spell of a witch? You were in the basement of the pack house, where you could be safe and not be forced to hurt anyone.”

She shook her head. “I remember being locked up down there. But that doesn’t answer my question. Why am I *here*, out in the woods? And why are you and Jay and everyone else here?”

Jay stepped up by my side. “We were looking for you. You ran away.”

“I… I don’t remember that. I don’t remember anything after the basement.”

Well, that couldn’t be good.

I forced a smile. “How do you feel?”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “A little cold.”

“Agreed,” Jacs cut in. “It sucks here. We should all go back to the pack house. Maybe have some of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha and talk about everything there?”

I held out my hand to Elle. “What do you say?”

She took my hand, and Jay draped his coat around her delicate shoulders as we led her back home.

Jacs cast a glance at Elle. “Do you really not remember anything after being locked up?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Only a strange feeling that urged me to go into the woods to shift and run free. It felt like I was supposed to be searching for something, or someone, but I have no idea what or who.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She shrugged helplessly. “That’s the thing. I don’t know.”

*Poor thing.* It was bad enough being targeted by a vampire-witch, but to lose entire hours of your life and not know what you’d done with them? It reminded me of when my shifting had been out of control. There’d been times when I’d wake up after spending the whole night as a werewolf and have no memory of what I’d done.

I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

We finally made it back to the pack house, and I saw some people making their way up the porch steps…

“Cali!” I cried, racing up to her. “Are you okay?”

She held out some kind of vase-looking thing. “We have the ashes!”

Beside her, Greyson narrowed his eyes as Elle and the others trooped across the yard. “What the hell is going on here?”

# Episode 3365

As I looked around the group that had now gathered around the porch—Lola, Jay, Charlie, Lilac, Violet, Jacqueline, and Elle, who was wearing only a man’s coat—I couldn’t help but wonder the same thing Greyson had, though I probably wouldn’t have quite put it the same way. Just what *was* going on here?

“Uh, well. You see…” Lola looked around the group, her eyes clearly pleading for someone to throw her a lifeline. Apparently, nobody wanted to face Greyson’s displeasure, because she was on her own. “It’s a long story, but the important thing is that it has a happy ending.” She grinned and patted Elle’s shoulder. “Elle’s back—and that’s the most important part, right?”

“Back?” Greyson repeated.

“I’m glad to see you, Elle, but where did you go?” I asked.

Elle opened her mouth to reply, and Lola stepped in. “Again, *long* story. I’m sure you guys don’t want to hear about it right now. We can talk about it later—and you guys can share your story too!”

Greyson and I exchanged a look. Lola was quite possibly the worst liar I’d ever encountered, and her attempt at deflection wasn’t fooling anyone. But she wasn’t wrong, necessarily. I was tired and cold and wanted nothing more than a hot shower to wash away that disgusting lake.

Lola’s gaze dropped to the urn. “Is that really her? Seluna, I mean?”

I nodded. “It’s her. And we never would have gotten the ashes back from Adéluce if it wasn’t for everyone’s help.”

“Grateful” didn’t even begin to describe how I felt about the pack, about my sister and my mates, about Rishika and Gabriel and Mikah and Tabitha and even Adair. I simply never would have gotten the ashes back without their help. Without each of us working together.

I remembered when I’d first been introduced to the concept of werewolves and packs. It had seemed strange to me at first, like some kind of communal, hippie lifestyle. But now I understood that a pack wasn’t so different from a family. A family that worked together to solve problems for the benefit of every pack member.

“Cali! Artemis!” My mother came running out of the house and pulled my sister and me into a tight hug. “I’m so glad my girls are back, safe and sound.”

“It’s all Artemis,” I said with a tired smile. “Without her skills with a bow and arrow, things might have turned out very differently. But, Mom, we got the ashes. We did it.”

She let us go and turned her full attention to Artemis. “Thank you so much for being so brave and strong and protecting your sister.”

Artemis mumbled a “you’re welcome” and quickly excused herself. “I need to go change into some fresh clothes.”

Mom watched Artemis as she trudged into the house. “Is she okay?”

“I think she’s probably just exhausted,” I said. “It’s been a long road to this point. We’re all worn a little thin.”

I followed everyone into the house, keeping the urn clutched tight to my chest. I’d seen Adéluce disappear beneath the surface of the lake like everyone else, but I wasn’t going to let the ashes out of my sight until they were in the demon world once and for all.

Immediately, I headed upstairs. Artemis had the right idea. Warm, dry clothes were a must. Along with an amazing shower. I might never come out.

I smiled dreamily at the thought, but as I pushed my bedroom door open, my smile disappeared.

“Artemis?”

My sister was sitting on the edge of my bed, waiting for me. Her head was bowed, and she was looking down at her lap. The sight had alarm bells going off in my mind.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” I knew Artemis would never admit to being hurt in front of everyone, but she could have gotten injured during all the fighting. It was honestly a miracle we’d all survived the past few days.

She shook her head. “I’m not hurt.”

“Oh,” I said, even though that didn’t really answer my question about what was going on. I sank down on the edge of the mattress next to her. “Mom’s worried about you. I hope you know I’m so grateful for your help. I really couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

“You’re welcome.” She didn’t look up from her twined hands, resting on her lap.

I decided to try another approach. “I know that going to New Orleans didn’t work out exactly how you were hoping it would. But Adair did come back with us. He fought Adéluce alongside us. Maybe there’s still a chance that he’ll spend some time with you, get to know—”

She cut me off. “This isn’t about Adair.” Her voice trembled, and her throat worked with emotion. My heart broke in two. She rarely showed emotions like this, and even more rarely came to me to talk about what was upsetting her.

Which, to me, meant something had to be terribly wrong. What was wrong with my sister?

“Artemis, what’s going on?” I asked as gently as I could. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

“It’s just… You shouldn’t be thanking me at all. It’s all my fault that Adéluce followed you back to Crater Lake.”

I frowned. “I don’t… What did you have to do with any of that?”

“Because I…” She stopped, her lips pressing together. “I was the one—” A couple of tears tracked down her cheeks.

I took her hands. “Whatever it is you think you’ve done, you can tell me.”

She sniffled and nodded. “I was the one who told Adéluce that Xavier was in Oregon. I didn’t say exactly where, but still.”

Instinct had me releasing her hands, but I tried to school my expression. To not react in anger. I wasn’t really angry, actually. I was confused. “Why would you tell her that? I know you’d never help her on purpose.”

“I had to.” She finally raised her eyes to meet mine. “I did it to save Rishika’s life. Adéluce had her, and she was going to kill her right in front of me. If I hadn’t told her where Xavier was, Rishika would be dead right now. I’m so sorry, Cali.” Her breathing hitched. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

I threw my arms around her, hugging her tight. It made sense now, how Adéluce had been able to find us so quickly. But it didn’t matter, because it was all over. Adéluce was dead. We were all alive. We had the ashes.

Like Lola had said, the most important thing was that we’d gotten a happy ending.

“It’s okay,” I whispered. “I don’t blame you.”

“How can you not? I betrayed you.” Her tears were hot on my neck.

“You saved Rishika. You didn’t betray anyone.”

I let her go, and Artemis shook her head. “I should have tried harder to fight her, but all I could see was Rishika. She was in danger. I knew Adéluce would kill her without batting an eye, so I sacrificed my own sister instead. I’ll never forgive myself for what I did.”

“Artemis, no. You were protecting someone you love. I completely understand. Believe me, I know what it’s like to be so in love with someone that nothing else matters. And it all worked out in the end.”

“I thought I could buy more time,” she continued, clearly not ready to absolve herself. “I had to save Rishika first, but I had every intention of figuring out a way to stop Adéluce before it was too late.”

“And that’s the thing.” I smiled, holding her at arm’s length. “You did stop Adéluce. Or you helped, at the very least. It’s not like you turned on me. You did what you felt you had to do. I love you, and I love Rishika, and I’d be devastated if anything happened to either of you. I think you did the right thing. We did it, Artemis. We beat Adéluce at her own game, and we got the ashes. That’s what counts. And I couldn’t have done it without you.” I wiped a tear from my sister’s cheek. “Rishika is alive today because you did what you had to do. All in all, that’s a pretty good day, right?”

She gave me a watery smile. “I guess it is.” She cleared her throat and swiped at her cheeks. “I’m going to check on Rishika.”

“Give her my thanks, okay?”

“I will.” Artemis picked up the urn. “I can’t wait for you to be freed from this demon.” She set the ashes on my desk and started toward the door.

“Artemis.”

She stopped and looked back. “Yeah?”

“What are you going to do about Adair?”

She sighed. “I don’t have the slightest idea. I don’t even know how long he’s planning to stay.”

“I know it must be hard, but I hope you’ll try to talk to him again.”

She smiled. “Maybe I will.” As she moved toward the door, it flew open, and Xavier stalked in.

“How the hell can I get in touch with the Courier? I want to return the ashes *now.*”

# Episode 3366

**Xavier**

I could tell I’d interrupted something between Cali and Artemis when I’d stormed in, but if I was being honest with myself, I didn’t care. In another time and place, I might’ve been more sensitive about everything those two probably needed to unpack, but right now, my focus was singular—I had to put those ashes where they belonged.

Cali blinked, clearly shocked by my tone. “Um, did you try calling Okorie?”

“Oh, right.” I nodded. “I will. In the meantime, keep the ashes by your side at all times, okay? Don’t let them out of your sight for a second until I get back.” I dropped a kiss on her lips, glad to feel them soft and warm against mine.

After she’d nearly drowned, hypothermia had been a huge concern. All through the desperate chase for the ashes, in the back of my mind, I’d known we had to hurry because Cali needed shelter. It was such a relief that she’d finally gotten it. That she was okay. That this seemingly never-ending nightmare was so close to being over.

“Hey, do you know where Rishika is?” Artemis asked.

“Um, I think she’s in the kitchen getting a mocha.” Werewolf or not, all of us who’d been at Crater Lake were in desperate need of an opportunity to warm up. Now that I thought about it, Elle’s “search party”—whatever the hell that was about—had looked pretty frosty when they’d strolled up to the house, too.

I left Cali’s room and was almost immediately met with the commotion of a full pack house. After the trip to New Orleans, I’d almost forgotten what it was like to have so many people underfoot all the time.

Lilac headed down the hall in my direction.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

He gave me a dirty look. “Don’t ask.”

*Okay… I wonder what the hell that’s about.*

But if I didn’t have time to spend with Cali right now, I sure as shit didn’t have time for Lilac’s teen angst. Besides, it wasn’t any of my business—especially if he wasn’t in a sharing mood. If, after I got things sorted with Okorie and the Courier and those godforsaken ashes, Lilac wanted to talk to me, I’d be all ears. But I wasn’t going to force the guy.

The house was in chaos, buzzing with reunions and story swapping, but I managed to find some quiet in the study by the front door. I pulled the door closed behind me and took out my phone.

Okorie answered after several rings. “I know this isn’t Xavier Evers calling me in the middle of the night.” His tone was full of annoyance.

Too bad I didn’t give a damn about his beauty sleep.

“Too fucking bad. I need—”

Okorie cursed under his breath. “Tutoring hours are over. If one of my students has fucked something up, call me about it in the morning.”

I reached the end of my (admittedly short) rope. “Shut the hell up, and listen to me. I want to speak to the Courier.”

“Okay? I’m not a fucking voicemail inbox.”

I pulled in a deep breath. “I want the Courier, and I want him now. So either get him to come here, or tell me how to get in touch with him before I find you and make waking up in the middle of the night the least of your problems.”

Silence settled in for a beat, and I thought the bastard had hung up on me. Finally, he sighed. “Fine. I’ll call him, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

“Text me either way. Thanks.” I ended the call.

I strode out of the study, restless. Now that I was waiting on the Courier to call me back, I felt itchy with impatience. I probably should’ve made some rounds around the house and checked in with everyone I hadn’t seen in a while, but I had more important things to do. I was ready to take the ashes wherever they needed to go.

The Courier had failed us last time, and I wasn’t going to let that happen again.

*I’ll escort the Courier as far as I can go and make sure he actually makes it to the demon world this time. If anyone tries anything, they’ll have me to deal with.*

I knew I couldn’t go into the demon world, but I wondered if I’d be able to just toss the ashes through the portal. If I could handle it myself, that would be ideal. I wouldn’t have to rely on anyone else. I’d make sure it was done right. But in the event that wasn’t an option, we’d need the Courier. And he’d messed it up last time.

Fuck.

Either way, it’d probably be good to ask Kira or someone if they’d been skimping any details about the demon world. As I searched the house for Kira, I ran into Greyson.

“How’s Cali doing?” he asked.

“She’s fine.” I continued for a few steps, then turned back to face my brother. “You shouldn’t have stopped me.”

He frowned. “Do you mean when you were going after Adéluce? It was the right thing to do, and you know it.”

I stepped close to him. “We *don’t* know that. Sure, we have the ashes, but for all we know, we let her get away again.”

“We had to act. Now we have the ashes, and she has nothing over us anymore. We can focus on getting the ashes to the demon world, and if Adéluce somehow managed to escape that lake, we’ll kill her. For now, just focus on the ashes.”

I scoffed. “I am. But she’s tricked us before.”

“I know that,” Greyson said. “Which is why you need to leave for the demon world ASAP. I’d offer to go with you, but I know this was made personal to you and that you want to handle it. I also need to be back with the pack—and here to protect Cali.”

Greyson and the others seemed all too ready to put Adéluce behind them, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that we weren’t done yet. *That* was why I’d wanted to jump in and kill her myself. Until I saw she was dead and dusted with my own two eyes, I wasn’t going to be able to rest. Getting the ashes to the demon world would at least take the most immediate danger away from Cali, but I knew I’d be looking over my shoulder for Adéluce Duquette for a long time to come.

My phone buzzed with a text from Okorie.

*The Courier will be there in an hour.*

“I have to go get ready.” I pushed past Greyson. I couldn’t let my anger toward my brother get the best of me right now. There’d be plenty of time for that when the ashes were gone.

But I knew from my mercenary days that you should never assume someone was dead until you saw the body for yourself. Maybe diving into that lake would’ve been risky, but it had been my risk to take, and Greyson had taken that from me.

And Cali had agreed with him, which kind of pissed me off too.

I knew she’d done it out of love, because she wanted to protect me, but I still wished I could go back and put this Adéluce question to rest for good. Though, if things were the other way around, there was no way in hell I would’ve let Cali go after Adéluce.

I could forgive her, but I’d never forgive Greyson.

I found Kira in her room, reading a book of spells.

She smiled when she saw me standing in her doorway. “I heard the good news. I’m so glad you’ve recovered the ashes. You must be feeling so relieved.”

“Not really,” I said shortly. “What do you know about the demon world?”

Her smile disappeared. “Why do you ask?”

I shrugged. “It’s where the ashes are supposed to go. What’s it like?”

“Well, I don’t know, exactly. I’ve never been there. It’s not a place for the living.”

“It’s probably pretty fiery, right? Must be hot.”

She studied me for a moment, a crease between her brows. “Xavier, why are you asking me this? Isn’t the Courier going to take the ashes?”

I scoffed. “Yeah. But if you recall, that didn’t work out so well before. I’m going with the Courier to make sure there are no screwups this time.”

Cali had been tortured by those ashes and the curse they carried for far too long. I’d promised to help her get rid of them, and I wasn’t leaving it up to chance and some fucking guy called “the Courier” this time. This time, I would personally make sure the ashes ended up where they belonged. Cali would be free, and those goddamn ashes would be out of our lives for good.

Kira’s eyes widened, and she shook her head. “Forget it. You can’t go near that place.”

# Episode 3367

After Xavier rushed out of my room as quickly as he’d rushed in, Artemis excused herself to go find Rishika, and I finally got to do the thing I’d been looking forward to since we’d left Crater Lake: take a shower.

The warm water slipped over my skin, and I tipped my head back with a sigh, savoring every drop. The heat of the water sank into my skin, my muscles, and for the first time since we’d arrived at Crater Lake, I felt my body begin to relax and thaw out.

*This is the most amazing shower I’ve ever had. I would believe someone who said this shower has magical healing properties.*

After that dangerous, icy plunge into the lake, it’s almost like I’d needed this to reaffirm the fact that water wasn’t just a deadly threat, but had the power to soothe and heal as well.

I glanced over at the urn, which was sitting on the bathroom counter. After everything we’d been through—me and so many people I loved—I could never let the ashes slip through my fingers again. Time constraints aside, I didn’t think any of us had the stamina to stage another search and retrieve mission for these ashes.

This was our last chance to get them back to the demon world. Our last chance to save me from Seluna’s parting curse. We simply couldn’t afford any mistakes.

A draft swept into the room, and I peered through the frosted glass of the shower to see a familiar figure step into the bathroom.

“Greyson? What are you doing in here? Did something happen?”

He shook his head, a gentle—if tired—smile tugging at his lips. “Not at all. I’m sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to check on you and see how you’re doing.”

My heart warmed. Both my mates were so attentive, so worried. They’d never admit it, especially not in front of each other, but they were a pair of mother hens.

I stared at my mate, who was still rumpled and a little worse for wear after the battle. He clearly hadn’t had a chance to decompress yet. As Alpha, he probably had all sorts of responsibilities to attend to now that we were back, even though he’d almost drowned. He’d been through hell at that lake, just as much as I had.

*Actually, he had two dunks in the lake*, I realized, remembering how he’d come up out of the water at the last second to stop the open urn from sinking beneath the surface.

I stepped back, away from the open shower door. “If you really want to see how I’m doing, you should get in here. The hot water will do you good.”

“I don’t know about hot water, but being close to you sounds pretty healing.”

I snorted. “I know you’re a werewolf and you’ve probably already recovered from the lake, but wouldn’t the hot water feel good, too? It’s lovely.”

He laughed. “I’m tempted.” His eyes flicked over to the urn on the counter. “Will Seluna’s ashes be joining us?”

“God, no.”

“I wonder if it’s worth having one of the witches confirm that they’re really Seluna’s. I know it wouldn’t make sense for Adéluce to put up such a huge fight and so many obstacles for an urn full of decoy ashes, but after what happened back in New Orleans, I’d like to be sure.”

I thought back to how I’d felt the first time I’d held this urn. How I’d just *known* it was the right one. That these were the right ashes. It was like the ashes in the urn called to the remnants of Seluna’s spirit locked inside me—the remnants that kept the curse alive.

Like had called to like, and there was no doubt in my mind we had the right ashes this time.

“There’s no reason to question it,” I said simply. “My body feels it. It recognizes these ashes.” I had a thought, and I turned to show him my bare, water-slicked shoulder. “How does the handprint look?”

He moved closer, standing just outside the shower. Stray water drops pelted his arm as he reached out and touched my shoulder. “It looks the same. And it hasn’t caused a reaction in the ashes like last time.”

I knew what he meant: the shed spontaneously catching fire with the ashes inside.

“But if you’re sure these are *the* ashes, then I’ll have to agree with you.”

I turned and caught his hand. “I’m sure.” I kissed his knuckles, then his palm. When I looked up at him, he was staring down at me with such intense love and adoration, it took my breath away.

How had I gotten so lucky, to have this man as my mate? This Alpha werewolf who had crossed worlds for me, who never hesitated to throw himself in harm’s way to protect me. Who loved me so much, he was willing to give up everything to save me.

“Thank you,” I whispered, “for not only believing in me, but for risking your life to save me.”

“That just seems to be something we do for each other. Though maybe now we won’t have to do it for a while.”

I gestured to the shower. “The water’s still warm.”

This time, he didn’t hesitate. He started tugging off his clothes, and the taut muscles across his body visibly relaxed as the water engulfed him.

He turned to face me, his eyes heavy-lidded as he looked down at me. “I think we got lucky, though having the support of the pack helped.”

“We couldn’t have done it without them.”

He shook his head. “Definitely not. I’m glad we had that protection spell from the witches, at least temporarily. Even though Adéluce still found us pretty quickly, I think it definitely bought us some time.”

I swallowed roughly, remembering Artemis’s confession. *Should I tell Greyson what Artemis told me?*

I didn’t want to get her in trouble, especially since she already felt so awful about the whole thing. Besides, it wasn’t like anyone could blame her for making the choice she’d made. I bet everyone in this pack house would have given up an important, life-and-death secret to Adéluce if she’d been holding someone they loved hostage.

He moved closer and gently wiped the water from my face. “What are you thinking?”

I sighed. “Artemis told Adéluce that Xavier was back in Oregon in order to save Rishika. It was life-and-death, and she couldn’t let the woman she loved die. I hope you’re not mad at her. She feels terrible about the whole thing.”

He smiled. “Honestly, I’m not surprised. You’ve already proven you’ll do anything to protect the people you love. Why shouldn’t your sister do the same?”

“You’re really not mad?”

He shook his head. “I would have done the same thing if the tables were turned. Artemis might act tough as nails, but she has a big heart. I’ll talk to her and try to put her mind at ease. Plus, Adéluce knew where she’d hidden the ashes—and that we were after them. She would’ve figured it out regardless. The important thing is that Artemis was able to save Rishika. Really, we should be thanking her.”

I slipped my arms around his neck. “Thank you. She’s blaming herself pretty hard right now. I know your support will mean a lot to her.”

His arms slipped around my waist, and he kissed my forehead. “I just wish I could have stopped all of this from happening. What a nightmare.”

“It won’t do us any good to worry about the past—now, we can start looking ahead. Thinking about what can be.” I smiled. “It’ll be a nice change of pace, right?”

“I’ll say.” He pulled my wet body into his and kissed me. “I see you’ve thawed out.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want you to warm me up.”

He grinned and pulled me in for another kiss. His tongue traced my lips, begging for entrance, and we both moaned when I opened for him. His hands slipped over my body, and when he lifted me in his arms to press me against the warm tiles of the shower, I was more than ready.

My legs wrapped around his waist, and he sank inside me with a groan. I was seeing stars, wrapped up in his heat.

We’d been through hell, but we’d survived. There was something so life-affirming about our bodies moving together, about his breathy moans and the gasps he tore from my lips when he hit that perfect spot inside me.

We had a future. In that moment, anything seemed possible. I never wanted it to end.

After, as he gently lowered me to my feet, pleasure still buzzing in my veins, a tingling sensation spread over my shoulder. I looked at it with a frown.

“What’s wrong?” Greyson asked.

I glanced over at the urn, which was still sitting safely on the counter. “We have the ashes—soon it’ll be the end of Seluna.”

# Episode 3368

**Xavier**

I paced back and forth in my room as I thought about Kira’s warning. She thought it was too dangerous for me to go to the demon world—or to even so much as approach it.

*She’s just worried about me. I get it, but Kira knows about as much about the demon world as I do—and that’s not much at all. She says it’s too dangerous, but I already knew that. That doesn’t change the fact that I have to get the ashes there, no matter what.*

Kira had suggested that I check with Big Mac to get her thoughts on the whole thing, but why bother? She was only going to tell me the same thing—that it was dangerous to enter that place and that if I went in, I might not be able to get back out.

*It doesn’t matter if I get trapped there, or if I get hurt—it’s worth it if that’s what it takes to make sure Cali’s safe. Ending her suffering is all that matters now. I don’t want her to even have to think the name “Seluna” for the rest of her days. Besides, I’ve been up against impossible situations before and come out on the other side. No reason why I can’t do the same now.*

I pulled out my phone to check the time again, just as there was a soft knock on my door. Cali came in and closed the door behind her. She held out the urn. “Here you go. Greyson said you were going to the demon world with the Courier tonight, so I guess you’ll need this.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her. She was so damn beautiful, and just seeing her face renewed my drive to deliver the ashes to the demon world, no matter what it took.

I took the urn from her. “I promise I’ll take good care of them.”

“Promise me that you’ll take good care of *yourself*,” Cali said. “You know, you don’t have to do this. You can just send the Courier with the ashes on his own. In fact, I think that’s what you *have* to do, Xavier. It’s not worth the risk otherwise.”

“No, the risky option would be sending these off with the Courier and having something go wrong yet again. Your life is in danger because these things aren’t where they’re supposed to be.” I lifted the ashes to eye level between us. “Adéluce stole these the first time because the Courier didn’t have what it took to protect them—I will.”

“I get it, but the vampire-witch is gone, Xavier. We took care of her!”

I shook my head. “Adéluce may be history, but she showed us that the Courier is vulnerable. There’s no way I can leave the ashes in his hands again. They’re too important, so I have to go with him.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t have to do this!”

I turned away from Cali, unable to keep looking at the fear and worry in her eyes. “I don’t want to argue about this, Cali. It’s the way it has to be. I won’t have peace of mind until I see these ashes delivered. You’re my mate, Cali. This is personal. There are no other options.”

Cali pulled me into a tight hug, and I wrapped my arms around her, inhaling her scent.

“I wish I could go with you,” Cali said into my chest. “You shouldn’t have to take this on all by yourself.” She looked up at me. “But I know that you won’t have it any other way.”

“You know me well.” I smiled down at her and then planted a kiss on the top of her head. “Better than anyone.”

“Remember, tomorrow’s New Year’s Eve,” Cali said, the look in her eyes finally softening, just a little.

My smiled widened, and I kissed her. “I promise I’ll be back in time for the New Year’s toast and kiss with my mate.”

I kissed her again, already fantasizing about experiencing that moment with her with nothing breathing down our necks, and no handprint to worry about.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Cali said with a wistful smile.

I realized then that I had no idea how long this whole thing was really going to take.

*Maybe I can ask the Courier for an estimate when he gets here. Even if I have to break my promise to Cali, I’m still going to see the ashes delivered.*

There were bigger things at stake here than a New Year’s kiss—no matter how much I hoped to make it back in time to lay one on her at the stroke of midnight.

Cali and I both perked up at the sound of a motorcycle approaching.

“That must be the Courier.” I carefully wrapped the urn in a towel to give it some extra protection and then slipped it into a bag. “I’m going to keep this with me the entire time. I’m not going to take it out of this bag or even put it down until we’re in the demon world and you’re free from Seluna forever.”

“I know,” Cali said.

I bent down and kissed her once more before turning to leave my room. Cali was right on my heels. Part of me wished that she would stay inside. I didn’t really want her questioning the Courier, since any answers the man gave would only make her worry more. A bigger part of me, though, wanted her right by my side up until I left so that I’d be able to see her face as we drove away.

“The Courier’s here,” Greyson said as soon as we got downstairs.

“I know. It’s about time. I just want to get this over with.” I looked past my brother to the door, already contemplating what was ahead of me. It was kind of comforting knowing that there could be no other outcome than me delivering the ashes to their rightful place and giving Cali her life back.

Greyson stopped me. “Hey, I know that you want to do this for Cali, but I can send someone from the pack with you. There’s no reason why you have to take this on all by yourself.”

My mind flashed back to Kira’s warning. She hadn’t been exaggerating, that much was for sure. “No. We need everyone here… Just in case.” I didn’t let my mind dwell on what “just in case” really meant.

Cali’s eyes widened in alarm. “Maybe this isn’t the best idea, Xavier. Greyson, tell him! He should just leave this to the Courier. Adéluce is gone—”

“Cali, no,” I said. “This is the only way. There’s no way I’m letting these things out of my sight. We’ve already taken too many chances and gone through way too much to get them back.”

“I agree,” Greyson said. “We can’t trust anyone else to do this.”

“What about the Courier’s terms?” Cali asked quickly. “Last time he demanded three years of Xavier’s life. Are we really considering doing that again?”

“Believe me, I’m well aware. I’ve already prepared myself for any sacrifices I may have to make.” I looked Cali in the eye, hoping that she could read how determined I was. There was nothing that could stop me from getting the ashes back. Not even the possibility of death.

“Could we ask for a discount? You know, because of the mess we’re in and how he’s partially responsible for it? He has to be willing to shave a bit off the top for that,” Cali said.

I took Cali’s hand in mine. “I’m going to do whatever’s necessary.”

Cali cast a worried look at Greyson. “Can’t you say something? Stop him!”

“Cali, he knows what he’s doing.” Greyson looked to me and nodded, as if giving his approval.

*As if I need it. I was going either way. Nothing can stop me.*

I approached the Courier as he climbed off his motorcycle.

“So, same thing? Delivery to the demon world?” he asked.

“Yes, but this time, I’m coming with,” I said. “I want to make sure that we actually make it there this time.”

The Courier shrugged. “Whatever—but the same deal, right? Three years of your life owed to me upon delivery.”

“No, that’s *not* the deal! You messed up, and you owe us! You didn’t do it right the first time, so we demand a discount!” Cali yelled.

I felt Cali’s pain, and it hurt me to see her so distressed, but I wasn’t surprised in the least that the terms hadn’t changed. I’d prepared myself for exactly this—had already resigned myself to giving up years of my life to the Courier for Cali. It was the only way that she would be safe, and so it was more than worth it.

The Courier sucked his teeth. “I don’t negotiate.”

Greyson snatched the Courier up by his coat. “Yeah? Well, you’d better start. The only reason he’s risking his life like this is because *you* fucked up last time. A decent guy like you? I’m sure you want to give us a deal after something like that.” Greyson’s voice was now a low, menacing rasp.

The Courier held up his hands and looked at me as he yanked out of Greyson’s hold. “Fine. What are you offering instead?”

“I want to get going, so let’s make this quick,” I said. “I’ll give you one year of my life. Do we have a deal?”

# Episode 3369

“Stop all this negotiating!” I said, exasperated and horrified by the entire display. “This is serious. We’re talking about my mate’s life being cut short, for god’s sake, not haggling over the price of a used car! There has to be some other way!” I looked at the Courier. “What about me? Will you accept years of my life instead?”

“Not an option!” Xavier and Greyson said in near unison.

I’d known that would be their reaction, but I had to try.

I just couldn’t wrap my head around the idea of Xavier dying even a second before he was supposed to because of a sacrifice he was making for me.

Xavier turned away from me and looked the Courier in the eye, his jaw set. “So, one year of my life in exchange for you escorting me to the demon world. Do we have a deal or not?”

The Courier nodded and shook Xavier’s hand. “Deal.”

I looked on in complete agony as the two men moved on and started talking about the trip—as if they hadn’t just bargained away a year of Xavier’s life.

“I wish it didn’t have to be this way,” I said lamely. I would never in a million years have dreamed that me killing Seluna would lead to my mate having to place himself in so much danger just to save me.

The Courier shrugged. “It’s a cold world out there. What can I say?” He turned back to Xavier. “So, hand over the goods.”

Xavier shook his head and took a step back. “No way. They’re riding with me the whole way.” Xavier gave the bag a little pat.

“Fine by me,” the Courier said. He checked his watch. “We should get going.”

“I’m going to go get my bike, and then I’ll be ready.” Xavier gave me a lingering glance before heading off to get his motorcycle from the garage.

I rounded on the Courier. “You’d better bring him back!”

The Courier sighed. “Listen, I only guarantee the delivery of the parcel. Whatever happens to your boyfriend after that isn’t my concern.”

His nonchalant attitude was really starting to rattle me. “If you do anything to hurt him, it *will* be your concern, because I will hunt you down.”

The Courier cast a bored look at Greyson. “Hey, will you get her to back the fuck off? I’m just a courier, not a bodyguard.”

“She’s right. If I find out that you did anything to put my brother in harm’s way, I’ll hunt you down,” Greyson hissed, jabbing his finger into the Courier’s chest.

The Courier shook his head and hopped on his bike. “I’ll be so glad when this job is over. I don’t get paid enough for this shit,” he grumbled.

Xavier came riding up on his motorcycle, the bag holding the ashes strapped tightly to his back. He looked so hot sitting there on his bike that for a split second I forgot about what he was about to go do.

I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him, then kissed him hard on the lips. “Be careful, Xavier. If it gets too dangerous, just come back, okay? We’ll find another way.”

“There is no other way, Cali. I wish there was, but there isn’t.” He kissed me. “I’ll keep you posted.”

Xavier slipped on his helmet, and I stepped back as he and the Courier rolled down the driveway.

Greyson took my hand as they shot down the road, their taillights disappearing into the darkness. Worry overtook me, but I wasn’t able to dwell in it for too long before Xavier looked back at me, his voice coming to me through mind link. *I’ll be back, Cali. I love you.*

My eyes were brimming with tears. It was always so painful, watching one of my mates go off to face unknown dangers. I was angry at Seluna all over again for throwing us into this predicament—one that had cost my mate a year of his life and could cost him more than that before all was said and done.

Greyson pulled me close. “Xavier will be all right. He’s a pro at this sort of thing.”

I nodded against his chest. “I hope you’re not just saying that to make me feel better.”

“Don’t get me wrong—I *am* saying it to make you feel better, but that doesn’t mean I don’t believe it. I know Xavier. I have complete faith in him.”

I closed my eyes and snuggled against Greyson’s chest. His words had brought me a bit of comfort, and I was thankful for that.

I could still just make out the sound of their motorcycles rumbling in the distance before the sound finally faded and there was nothing but silence. I squeezed my eyes shut, picturing Xavier’s face right before he’d slid on his helmet, then him looking back at me before reaching out to me through our mind link. *I’ll be back, Cali. I love you.*

“Let’s go inside,” Greyson suggested. “It’s late, and we could both use some sleep.”

I hesitated for a moment before I finally let Greyson lead me inside, my mind replaying every detail of every conversation that Xavier and I had had over the past few hours. He’d said that he would be back in time for New Year’s, and I had to believe that he would be. It was the only way I was going to be able to keep it together.

The house was quiet when we went in. Most of the pack had probably turned in for the night, and I found the quiet a little unsettling.

“Will you spend the night with me?” I asked Greyson as we made our way upstairs.

Greyson smiled. “Of course, love.”

He wrapped his arms around me as we walked into my bedroom and collapsed onto the bed, both of us quiet and lost in our own thoughts.

It made me hopeful that I wasn’t the only one worried about Xavier. He had two people who loved him rooting for him to come home. I closed my eyes and tried to picture Xavier riding back toward me on his motorcycle, safe and sound.

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I woke up the next morning in Greyson’s arms. He’d held me all night long, and I was sure he was the only reason I’d slept at all. I slipped out of his embrace and grabbed my phone, hoping to see a message or even a missed call from Xavier. I sighed with relief once I saw that he’d reached out as recently as an hour ago.

I read his text over and over. *Still on the road. All good.*

I sighed and put the phone down, trying to get my nerves in check. I wasn’t sure what time we’d gone to bed the night before, but it couldn’t have been more than five hours since Xavier had left. I was still tired, but I was way too anxious about my mate to go back to sleep. I was just happy that he’d kept his word and was staying in touch and keeping me updated.

Greyson stirred. “Is everything okay?”

I sat down beside him and stroked his cheek, happy that I at least had him safe and right beside me. I couldn’t help but think of the times that they’d both been gone, and I’d had to worry about them both at once. Those times had been pure torture.

“Everything’s good. Got a text from Xavier—he’s okay, and they’re still on the road.” I sighed. “I think that I’m just going to be on edge all day until I know that he’s on his way back.”

Greyson sat up, the sheets falling away to reveal the deeply muscled planes of his chest. I turned away. *I can’t get distracted right now.*

I cleared my throat. “I could use some caffeine.” I grabbed my robe and slipped it on.

“Okay. I’ll be down in a bit,” Greyson said around a yawn.

I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, then grabbed my phone and went downstairs. I let out an almost audible groan when I saw Lola busy at the coffee pot.

*Just my luck. Lola makes the worst coffee.*

Seeing me, Lola smiled wide and presented me with a steaming cup. “Morning, Cali! Coffee?”

I barely managed a smile. “No, thanks. I’m more in the mood for tea this morning.”

I put the kettle on just as Torin came bouncing in, full of excitement. “Morning, everyone!” he sang. “You know what day it is, right? New Year’s Eve!” He clapped his hands and did a little spin. “You all thought Christmas was fun, well, wait until you see what I have planned for tonight! Tom and I are baking a special cake, and that cake will be the centerpiece of the night. Then there’ll be finger foods, champagne—”

Torin’s excited chatter was interrupted by the chime of the doorbell.

Lola looked confused. “We have a doorbell?”

I rushed to the door, half hoping that it would somehow be Xavier standing there when I opened it—though there was no reason why he’d ring the doorbell instead of just using his key. *It’s probably not him, but a girl can dream, can’t she?*

I pulled the door open. There was no one there, but I noticed a letter sticking out of the mail slot.

“What is it?” Lola asked as she and Torin came up behind me.

I picked up the envelope. “Not sure, but it’s addressed to the Redwood pack… And it’s from the Vanguards.”

# Episode 3370

**Xavier**

The Courier and I were heading southward toward Nevada when I remembered that I hadn’t asked him just how long this whole thing was going to take. I wished that I didn’t have to ask and that the demon world was a place I could reach by myself, using a simple GPS.

*Even if this whole thing goes off without a hitch this time, I still don’t think I’ll ever trust the Courier. He messed up royally the first time, and he doesn’t even seem repentant about it.*

I pulled up alongside the Courier and signaled for him to pull over. The Courier nodded, and a few moments later, we were idling on the side of the road. He lifted the visor of his helmet, and I was greeted by the same annoyed look that he always wore on his face.

*Does this guy ever smile? Or does he scowl like this even when someone’s telling him a joke?*

“How much longer is this going to take?” I asked. We’d been riding for a while, and I was antsy to get this thing over with. The longer I was away, the longer Cali would have to worry about me.

The Courier shrugged. “Time is just a mood.”

I scowled at him. “I’m sure it’s just a *mood* to *you*, but in the real world, time works in hours and minutes.”

*What’s with this guy? Time is a mood? What, is he some sort of mystic all of a sudden?*

“The demon world isn’t the real world though now, is it? This world may work according to your time constraints, but the demon world isn’t a fixed distance away. It moves. It’s always moving, in fact. You and I just have to keep moving until we’re there. There are no shortcuts.”

“If you’re bullshitting me, you’ll be sorry,” I snapped.

The Courier glared at me. “Sure, pal. Just remember, you need me more far more than I need you. If you still insist on tagging along, then you’re just going to have to be patient and follow the process.” He slid his visor back down. “So, long story short: we get there when we get there.”

I was fuming and doing everything in my power to keep from ripping him off his bike and throwing him headfirst into the road. *If I didn’t need him, I’d kick his ass in a second. Right about now, that’s the only thing that would make me feel better.*

In the end, I just gritted my teeth and said, “Then we’d better get going.”

I readied my bike and then quickly pulled out my phone to send Cali an update. I was glad to see that she’d sent me a few reply texts. I read them over and over, wishing that I was by her side instead of taking what could end up being a one-way trip to the demon world.

I put my phone away and then checked to make sure that the urn was still nestled securely in my bag before I hit the throttle and followed the Courier back out onto the road.

I was trying to be patient, but the Courier was moving at a snail’s pace, and it was starting to get to me. It was like he had no urgency at all.

*Time might not mean much to him and his constantly moving demon world, but I promised Cali that I’d be back for New Year’s, and I’d like to keep that promise if I can.*

It occurred to me that the Courier was just being cautious. After all, last time Adéluce had caused him to crash so that she could steal the ashes. I guessed I couldn’t blame the guy for being careful.Still, I felt like we could be cautious *and* up our speed, just a little bit. We were on motorcycles, after all, and going so slowly on bikes like these almost seemed wrong.

We drove for what felt like hours, and I was becoming more and more uncertain. I had no way of knowing whether we were getting closer or not, which was maddening all on its own. The demon world portal not being stationary like the portal to the Fae world was a difficult concept to wrap my head around. All I knew was that wherever we ended up, I was determined to get there.

I pushed up my helmet visor and took a good look around. I’d been all over Oregon, but I wasn’t all that familiar with this part of the state, and that made me uneasy. I thought I’d been paying pretty close attention, but I hadn’t seen any signs for a while to indicate exactly where we were. It was unusual for me not to recognize the area. But wherever we were right now, it felt… different.

*I hope this isn’t some endless journey. I don’t have time for this, and neither does Cali.*

After a few more miles—or at least what my odometer told me was a few more miles—I motioned for the Courier to stop.

The Courier took off his helmet and looked at me with his usual annoyed expression. “What is it this time?” he asked with a loud sigh.

“Where are we? I don’t recognize this place.”

The Courier shrugged and rolled his eyes. “We’re somewhere. Why?”

“Do you have any idea where we’re going?” I took another look around, hoping that something would stand out to me and ring a bell, but it didn’t.

The Courier threw his head back and sighed again, his annoyed look intensifying. “Do you have a problem with me?” He stepped off his bike and faced me. “If you do have a problem, just come out and say it. I don’t like being accused of whatever it is you’re accusing me of. I’m doing my job, the one you hired me to do, so I don’t get why you’re giving me such a hard time.”

Once again, I stifled the urge to beat the crap out of the Courier. I’d already agreed to give up a year of my life to the guy, so I’d expected slightly better service than what I was experiencing. Maybe even an ounce of respect. I clenched and unclenched my fists, yearning to show the Courier just how big a problem I had with him. I took a deep breath and let it out, trying to relax.

*This isn’t the time to lose my cool, no matter how good it would feel to unleash on this guy. Cali is depending on me to see this thing through. I can’t mess up now.*

The Courier arched an eyebrow at me. “Well?”

“I’m sorry,” I choked out. “It’s not that I have a problem with you, it’s just that I’m not familiar with this part of Oregon.”

“Most people aren’t. But we’re on the right track, and the longer you keep questioning me, the longer it’s going to take.”

I revved my engine and nodded. “Okay then, let’s go.” *Because if I don’t get going now, I might snap and punch that annoyed look right off your face.*

Without another word, the Courier hopped on his bike and took off, spraying a cloud of dust and gravel into my face in the process.

I clenched my jaw. *Great.* I floored it and pulled in behind the Courier. I took another good look around, still trying to make sense of where we were. There were mountains on the horizon, but I couldn’t identify them. We were headed straight for them, but they never seemed to get any closer. *Weird.*

The Courier made a sharp turn, and I followed him onto a bumpy dirt road that forked off from the main highway. I was hopeful that we were finally getting somewhere. Up ahead, I spotted some kind of tollhouse with a gate barring the way. A we pulled up, a spindly, shadowy figure peered out and extended a bony hand.

The Courier dropped a couple of odd-looking tokens in his hand and gestured back at me.

“He’s with me,” the Courier yelled over the rumble of our engines.

The figure slipped back inside the tollhouse, and a few seconds later, the gate opened. I couldn’t help but notice the sign mounted on the other side of the gate: “Pass at your own risk.”

The Courier slowed to a stop as I pulled up beside him. He lifted his visor and looked me in the eye. “No matter what, stay close behind me. Don’t stop.”

Before I could say anything, the Courier pulled off, and I rushed to fall in line behind him. *Why does everything seem so ominous all of a sudden?* The Courier picked up speed, and I noted that we were finally traveling faster—almost ninety miles per hour. I looked up to see that the road ended in a sudden drop-off only a few feet ahead.

Without warning, the Courier gunned it and flew over the edge. It was too late for me to stop, so I sailed right after him, out over the ledge and into the open air.

# Episode 3371

**Greyson**

“If it has anything to do with the Vanguards, I want nothing to do with it,” Cali said as she handed me the envelope. “Even thinking about going anywhere near Lucian, Aysel, and their palace of horrors gives me the creeps.”

I took the envelope and turned it over in my hands, examining it. *What’s Lucian up to now? There’s always something when it comes to the Vanguards. It’s like they spend their time dreaming up ways to mess with people.*

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Lola asked. “I’m dying to know what it’s all about.”

I hesitated, already preparing myself for what I knew was inside the envelope. “Nothing good comes from the Vanguards,” I said, as much to myself as to the others. With a sigh, I tore it open and pulled out the fancy invitation inside. “It’s an invitation to their New Year’s party,” I said dryly. “Signed by Lucian.”

It was no surprise that Lucian was throwing a party, and even less of a surprise that he was asking us to attend. The guy wasn’t good at taking a hint.

“But what about *my* party?” Torin huffed. “I’ve spent so much time planning it, and it would be so lame if I had to cancel it to go to a party that I know won’t hold a candle to what I have in store for us.”

“Take it easy, I’m just reading it. I haven’t made a decision yet,” I said. This was so typical of Lucian—sending an invitation the night of.

*Doesn’t the princeling believe in planning? Why’s he always springing things on us with no warning? I’m starting to think he gets off on the element of surprise.*

I was so tempted to tear the invitation to shreds—to hell with Lucian—but I knew that with the Samara pack still in flux, I might need the Vanguard pack to remain an ally, even if every fiber of my being screamed out for me to not trust them in any way. It seemed like a lifetime ago that the Samaras and the Redwoods had discussed an alliance with the Vanguards, and now that Knox was gone, I guessed I felt a little better about joining forces with the Vanguards. Still, that didn’t mean that I trusted them.

I thought about how Lucian had come around wanting to have drinks, and we’d blown him off. In fact, he’d invited us to a few things lately that we’d decided not to attend. If we turned this invite down, Lucian would take it personally—and rightfully so. Most invitations—especially ones that came from the Vanguards—were really more like orders anyway. I wasn’t one to take orders from anyone—especially Lucian—but maybe this was one of those times when I’d have to put my pride aside in the name of the greater good.

“Are you thinking of accepting?” Cali asked. “Or rather, *don’t tell me* that you’re thinking of accepting. I want to celebrate New Year’s with people we actually like.”

“I know, me too—but this is hard to turn down. We haven’t been the most sociable with the princeling lately, and we might still need Lucian and the Vanguard pack’s support down the line.” I stared at the invitation, thinking. “Maybe I could just go alone. Save you and everyone else the trouble.”

“Yes, but the invitation is for the entire Redwood pack, not just the Redwood Alpha,” Cali said. “You know how Lucian is—if you go alone, he’ll still take it as a slight. If you’re going to go, then we all should go.”

Torin pouted. “But what about *my* plans?”

It looked like he was seconds from throwing a temper tantrum. To say that Torin didn’t take holidays lightly was the understatement of the century.

“Sorry to say this, but we might need to attend. We can go early, make an appearance to please Lucian’s fat ego, then come back to the pack house, and you can still have your party, Torin.” There wasn’t even a small part of me that wanted to darken the Vanguard palace doors ever again, but going there as a show of good faith was a necessary evil. But I didn’t want to risk Torin’s wrath for blowing an opportunity for him to put on a holiday party, either.

“I suppose that’s a decent compromise,” Torin finally said with a loud sigh. “Can Tom and I still bake the cake?”

“Sure, I think that’s a good idea—and it sounds delicious. Maybe you could make two—one for our party, and the other as a gift for the Vanguards,” Cali suggested. I was thankful to her for pitching in to help manage Torin’s expectations.

Torin’s eyes lit up. “That’s a great idea, Cali! I have to go tell Tom. Two is always better than one when it comes to baking!” He rushed off.

“I’m kind of excited to go to the party, but on the other hand… it’s a Vanguard party. Ugh,” Lola added. “Hopefully the music’s good, at least.”

I nodded at Lola. “I agree that partying with the Vanguards isn’t ideal, but we’ll get through it.”

*Also, it might be the perfect thing to get Cali’s mind off Xavier. There’s no telling when he’ll be back, and if a crazy Vanguard party can keep her occupied for a few hours, all the better.*

“I’m sure Aysel is absolutely ecstatic about this party. It’s yet another opportunity for her to get dressed up in a gown right out of Disney movie,” Cali said with an eyeroll.

“Most likely,” I said. “Anything to draw attention away from how beautiful you are, Cali.”

Cali blushed a little and ducked her head. “You think Aysel is jealous of *me*?I find that really hard to believe.”

I pulled her into a hug. “You should believe it, because it’s true.”

Lola grabbed Cali. “Looks like we have wardrobe planning to do!”

She dragged Cali away, and I watched them go, already pleased that Cali was finally thinking about something other than Xavier.

I headed for the kitchen in search of a little caffeine pick-me-up and ran into Elle on my way. She was standing near the front door and looked a little lost in thought.

“Hey, Elle. How’re you feeling this morning?” Jay had filled me in, and I knew that she’d been through a lot, having been under Adéluce’s spell. I was happy that I was back in the pack house and finally able to support her. Once the ashes were delivered and Xavier was back safe, I really wanted to do more to help acclimate her to her new existence.

It took Elle a moment to snap out of whatever she was thinking about before she looked at me and smiled. “Glad to have you back, Greyson. I really missed you.”

“Glad to be back. Were you thinking about what happened?” I asked cautiously, not wanting to pry or trigger her.

“Yes. I guess I’m worried that it might happen again, but I also don’t want to be chained up again. I hated it. No fun.” Elle sighed. “I was lonely and I felt mad, too, and like I had no control.”

“I know how that feels, and I know exactly how awful it is for a werewolf to be confined. I’m so sorry that happened to you—the spell and everything. Are you feeling better, at least?”

“Yes, ever since Lola and the others found me last night, I’ve felt more like myself.” She paused. “Do you know why?” Elle turned to face me, her eyes searching mine for an answer. “One minute I felt strange, and the next, I was better.”

“Well, it was the vampire-witch’s dark magic that was affecting you. And we beat her. Maybe now that she’s gone, the magic that had a hold on you left, too. It’s just a guess, of course, but that’s the only thing that really makes sense to me.”

Elle nodded and looked down at the floor, probably mulling over what I’d said.

Suddenly, I felt the overwhelming urge to protect her. I’d promised her father that I would, and it was my duty to keep that promise and keep her out of harm’s way.

“Do you think I’m going to be okay, Greyson?” she asked.

Sensing her fear, I pulled her into a tight hug. “I *know* you’re going to be okay,” I said. I hoped she could hear the confidence in my words. Adéluce and Seluna’s ashes had taken me away from the pack house and away from her, but now I wanted her to know that I was there for her and would do everything in my power to protect her. It was unfortunate that she’d been caught in the crossfire between Xavier and Adéluce, but at least now, with Adéluce out of the way, Elle would be safe from her influence once and for all.

Elle smiled up at me and hugged me tightly. “Thank you, Greyson. You are a good Alpha, and a good man.”

Elle was still clinging to me when I heard a noise. I turned to see Cali standing in the doorway, watching us.

# Episode 3372

I stood frozen in the doorway, watching Greyson and Elle hugging, a rush of emotions coursing through me. The logical part of me knew that it was nothing more than a hug. Lola had told me what Elle had gone through while we’d been away, and that had to have been hard for her. She was new to being a werewolf, and we’d been preoccupied with Adéluce and Seluna. Unfortunately, Elle hadn’t gotten away unscathed. Who could blame her if she needed to lean on Greyson right now?

Greyson suddenly turned and locked eyes with me, and I realized that my standing there just watching them could give the impression that I was upset about the hug. I wasn’t. In fact, I loved the way Greyson cared for his pack—or that was what I was telling myself, at least. I started to leave, but then I realized it would only make it weirder if I walked off without saying anything.

I forced a smile. “Hey! So, is Elle coming to the Vanguard party?”

I didn’t know why I’d asked that—it was just the first thing that had popped into my brain.

Elle looked confused. “What about Torin’s party?”

“I was going to tell her about that,” Greyson said quickly. He turned and looked at Elle. “We literally just got the invite to the Vanguard New Year’s party.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to spill about the party,” I said. Somehow, I’d now made it more awkward than if I *had* just walked off without saying anything.

Greyson waved that off. “No biggie. I just hadn’t had a chance to tell her about it, yet.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to it,” I said, as Greyson started telling Elle about the party.

I went to my room and started pacing, trying to ignore the pit in my stomach. I knew that I was being ridiculous. Greyson was my mate. He’d never given me any reason to doubt him, and we’d been down the Elle road before. But I just couldn’t help it. Every time I saw Greyson touching Elle, every time Elle was anywhere near Greyson, I got hit with a wave of jealousy that I couldn’t quite make sense of.

I was trying my best not to make anything of it. Elle looked up to Greyson, and, as much as I hated to admit it, they would always have a special bond.

*It might not be a mate bond, but Greyson turned her. They’ll always have that between them, and I need to accept that she’s not going anywhere and will be a part of Greyson’s life forever.*

I looked down and realized that I was still holding the dress that Lola had helped me pick out. I’d rushed downstairs to show it to Greyson, but seeing him with Elle had thrown me off. I turned to the mirror and held the dress up against my front, imagining myself wearing it at the party. I thought back to what Greyson had said about Aysel being jealous of me, and I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around it. *Is this dress good enough to go up against the princess herself?*

Greyson appeared and put a hand on my shoulder, surprising me. I gasped as he leaned in and kissed my neck.

“You’re going to look stunning in that,” he whispered in my ear, catching my gaze in the mirror.

I turned to him, feeling a little flustered. “I didn’t even hear you come in.”

“I’m sneaky, what can I say? So, please tell me that’s what you’re planning to wear to the party tonight.” He stood back and looked me up and down, and a rush of heat poured through my body.

I held the dress up to the light. “Lola thinks it’ll turn heads.”

“I second that,” he said with a wicked grin. “And the best part is that I’ll be the only one who knows exactly what’s underneath it.”

A rush of heat gathered in my cheeks, and I smiled up at him as his expression grew serious.

“What is it?” I asked when he didn’t immediately explain the obvious shift in his mood.

“Nothing—I just thought that you might have been bothered, seeing me with Elle,” he began. “I wanted to come up and check on you, just to make sure you hadn’t gotten the wrong idea.”

“What? Me? No! Not at all! Why would you think that?” Inside, I was horrified. I never wanted Greyson to feel like he had to alter his interactions with his pack members to avoid the wrath of a jealous mate. I was thoroughly embarrassed that he’d picked up on my unease, despite the fact that I’d tried to cover it up.

“I could tell, Cali,” Greyson said softly. “I’m sorry that it made you uncomfortable, but I just want you to know that I was just trying to comfort Elle after everything that happened to her. I hope you didn’t read too much into it. I was just trying to be there for her.”

I was feeling more foolish by the second. “Of course! I know it didn’t mean anything. You love me, I know that. You just risked your life for me—again. You helped save the ashes. I have nothing to worry about. So please—don’t mind me. Elle needs you, and I’m glad that you were able to be there for her—like you always are for me.”

“I’m glad that you know that, Cali.” Greyson flashed me a smile as he reached out and ran a finger gently down the side of my face.

“Honestly, I think I’m just on edge about Xavier running off with the Courier… And I guess a little jealousy is normal when your sexy-as-hell mate is talking with a beautiful woman like Elle.” I couldn’t help but picture them again, locked in an embrace. It had been a lot to take in, no matter what my logical mind said.

“Maybe so, but there’s no reason for it—not when you’re the only woman I love.” Greyson pressed his lips to mine and kissed me with such passion and heat that I was momentarily swept away, forgetting everything but him. “You’re so beautiful, Cali—not to mention smart and courageous. No one holds a candle to you. You have to know that.”

He pressed his lips to mine again and gently slid his warm tongue between my lips.

Kissing Greyson and pressing my body against his felt so right, and I’d been wrong to let anything make me think otherwise. Things had been so stressful lately that I wasn’t thinking straight. If I had been, Greyson wouldn’t have had to worry that I’d misread the innocent moment he and Elle had shared.

Greyson pulled away and ran his fingers through my hair, his eyes on mine. “I need to go let the rest of the pack know about the change in party plans tonight. You good?”

“I’m good,” I said, giving him another peck on the lips before he left.

Once he’d gone, I put the dress down on my bed and stared at it. Both Greyson and Lola had approved of it, but if I really wanted to turn heads tonight, I needed to pull out all the stops and wear the best dress that I had. Aysel wasn’t going to pull any punches, and I needed to be ready. I believed Greyson when he said that I was beautiful, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want to send him another reminder of just how beautiful and sexy I could be.

I was about to return to my closet to look at a few more options when I heard a commotion outside my door. I stepped out into the hall to see Tabitha and Dani talking.

“Neither of us has the right type of clothes for a fancy shindig,” Dani was saying. “Maybe we should just stay behind at the pack house?”

“Maybe,” Tabitha said. “It sure sounds like fun, though. But I definitely don’t want to be underdressed.”

As I listened to the sisters talking, I couldn’t help but think about Astrid and the way she’d used her Fae glamour spells to make anyone look dressed up and beautiful, no matter what they were wearing or how underconfident they felt.

*Too bad that’s not an option anymore. But between everyone in this pack house, there has to be something around that’ll fit the sisters. It would be a shame for them to miss out on the party just because they didn’t have the time or proper notice to find something to wear.*

I decided that I would call on Artemis, Rishika, and the others to help out and get them dressed and ready. There had to be something in the pack house for them to wear. I took a lingering glance at Tabitha and Dani, happy to see them together. We’d accomplished so much more than we’d expected in going to New Orleans by bringing the sisters back together.

I glanced at my phone, hoping to see an update from Xavier, but there was nothing. I left my room and passed by one of the studies, stopping short at what I saw just beyond the partially open door. It was Adair, and he was holding my crying mother in his arms.

I rushed into the study and looked back and forth between them, confusion circling in my mind. “What’s going on here?”

# Episode 3373

**Xavier**

I was already soaring through the air before I had time to consider whether I should let go of my motorcycle and try to avoid crashing in a fiery heap below, or if there was any way I could land on the bike and somehow manage to keep it upright. The ground was an indeterminate distance below me, and I couldn’t quite figure out if I was so high up that I would die on impact, or if I might just suffer some nasty bumps and bruises that would heal in no time. One thing was certain—I wasn’t too excited about my prospects.

Trying to stifle my panic so that I could think straight, I watched as the mountain vista melted before my eyes and transformed into a cluster of shimmering red peaks. The temperature seemed to be rising—or maybe I was just freaking out, I couldn’t really tell. It was probably a combination of both.

The Courier looked cool as a cucumber and was still seated firmly on his bike, like he drove off cliffs every day—and I supposed that might have been the case, seeing as he did this type of thing for a living. He revved his engine as he descended rapidly toward the ground, where he landed hard, sending sparks shooting through the air.

I braced myself as the road below loomed closer—but was it even a road? It looked more like a river of lava, and I wasn’t sure how my tires were going to hold up under those conditions.

Before I could even process what the right move might be, the decision was made for me as I landed seconds after the Courier, flames and ash flaring into my face as my tires made contact with the strange red surface. My bike fishtailed and spun out as I struggled to control it, straining my muscles to their limits before I was finally able to hold it steady. I immediately jammed on the brakes and careened to a stop with a spray of smoke and reddish gravel.

Then it hit me. *Are we in the demon world? Shit.* If we’d really arrived in the land of the dead and damned, then I was going to have a heck of a time trying to get back out. I gunned my bike, feeling the heat rising from the road as I went. I hoped to hell that my tires weren’t about to melt as I closed in on the Courier and then overtook him, swooping in front of him and forcing him to come to a screeching halt.

The Courier ripped off his helmet and threw it to the ground in frustration. “Just what the *fuck* are you trying to do? You’re really starting to cramp my style!”

I leapt off my bike and charged at him. “This wasn’t part of the deal! You weren’t supposed to lead me right into the demon world; you were just supposed to bring me to the entrance!”

I was already thinking about what it would be like to never lay eyes on Cali again. I’d told her I’d be back—and more than that, I’d told her that I would be back in time to ring in the new year with her. Now it appeared that the Courier had led me right into the place that would keep me from ever seeing her again.

The Courier’s annoyed expression melted into amusement. “You really think *this* is the demon world? Wow.”

*Go figure—he* is *capable of an expression other than annoyance*,I thought bitterly.

I took a look around. The air was positively shimmering with heat, and red mountainous shapes framed the distance, surrounded by an expanse of desert sand and rock. “Well, we sure as hell aren’t in Oregon anymore! If we’re not in the demon world, then where the hell are we?”

“We have a ways to go before we reach the demon world. This place is what you might call the ‘foyer’ to the demon world. I suppose it exists to keep people away,” the Courier said, sighing as he picked his helmet up off the ground and slid it back on.

“It’s more like hell,” I muttered.

“Listen, we don’t have time for sightseeing—I have a schedule to maintain, and I thought you did, too, but who’d know it with you stopping every other minute?” The Courier revved his engine. “So, you coming or what?”

I looked around. There was nothing I wanted more than to leave the Courier behind, but if I continued without him, I wouldn’t have a clue which way to go or what to look for. I was stuck with him for the moment, whether I liked it or not. I looked behind me, unsurprised to see that the road we’d roared off only a few moments ago was nowhere to be found, like it had never been there at all.

I made my way back to my bike, the ground so hot I could feel the heat straight through the soles of my shoes. I hadn’t even climbed back onto my bike when the Courier took off, not even bothering to look back to see if I was following.

“Fuck this guy!” I yelled, starting my engine and squealing after him. “I swear, I’m going to get even with this bastard.”

I finally caught up with him, just as I noticed that the road we were on had grown coarser and it was getting harder for me to maintain control of my bike. The bike’s shocks groaned as I bounced over the rough terrain, sliding over rocks and spinning out over the sand and gravel. I had to keep bracing myself against getting thrown off at any moment.

I swung my bag around so that the urn was against my chest, hoping to protect it better, but the road was too rough for me to be able to hold it steady while trying to steer with only one hand. The Courier took a sudden turn, and I followed him off the road and onto a sandy path that led to a cluster of cacti. I let out a sigh of relief as we slowed to a stop.

“What now?” I asked.

The Courier hopped off his bike. “We have to go the rest of the way on foot.”

I was somewhat relieved by this. I’d been worried that the urn would fall off and shatter if we kept speeding down that bumpy road. At least now, I could keep a tight hold on it.

The Courier was already walking, and I quickly removed my helmet and left it on the bike—it wasn’t like I had to worry about anybody coming by and stealing it. There wasn’t another soul around, as far as I could tell. Apparently, the demon world’s foyer wasn’t a popular tourist attraction.

I fell into step beside the Courier, who was looking straight ahead.

“So, where are we headed?” I was more than prepared for him to say something snarky, and I was surprised when he lifted his finger and pointed at a shimmering crest on the horizon. I couldn’t really tell how far away it was, but that didn’t matter. It could’ve been a mile away, or twenty miles away—I was going to get there, regardless.

We walked in silence for most of the way, and I didn’t mind it at all. I pulled out my phone to text Cali and wasn’t at all surprised to see that I had no reception. *I hope she’s not worried. I’ve been gone a while, but I’m still making good time… I think.*

The Courier glanced at me. “Why are the ashes so important, anyway? Demons die every day, and nobody seems to give a shit.”

I had no desire to reveal anything to this man who I didn’t trust even a little. “These ashes are different,” I said in a clipped tone. “All you need to know is that a lot is riding on them being returned to where they belong.”

The Courier shrugged. “Whatever, suit yourself. Just trying to make small talk.”

“I don’t need small talk. I just need to get these ashes to the demon world, and then after that, we never have to see each other again.”

“Can’t wait,” the Courier said.

The path began to ascend as we reached the beginning of the crest. We’d gotten there faster than I’d thought we would, and it was a lot steeper than I’d expected. I made sure the urn was strapped on tight as we slowly worked our way up, climbing over rocks and leaping across crevices. It was so hot that sweat was pouring down my face in a steady stream, stinging my eyes and blurring my vision so that I had to stop a few times and use the bottom of my shirt to wipe it away.

After what seemed like an eternity of climbing, we finally reached the top of the crest, both of us breathing hard. I was busy wiping the sweat out of my eyes when the Courier spoke again.

“You asked before if we were in the demon world?” he said. He pointed toward a shimmering void in the distance. “*That* is the demon world.”

# Episode 3374

My mother pulled away from Adair and started wiping away her tears as I came barging into the study. I looked between her and Adair, my head spinning at the sight of them together.

“Um, what’s going on here?” I repeated. It was strange, seeing my mother being comforted by a man I’d only just met—especially when I wasn’t all that sure about him yet.

Adair cleared his throat and stood up. “I’ll talk to you later, Orla. I need to go check on Tabitha. Cali,” he said gruffly as he passed by me and left the room.

I hurried to my mother’s side. “What did he do? What did he say to make you cry like that?”

I knew Adair could be difficult, and it was bad enough that he’d treated Artemis so coldly. Now I was beyond annoyed that he’d somehow hurt my mother. Part of me was wishing that he’d stayed behind in New Orleans. I was already thinking about what I was going to say to him when I confronted him later.

*If he thinks he can come here and hurt the people I love, he has another thing coming.*

Taking a moment to collect herself, my mother let out a sigh and shook her head. “Adair didn’t do anything. We were just talking, really.”

“I don’t get it. What were you talking about that had you in tears?” My mother didn’t cry easily, so I knew it had to be something big.

“Kadmos,” she said, trailing off as if she’d intended to add more but decided against it. She looked away for a moment, a wistful look in her eyes.

“What could he have said about Kadmos? He told Artemis that he didn’t remember all that much about his brother.” I considered the possibility that he hadn’t been up-front with Artemis and remembered more about his brother than he’d let on. I certainly wouldn’t put it past him.

“It wasn’t what he said that upset me. It was seeing him. He reminds me so much of Kadmos. It was like I could see Kadmos in Adair’s eyes, in the way he moves, the sound of his voice…. It was all just… a lot. I’m not sure if you’ll understand this, Cali, but seeing him filled me with both joy and heartache. And it was kind of unexpected. I love your father, of course, and I always will—nothing will change that—but seeing Adair, talking to him… All these memories came flooding back. I was overwhelmed.” She let out a sigh and then gave me a weak smile. “It’s funny how the smallest thing can take you all the way back to another time.”

Seeing the conflicted emotions on my mother’s face, I pulled her into a hug. “I do understand, Mom. I’m sorry that Adair is stirring all that up.” I hated to see my mother upset, especially at the hands of someone like Adair.

My mother pulled away. “You shouldn’t be sorry. I’m fine, really.”

“Should you maybe talk to Artemis about this? She went to New Orleans to learn more about Kadmos, and Adair hasn’t exactly been an open book.” I didn’t want her to end up disappointed like Artemis was if Adair ended up being cold to her, too.

“I already have, and I’ll continue to do so,” she said. “I don’t know if Artemis is ever going to get all the answers she’s looking for, but it might give her some peace of mind to at least discuss what we do know.”

“I agree,” I said slowly. “I wonder how Dad is taking all of this. It must be kind of weird for him to meet the brother of your former husband.”

I couldn’t help but think about Ava, and how trying it had been to have her hanging around as a constant reminder of Xavier’s past. This wasn’t the same as that, but I could definitely see how things could be a tad awkward for my father.

Mom smiled. “He’s been wonderful, as usual. He’s far more sensitive and understanding than people think.”

“I can see that.” That was comforting to hear, especially since my parents had recently gone through a rough patch. It was good to know that they were back on solid ground, and that this newest development wasn’t causing any trouble between them.

My mom wiped away the rest of her tears. “I don’t want to make this day all about me and my past. It’s New Year’s Eve… Have you heard about the invitation from the Vanguard pack? Exciting, right?”

“Yes,” I said with a sigh. “I was just trying to pick out a dress to wear. I have a feeling that everyone there will be dressed to the nines.” I decided not to mention Aysel specifically. There was no point in dragging my mother into that drama.

“Oh? I can help if you’d like. Maybe you can help me pick out something to wear, too.”

“You’re coming?” I asked, surprised. It was strange to think of my mother experiencing one of Lucian’s off-color parties.

“Yes, and so is your father. We figured it only made sense to celebrate one last big event with you all, since we’ll be going back to Minnesota soon. We want to spend as much time with our daughters as we can.”

“Well then, now I’m excited!” I hadn’t been all that keen on returning to the Vanguard palace after everything that had happened there, and I was still struggling with Xavier being gone, but the thought of having my parents by my side actually gave me something to look forward to.

We went and snagged Artemis, then spent the next few hours trying on different outfits. It felt good to do something light, like trying on dresses and laughing together. We were acting like a real family—a normal family—even if we *were* preparing to go to a werewolf prince’s New Year’s Eve party.

Even my father poked his head in and weighed in on our little try-on session.

“Honey, you should wear something a little more revealing,” he said to my mother as she modeled a modest A-line dress. “Something that plays up all your assets.” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

Artemis and I looked at each other and cringed.

“I think what she has on is perfect,” I said quickly. “Her assets are being shown appropriately, I think.”

“Whatever you say; you’re the experts,” Dad said before continuing on his way.

If Artemis was still upset about how things were going with Adair, she wasn’t showing it. I was surprised that she was looking forward to partying with the Vanguards. After the battle at the palace, I’d never thought I’d see the day when my sister would set foot in that place again.

Torin, who’d been in a bit of a sulky mood since he’d learned about the change of plans, had regrouped and was in the living room showing off a shimmering multi-colored outfit that he’d “just thrown together.”

“If you threw that together, I’m a fashion model,” Artemis said as we congregated downstairs with everyone else.

Everyone was in a festive mood, and I was glad of the distraction—though I excused myself before too long so that I could go check my phone. It had been a few hours since I’d last heard from Xavier, and I was feeling a little guilty that I was having so much fun while he was out transporting demon ashes.

My worry ratcheted up a few notches once I saw that he hadn’t reached out.

*He’s probably still on the road, or riding through a pocket with no cell reception. He’s fine. He said he’d be back tonight, and I believe him… And even if he turns up late or doesn’t make it before the new year, I’ll still stay positive.*

I knew that he would reach out to me as soon as he could, and that had to be enough for now.

I gasped when I went back into the living room. My mother had come downstairs and was dressed in a stunning ensemble featuring colorful plants and flowers.

“I actually forgot I had this,” she said, twirling around so that Artemis and I could see it from every angle. “Do you two approve?”

My father swooped in and pulled my mother into a hug. “Who cares what they think? I love it.” He spun my mother around and dipped her low before lifting her up and twirling her around the room.

Artemis and I jumped up from our seats and joined in, dancing around and laughing while Torin struck a series of poses in the center of the room and everyone cheered and laughed along with us.

“Do you think Lucian will kick me out of his fancy party if I dance like this?” Artemis asked, doing an animated robotic move.

“Nothing you do will be enough for Lucian to even dream of kicking you out. Trust me. He’s just going to be happy that we showed up,” I said, just as Lola came running in.

“Cali!” Lola took me by the shoulders. “We have a major problem!”

# Episode 3375

**Xavier**

I gazed into the shimmering darkness, still unsure if I was staring into an optical illusion or a real live gateway to hell. I’d pictured what I thought the portal to the demon world might look like, and this wasn’t too far off.

I took a deep breath and started toward it. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

The Courier threw an arm across my chest to stop me. “Are you sure you don’t want to just wait right here? I could’ve sworn you just had a freak-out back there when you thought I’d led you into the demon world. You do realize that you can’t actually bring the ashes into the demon world, right? Unless you’re looking to stay there for the long haul, that is.”

“I realize that,” I snapped, slapping his arm away. “But I’m going to get as close as I can before I hand them over.”

I put a protective hand on the ashes, thinking about my promise to Cali—that I wouldn’t let them go until the very last moment. That was still the plan.

The Courier said nothing, just motioned to me to follow as he walked toward the shimmering abyss. “I hope you understand what you’re in for,” he muttered.

I looked out at the gloomy terrain separating us from the shimmering passageway. It looked exactly how I imagined the path to an evil place might look—hideous and terrible—and I was certain that journeying across a literal wasteland was going to suck.

*No turning back now. This is all that stands between Cali and her freedom from Seluna.*

I double checked the ashes to make sure they were secure, then I fell into step beside the Courier as we made our way along a winding path toward the entrance to the demon world. I couldn’t tell if the air had actually cooled or if I was just acclimating to the hot temperature. Either way, I was just happy that I wasn’t sweating like crazy anymore. I swallowed, wishing that I’d thought to bring some water along, since my throat had grown bone dry during our journey. The Courier, however, seemed unfazed.

“I’m curious—how many times have you made this journey?” I asked him. He looked like he was taking a leisurely stroll through the park.

“I don’t know. I lost count years ago. I’ve been doing this for centuries, though.”

“Why?”

The Courier seemed confused by the question. “Why not? It’s what I do. Simple as that.”

“Have you ever thought about trying something else?” I realized I was asking a lot of questions for someone who’d just snapped at him about small talk, but now I was actually interested in learning what type of person made a career of journeying back and forth to what had to be one of the worst places ever. I just didn’t get it.

“There were only three times in my life when I had regrets about taking this path. One was when I first started out. I had to return a relic to the demon world that a king had stolen from a crypt. I was new and didn’t know the ropes yet, and I almost got myself stuck in the demon world due to a misunderstanding. Needless to say, I had second thoughts once it was all said and done. The second time was more recently—when I was attacked and your ashes were stolen, which you already know about.”

“And the third time?”

The Courier shook his head and stared off into the distance. “Don’t want to talk about it.”

I didn’t press the issue as we continued our journey toward the shimmering darkness. I couldn’t believe that he’d been doing this for centuries. It was kind of a shitty job. I couldn’t imagine what kind of person woke up and decided that they wanted to carry people’s stuff into what was pretty much the bowels of hell, over and over again. It had to take a toll on a person’s psyche, whether they’d chosen to do it or not. I was starting to realize why he was so insufferable.

“Were you cursed or something?” I asked. “Is that why you do this?”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” he snapped. “You want these ashes delivered? Then just shut up and walk!”

I was startled by his sudden show of real emotion. He’d been pretty stilted up until now, and it had seemed like nothing could get to him. Rather than snap back, I just shrugged it off. I was only going to have to be around the guy for a little while longer, anyway.

I saw something move in our periphery. I paused to scan the rocky terrain, my senses on high alert. I glanced at the Courier to see if he’d noticed, but his face was hidden behind his helmet, so I couldn’t tell either way.

“Just keep walking,” he said. “We’re being watched.”

He was so matter-of-fact about it that I almost wondered if I’d heard him correctly.

“What the hell does that mean?” I looked around, my pulse quickening just a bit as I primed myself to react. “Who’s watching us, and why?”

I hadn’t expected that a journey to a demon portal would be a piece of cake, so I was ready for whatever might come our way. But that didn’t mean I was looking forward to going up against anyone—or any*thing*—that called this place home.

“The demon world isn’t like a bar, where anybody can just walk in and out whenever they please. There are… creatures… who guard the portal and monitor anyone who approaches it.”

“What, like bouncers for the underworld?” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

The Courier didn’t respond, and I tensed even more when I saw eyes staring out from the dark recesses, looking right at us.

*I don’t like this. If Gabe were with me, we’d already be discussing some kind of defensive strategy, not walking straight into the clutches of some threat.*

It didn’t bring me much comfort that the Courier was the only backup I had. I wasn’t sure whether we should slow our pace or quicken it. The longer we took, the more exposed we were, but if we sped up, who was to say that the creatures wouldn’t take that as a sign of aggression and attack?

“Are you sure this is all good?” I asked. “Should we move a little faster, or—”

The Courier held out a hand. “Just keep walking like normal. Don’t make eye contact with them.”

I tried to take the Courier’s advice and keep my eyes on the path ahead, but it was getting harder and harder for me to ignore the strange creatures. It went against my nature. I was trained to hunt, to stalk, to always be one step ahead. I wasn’t used to being prey.

*I don’t like this one bit, and I don’t know how long I can just sit back and wait for something to attack.*

I wasn’t looking at the creatures, but I could certainly feel their eyes watching me, and the hairs on the back of my neck were standing on end.

*What if this doesn’t go according to plan? Do these creatures have weapons? Should I shift just in case? And if I’m forced to shift, what will I do with the ashes?* I couldn’t risk losing them in a fight, not when we were so close. I’d never forgive myself if I got right to the door of the demon world only to lose the ashes to some strange demon guard.

Before long, the creatures began to show themselves. At first there were just a couple of them, lingering just at the edges of our field of view, but then I saw that a few of them were edging closer, like they were testing us to see how much they could get away with before we responded to their presence.

“Are you sure these guys are your friends?” I whispered.

“I never said they were my friends. Just keep moving!” the Courier hissed.

The creatures were starting to close ranks, and soon they were blocking the path ahead. There was no way we’d be able to reach the shimmering void without facing off with them. I turned around to confirm what I’d suspected—that we were surrounded on all sides by the foul-looking creatures. I’d never seen anything quite like them. They had thin, wiry bodies with long spindly arms and mean faces. They were hideous—like something straight out of a nightmare—but they were also pretty scrawny.

*I could probably take out a handful of them, no problem… But hopefully it won’t come to that.*

The Courier came to a stop. “I’m here to make a delivery. Let us pass.”

One of the creatures stepped forward. “What about him?” it hissed, pointing a long, gnarled finger right at me.

“It’s okay,” the Courier said, his voice even. “He’s with me.”

The creature stepped away to converse with its companions. Seconds later, I was grabbed from behind and dragged toward the shifting, shimmering blackness.

# Episode 3376

Lola dragged me out of the living room and pulled me upstairs.

“I don’t know what to do!” she wailed. “This is like, the worst thing that could have happened. Tonight of all nights! What are we going to *do*?”

I planted my feet, forcing Lola to stop just outside her bedroom door. “What happened? Is someone hurt? Should I get Torin? Big Mac?”

“The only thing that’s hurt is this!” Lola opened her bedroom door to reveal Jay, who was wearing a dinner jacket with a huge bleach stain across the front of it. Lola threw her head back and squeezed her eyes shut as if it was literally painful to look at her mate. “Who uses bleach on a black jacket? Huh? Tell me!”

“Uh… Jay does?” I said hesitantly.

“It was an accident, *clearly*!” Jay said.

“I can’t believe it. How can this be described as an accident? The one time you need to wear it, and it looks like a painting in a modern art gallery!” Lola yanked me into the room and held her hand out at the stain. “Look at it, Cali! *Look!*”

I winced. “It does look pretty bad.” I’d had my own tangles with errant bleach in my day, but I’d never made a stain that big.

“I know! Maybe Big Mac can do something about it? Like cast some kind of dye spell to get it back to the right color?” Lola said.

“I wouldn’t bother Big Mac with something like this,” I said.

“What about Kira? She’s cool, right?”

“No. No witchcraft for a bleach stain, Lola,” I said. I couldn’t believe she’d even consider using magic to fix a fashion emergency.

“But what am I supposed to do?” Lola squealed. “This was the perfect outfit. I had it in mind from the moment I heard about the party, and now my vision is ruined!”

“Why can’t I just put on a sweater or something?” Jay looked like he was seconds from saying “forget the whole thing.”

Both Lola and I raised an eyebrow at him.

“A *sweater*?” Lola put the back of her hand on her forehead like she was about to faint. “Just kill me now!”

“Lola’s right, Jay. A sweater won’t cut it.” Lucian and his pack were pretentious, to say the least. I could only imagine the scandal of Jay walking in wearing a sweater.

“No, it won’t! This is a formal New Year’s Eve party, honey. Save the sweater for the hangover brunch, okay?” Lola said. “How could you do this to us, Jay? How? We were supposed to be perfectly coordinated tonight, and now I guess there’s no chance of that!”

Jay rolled his eye at Lola. “You’re being so dramatic,” he said. “No one pays attention to the dudes at these types of parties, anyway.”

“He kind of has a point there,” I said.

“No he doesn’t. *I* have to look at him!” Lola wailed.

“Point taken. Oh! I have an idea! Xavier has a few nice suits. Why don’t you just borrow one? I’m sure that Xavier won’t mind.” I tried to hide it, but even the mention of Xavier sent me reeling.

Lola’s face lit up. “Amazing! Xavier has amazing taste!”

Jay shrugged. “Whatever makes you happy, babe.”

I led them into Xavier’s room and was hit by the reality of his absence the moment we stepped through the threshold. I checked my phone. Still nothing. My worry intensified as Lola flung open Xavier’s closet doors.

“Wow!” Her eyes went wide as she took it all in. Wasting no time, she began to sift through the rack. It didn’t take her long to find a dark jacket, which she pulled out and held against Jay’s chest. “You’d look great in this! It brings out your hair color.”

Jay scrunched up his face. “It’s too… *Xavier-ish*.”

I wondered what that was supposed to mean, but I decided to let it go.

“Fine,” Lola said with an eye roll. She thrust the jacket back into the closet and then pulled out a few more options before they both settled on a simple black jacket that looked pretty similar to the one Jay had ruined.

Jay put on Xavier’s jacket, and Lola groaned when she saw how the sleeves engulfed Jay’s hands. The shoulders were a little wide for him, too. I was a little surprised by how badly it fit. I knew that Xavier was a big guy, but I hadn’t realized just how much bigger he was than Jay. I thought back to how intimidated I’d been by Xavier’s size when we’d first met. Jay was no slouch himself, but he still couldn’t quite fill out Xavier’s jacket.

“Nobody will notice,” Jay said. “No big deal.”

Lola sighed. “It’ll have to do. I might be able to pin it in a few places to make it fit.” She grabbed Jay by the arm and pulled him out of the room.

“Come on, Lola! I don’t want to be pinned!” Jay complained as she dragged him off down the hall.

Once they were gone, I picked up the jackets Jay had passed on and hung them back up in the closet. I placed the last jacket back on the rack, then lingered near Xavier’s clothes, hoping to catch a whiff of his scent.

I was glad that I’d been able to help Jay out, but there was something about standing in Xavier’s room and preparing for a party while he was out risking his life for me that made me feel uneasy—and more than a little sad.

I checked my phone again, knowing that he hadn’t texted even before I looked at the screen to confirm it. I’d told myself over and over not to worry about him, that he would be fine, that he’d make it back to me in one piece, but I couldn’t help but worry that he wouldn’t. I sent him a quick text and then put my phone away.

*I need to go get dressed, or I won’t be able to go to the party with the rest of the pack.*

I went back to my room and stood in front of the bathroom mirror, wondering if I should wear a dress that left my shoulders exposed, or if I should keep them hidden. The handprint was still as much of an eyesore as ever, so I made a quick decision to keep it covered until the ashes were delivered. I didn’t want to take any chances—and the last thing I wanted was to make things awkward with Lucian. Who knew how he might react to seeing something that reminded him of his precious Seluna?

I twisted around in the mirror so that I could get a better look at the handprint. It had faded quite a bit, but I didn’t like the idea of anyone catching even the quickest glimpse of it. It was nothing to be proud of, and I couldn’t wait until it was gone, once and for all.

I fixed my hair and then slid on a dress, taking a moment to prepare myself for where we were about to go. I had way too many bad memories of the Vanguard palace, and I knew that seeing Lucian again was going to bring all of them racing back to the forefront.

*And don’t forget Aysel. She’ll be there, too.* Aysel certainly wasn’t going to make me feel any better. Even if Greyson was right and Aysel was jealous of me, the only thing that would shield me from the past would be if Xavier managed to fulfill his promise and make it back in time for New Year’s.

I heard laughter drifting up the stairs as everyone began to assemble downstairs. I followed the sound and went downstairs, blown away by how fabulous everyone looked. Rishika had somehow managed to get Artemis to dress up, and my parents looked positively dapper. My father couldn’t keep his hands off my mother, and Artemis and I exchanged an awkward look as they shared a long kiss.

I spotted Greyson talking to a glammed-up Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, but his eyes went wide as he caught sight of me coming down the stairs. For a moment, I felt like Cinderella, especially as I took in Greyson’s striking form in his classy, sexy suit.

He came over to meet me at the foot of the stairs. “I’d better not take my eyes off you for even a second. You look too good to be left on your own.”

I smiled, knowing that I was blushing like crazy. Greyson was looking at me with such heat in his eyes that I started to get a little flustered. “And you look so handsome that I might have to do the same.”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” Greyson whispered, his lips brushing lightly against my ear and sending electric pulses racing through me. He turned and addressed the pack. “All right, Redwoods, it’s time to go!”

There was a rowdy cheer as we all filed outside. My phone buzzed in my clutch, and I quickly pulled it out, anticipating a text from Xavier. But my stomach clenched when I saw that my last message had bounced back to me, undelivered.

# Episode 3377

**Xavier**

It was taking every ounce of energy I had to break out of the creatures’ grasp, but they were surprisingly strong despite their size. They were fucking fast too. They moved at a lightning-fast clip toward the portal, and I held the ashes tightly as they dragged me across the ground, doing my best to shield the urn with my body. I attempted to turn around to see what the hell the Courier was doing while I was being manhandled, but I couldn’t see him from this angle.

*Was this his plan all along? Not to deliver the ashes to the demon world, but to deliver* me *to the demon world? Is that why he didn’t put up a fight about me coming with him?*

A chill raced down my spine at the telltale moans of suffering filtering through the flickering darkness. I couldn’t help but wonder if that was my destiny, to become one of the damned.

*Not if I have something to fucking say about it. I told Cali that I’d be back, and I will. I would never break my promise to her.*

I just had to get these creepy things off me and get the urn to the Courier. I couldn’t let these demon assholes get in my way. Who was an Alpha and who wasn’t?

I twisted and bucked in the creatures’ hold, finally managing to yank one arm free. Without a moment’s hesitation, I lashed out at the creature with its claws in my other arm, sending it howling to the ground. Making sure to keep a tight hold on the urn, I kicked another one of the creatures, knocking it off its feet. With a bit of difficulty, I got to my feet and stomped on the creature before fighting my way back toward the Courier, one arm still wrapped protectively around the urn.

“Do something!” I shouted at the Courier as I made my way over to him.

The Courier was busy arguing with one of the creatures and gesturing angrily. I didn’t even think he’d heard me. He was stomping and yelling at the top of his lungs, but whatever he was saying wasn’t having much effect on the creatures, who wouldn’t stop swarming around me, their long, thin fingers clawing at me and trying to drag me away again.

Channeling all the strength I had left, I swung at the creatures in a wide arc, knocking a bunch of them back at once and finally freeing myself from their hold. I took off running, but I didn’t make it very far before I tripped and fell to the ground, rolling at the last second to keep myself from landing on top of the urn and crushing it.

“No!” I screamed, fighting and kicking as one of the creatures looped a rope around my leg and used it to yank me back toward the void. I clawed at the ground, partially shifting and digging my claws into the dirt to get a better grip, but there was nothing to grab hold of except rocks and sand that scraped my skin raw.

The tortured moans grew louder as the creatures hauled me toward the swirling darkness, and I knew it was only a matter of seconds before they tossed me through the portal and into the demon world. Resigned to my fate, I used the last bit of strength I had left to clutch the ashes to my chest.

*At least I’ll die knowing that I did what I came for. Cali will be safe, and that’s the only thing that matters. My life for hers. I knew there was a possibility that things would turn out this way, but I have to see this through.*

I pictured Cali’s beautiful face, wishing I could mind link with her to tell her that everything was going to be okay. I wished I could just kiss her one last time, and my heart ached at the thought that I never would again. For the first time ever, I was happy that she had Greyson—he’d be able to protect her, now that I wasn’t going to be around anymore.

A gunshot suddenly rang out, pulling me back into the present. The creatures hissed and let me go. I hadn’t realized that I’d closed my eyes, and I opened them to see that one of my legs was dangling over the precipice of the void.

“That’s enough!” the Courier barked, lowering a silver revolver. He rushed over and helped me to my feet. I couldn’t take my eyes off the gun. I was glad that he’d come prepared.

I watched the creatures where they stood milling around us, still too close for comfort. They were standing down for the moment, but it looked like they were trying to decide what to do next. Most of them kept their eyes on the gun in the Courier’s hand, even as they talked amongst themselves.

*There are so many of them; they outnumber us easily. Are they going to regroup and attack both of us, now?*

I planted my feet and looked at them, showing no fear. If they tried to come at us, I would kill as many of them as I could before they killed me.

The Courier waved his gun. “I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this. I really thought you’d all be a little more reasonable. Have I ever done one single thing to violate your rules? Have I ever hurt any of you? Attacked you? Anything? And this is the thanks I get?”

The creatures murmured to each other, their whispers filling the air with bone-chilling menace.

“You could have intervened a little sooner!” I whispered angrily. “I had one leg in the void—literally.”

“I tried to stop them and explain the situation, but they’re not the brightest. Sometimes they only respond to force.” The Courier leveled his gun at the apparent leader. “You know that I know the rules, and I’m not going to bring this guy into the demon world with me. I’ve got a package to deliver, that’s all.” The Courier gestured at the urn. “My client Xavier here just wants to see it delivered. It’s just business. Nothing more. Do you have a problem with that?”

In a flash, one of the creatures lunged for the Courier. I was about to grab it when the Courier fired his gun, blasting the creature into the glittering black void. An eerie chorus of tortured voices rose up from the thick darkness as the creature fell.

The Courier whipped his gun around. “Who’s next?” He gestured at the leader. “I don’t want to have to send any more of you to the other side, but so help me, I will! And I’m going to have to report all of you for this. I hope you know that.”

*Report them to who? Is there some sort of creature ruler? A demon head of security? I’m so confused.*

The leader held up its long, knobbly hands. “Stop! I will allow the Courier to deliver his package.” It pointed its finger at me. “But he must stay with us as a prisoner until you return.”

“I’m no one’s prisoner,” I spat. There was no way I was going to agree to that. What if the Courier took hours, even days to come back? Or even worse—what if he never came back at all? What then? Whatever was lurking on the other side of that portal wasn’t pretty, and the Courier had said himself that he’d nearly gotten trapped inside before. There was no way I was going to take that chance. “The first one of you to try to restrain me is going to join their buddy in the hole of pain back there.” I pointed to the portal. “So don’t try it.”

The creatures murmured amongst themselves again, casting glances back at me and the Courier as they conversed in low, harsh tones.

“He’s right,” the Courier said. “That’s not a deal I’m willing to make. You have my word as Courier that Xavier will not try to cross into the demon world. That’s the only thing I’m prepared to offer.”

There was more murmuring before the leader waved its hand. “Let the Courier pass!” it hissed.

The creatures stepped aside, clearing a path to the portal. The Courier turned to me and held out his hands, his eyes on mine. “It’s time to hand over the ashes.”

I opened the bag and pulled out the towel-wrapped urn. I slowly unwrapped it, then handed it over. Just before I let go of the urn, I clamped my hands around the Courier’s and tugged him close. “Listen. If you fail, or if you double-cross me, don’t even bother ever coming back, because if you do, I will kill you. I promise you that.”

The Courier nodded. “I don’t doubt it,” he said simply.

I finally released the ashes into the Courier’s care, then watched as he turned and walked into the shimmering, roiling darkness of the demon world.

# Episode 3378

Everybody was excited about the Vanguard party, but I was internally freaking out. The “unable to deliver” text was making me feel both restless and exhausted at the same time.

*Don’t you just LOVE anxiety?*

I did not. I re-sent my message to Xavier and crossed my fingers. Perhaps this was just one of those technical things I didn’t understand, like how Microsoft Excel spreadsheets worked. Meanwhile, in the background, the pack was splitting into vehicles while arguing over who was going to ride with whom.

“No, I have to go with Sage!” Zainab exclaimed. “We have to figure out our game plan for tonight!”

“What game plan?” Lola asked with a huff.

“There is no game plan,” Sage said wryly. “She just wants to gossip with me about everyone’s outfits.”

Zainab elbowed Sage, and Lola gasped in outrage until Zainab reassured her that her outfit was one of her favorites. I tuned them all out and made a beeline for Greyson, who’d just finished tying Ravi’s tie. My phone buzzed again, and my stomach jumped.

*It’s Xavier! He’s responded! Everything is okay! Everything is—*

Not okay. It was another undelivered message. There was a lump in my throat.

“Cali!” Greyson’s voice pulled me out of my pool of misery. When I looked up, he was gesturing for me to join him. He was so devastatingly handsome tonight, but not even that could distract me. I walked over, and his casual expression twisted to a frown as he scrutinized my face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked instantly.

There was a pit in my stomach. If I spoke right now, I’d probably start cursing or crying, so I decided to just hold up the screen and show Greyson. His brows furrowed.

“Weird,” he said, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “Let me try.” He typed out a text, adding, “I don’t think this is that unusual, though—Xavier could be in an area with no service. There are so many of those pockets in Oregon.” He had barely finished his sentence before there was a *ping.*

His text had bounced back as well.

*Oh, no. No no no no no NO—*

The pit in my stomach grew, as if preparing to swallow me whole.

Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe.

“Cali, hey,” Greyson murmured soothingly, pulling me closer. “I know what you’re thinking, but Xavier’s phone being out of range is to be expected. You shouldn’t read into it.” He rested his palm on my chest, his silver eyes boring into mine. “Breathe, love.”

His words unlocked something inside me. I breathed deeply through my nose, but that didn’t make the dread go away.

“But what if something happened?” I whispered. “What if he’s just—”

*Gone*.

I didn’t say the word out loud, but Greyson had heard it loud and clear. His expression turned grave. “If Xavier had truly been harmed,” he said, “wouldn’t you feel it through the mate bond?”

My temples were throbbing. “But I don’t know if the dread I’m feeling is the mate bond warning me, or just plain old stress.”

Greyson took both my hands, staring into my eyes. “What do you want to do?”

I looked at all the laughing, chattering people around me. “It’s like everyone’s forgotten about Xavier’s mission.”

“I guess supernaturals just learn to live with danger,” Greyson said gently.

I pressed my lips together. “I’m still half human, though. And going to a party doesn’t feel right—not if my texts to Xavier are bouncing back because he’s gotten sucked into the demon world.”

Greyson nodded. “I get it. You and I can stay home all night until we hear from Xavier, and the others can go to the Vanguard party.”

I examined his calm expression. “Aren’t you worried about your brother at all?”

“Of course,” Greyson said, still calm. “But I also have to be the Redwood pack Alpha. That means keeping up appearances with the Vanguard pack. Like it or not, Lucian and I struck a deal to be allies. I need to accept his invitation and attend this ridiculous soirée to keep that strong. And either way, I know Xavier is more than capable of pulling this mission off.”

“Of course, but the text…” I trailed off. Worry was clouding my judgement. Logically, I knew that it was normal for Xavier not to have a signal while going to probably literal *hell*.

“I’ll do whatever you want, love. I hope you know that.” Greyson’s gaze was tender, and the lump in my throat grew.

*Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t—*

“You’ve been through a lot these past few hours,” Greyson said. “I need you to remember that nobody expects you to push through and go to the party, if that’s not what you—”

“Cali!” Lola exclaimed, barreling over to me. “What’s happening right now? Why are you guys looking so down and serious? We’re going to be late for the party!”

I swallowed down semi-hysterical laughter while Greyson scowled.

“Sorry, Lola,” I said with a sigh. “I don’t think I should go to the party.”

Lola huffed. “Are you worried about Lucian? If that royal asswipe tries anything, I’ll tear his eyes out with my—”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with Lucian,” Greyson interrupted.

Lola peered at him. “Then what is it?”

Greyson’s tone was dry. “It’s just that your best friend, who almost died approximately five million times in the past week alone, wanted to take a moment to discuss Xavier’s life-threatening mission. We’re sorry for stalling and disrupting your evening, though.”

Greyson’s sarcasm flew right over Lola’s head. She waved a hand. “Oh, no worries, I get it! Cali, I’m certain Xavier will be okay—he’s the strongest Alpha I know.”

Greyson suddenly looked so offended that it would’ve been hilarious under different circumstances.

“Look what happened when I texted him, though,” I said, showing Lola the phone.

Lola frowned at the screen. “Well, other than the fact that he might be in demon hell or whatever, this could be the cell towers—one bad tower can spoil everything. You might have better luck sending the text from the Vanguard palace. I bet Lucian has the best signal in the entire state. He probably bribed someone for it.”

Hope bloomed in my chest. “Do you really think that would work?”

Lola scoffed. “Are you really doubting me? Wasn’t I the one who hacked LIPS’s drone? We should go to the party and—”

“You and the rest of the pack should go, yes,” Greyson said firmly. “Cali, on the other hand…” He wrapped an arm over my shoulders, squeezing. “She should do whatever she wants to do. There’s no pressure.”

Lola huffed. “There’s maybe a tiny bit of pressure, because I’m sure Xavier is fine, and what will Cali do all alone at the house? She’ll just overthink and drive herself up the wall and—”

Greyson interrupted Lola for what felt like the millionth time. “No pressure,” he repeated, staring deep into my eyes.

I paused for a moment, taking both of them in. Greyson had said earlier that staying home wouldn’t change anything, and Lola was right about one thing—if I stayed back, I *would* start overthinking and lose my shit. Even if Greyson was there.

I knew that he would refuse to leave me, but if he didn’t show up as the Redwood Alpha to a Vanguard event, it would raise questions and seed doubt. Which would be bad, considering the Samara situation was still in flux. The Redwood pack needed to appear strong and united.

*Besides, there’s a chance that Lola’s suggestion to try texting from another area will work*, I told myself. *I have to at least try.*

“Okay,” I said, nodding determinedly. “I’m coming too.”

Lola grinned. “Hooray! Let’s hit the road.” She leaned forward, kissed my cheek, whispered in my ear, “Xavier will be fine,” and then strutted over to Jay. Her honest certainty made me feel lighter.

While Lola inspected Jay’s suit, Greyson opened the door to his car for me. A moment later, he was in the driver’s seat. Before anyone else could join us, he just started driving.

“Wait, aren’t we taking Lola and Jay with us?” I asked.

Greyson smirked. “They’ll survive driving with Big Mac. I’m pretty sure Jay’s other eye is safe.”

I let out a sound that was both a laugh and an outraged gasp. “*Greyson!*”

He shrugged. “What can I say? I wanted you all to myself, so we could share a bit of peace and quiet. When we get to the party, I won’t have that luxury, so I thought I’d take advantage of it now.”

“You’re so devious,” I teased.

“I try,” he said casually.

I chuckled before taking his hand. “I’d love that too, you know,” I said, more seriously now. “Just the two of us, peace and quiet.”

Greyson raised my hand to his lips and kissed it. Sighing, I looked over my shoulder. The other cars were falling in behind us, like a wolf pack procession. The only thing missing was Xavier. The thought made me clutch my phone tight, as if squeezing it would solve the text problem.

*Xavier will be okay*, I told myself. *He has to be okay.*

Within a few minutes, Greyson slowed down, looking forward. “There’s a line of cars leading to the palace.”

I blinked in surprise. “This party must be a lot bigger than we thought.”

Up ahead, there was valet parking, complete with attendants running around, directing people.

“I see some of the Blue Bloods are in attendance,” Greyson noted. “I spotted a few Samara members as well, and lots of other familiar faces from neighboring packs. Looks like Lucian is going all out.”

“Oh, goody.” I scoffed. “More werewolf politics.”

Greyson snorted and pulled up beside an attendant. I was thinking that I should text Xavier now—we were at the palace, so the cell towers had to be different here, or whatever Lola had said. *Right?*

The moment the attendant opened my door, my phone buzzed.

# Episode 3379

**Xavier**

I stared at the shimmering darkness. What the hell—literally—was on the other side? I imagined it had to be some sort of dusty, creepy wasteland, full of suffering souls and monstrous creatures. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe the darkness hid a gleaming palace with servants and fountains full of crystal-clear water.

Nah.

Whatever. It didn’t matter. The only thing I cared about right now was the Courier getting out of that place alive so he could reassure me that he’d done what he was supposed to do—deliver Seluna’s ashes. Then Cali would finally be free.

I’d give up my life for her freedom, if that was what it took.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped back and sat down on a cluster of rocks. A piece of rope was still dangling from my leg. I removed it and tossed it away, keeping an eye on the creatures. They’d backed off when their leader had told them to, but I was pretty sure that not all of them were pleased to leave me alone.

What the fuck was their problem?

They kept glaring at me, whispering to each other. It gave me an uneasy feeling, which I smothered as I checked the bruises I’d sustained. At least I was healing properly. Where did these creatures get their strength, anyway? They could definitely throw a punch, even though they were all bone and no muscle.

My musings were interrupted when one of those things walked toward me, its gleaming eyes fixed on my face. It stopped five feet away from me and declared, “I don’t like werewolves.”

I snorted. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

The creature scowled, making itself even uglier. “You should be.”

I stood up and stepped closer to the thing. “I don’t like demons and their gangs, either. What should we do about that?”

The creature held my gaze, its face full of anger, until a loud voice cracked through the air.

“I told you to cut the bullshit!” the leader called, voice thunderous.

I arched my eyebrows at the bony asshole who’d just challenged me. The creature retreated, and I wished the motherfucker had tried something—I was in the mood to kick some creature ass.

Then again, that wasn’t why I was here.

I had to focus on the task at hand and ignore the bullshit. As long as these creepy things didn’t start a fight, I wouldn’t either. Their leader was glaring at them, but that didn’t keep them from whispering and pointing at me.

I had to keep cool, though—I was doing all this for Cali and could not, under any circumstances, let my pride get in the way. This wasn’t the time for Alpha bullshit. Or perhaps it was, because three more creatures approached me.

I pretended not to notice, but I was ready to shift and protect myself. The biggest creature of the three, which had the foulest smell, stepped closer to me.

Way too fucking close.

It reached out with all the audacity in the world, poked my chest, and said, “You’re sitting on my friend’s rock.”

I scoffed. “You have friends?”

The creature snarled. “Get. *Off*.”

The rest of those things were watching. I felt like I’d been thrust into a weird Western, where I needed to have a shootout with the bad guy if I wanted to be respected. And now said bad guy’s companions were reaching for something hidden in their filthy clothes. Obviously weapons.

“I told you to stay back!” the leader called from the far end.

“You heard him,” I said, standing slowly. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll back the fuck off.”

Rotten teeth appeared when the creatures smiled at me. A second later, I saw the flash of a blade, and that was it. I leapt to the side, punching the creature with the dagger and kicking at the one closest to me. Within seconds, all hell broke loose.

I picked up the third creature—who’d demanded that I vacate his friend’s rock—and threw it screaming into the shimmering darkness. The other two attacked me at once, one from the right, the other from the left, but I kicked the one and grabbed the other to put it in a chokehold.

The thing wheezed as I squeezed the life out of it.

“Leave me the fuck alone,” I hissed, and—

*Thud!*

Something heavy collided with the back of my head. I fell to my knees, dazed. The creature I’d been choking was gasping and shaking on the ground. From behind me, the leader barked, “Enough!”

I fought through the dizziness, rubbing my nape as I turned around to face the monsters. There was blood on my head, a throbbing wound. When I saw the leader, I let out a growl. He was holding a staff of some sort, waving it around.

“There will be no more fighting!” he declared. “You will wait for the Courier, and then you will go!”

I rose to my feet slowly, ignoring the gaping slash at the back of my head. I glared at the leader and said, “That was exactly what I was doing until your little minions decided to fuck with me. Seems like you’re unable to control them.”

The leader snarled. “Watch your mouth, werewolf!”

“I’m just saying, you gotta do a better job of keeping your troops in line.” I wiped the blood from the back of my head. The leader didn’t say another word, even though I’d offended him. The creatures were no longer speaking, just peering at me as if they wanted to kill or eat me. Probably both. But they didn’t attack again, and I had to wonder if this truce could hold.

I decided to sit down a safe distance from the group, so as to not create any more tension. I couldn’t fucking believe I was walking away from a fight, but I’d do anything for Cali. Settling against a strange cactus-like plant, I watched the monsters.

They’d better not walk over to me to say that this fucking cactus was theirs.

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I had no idea how long my stare-off with the monsters lasted. The silence was unnerving, until finally, I heard some murmuring. And then the shimmering darkness seemed to undulate, and a strange red mist oozed out.

The Courier emerged.

My heart pounding, I marched over to him. He was holding something in his hands.

“Is it done?” I asked.

The Courier shot me yet another of his annoyed looks and handed me a crystal tablet.

I scowled. “What the fuck is this?”

“Your receipt,” he told me, as if that made any fucking sense.

I frowned at the thing, examining the weird symbols on it. “I have no idea what this says. How do I know it’s really a receipt and the ashes have been returned?”

The Courier stared at me, his expression unimpressed. “I’ve been doing this job far longer that you’ve been alive. Trust me when I say it’s done. This is what you paid me for. The ashes have been transported, and the deal is complete.”

He finished his sentence while wiping something that looked like gelatinous slime from his arm. In the meantime, I was trying to wrap my head around what was happening. I stared at the tablet, my pulse running a mile a minute.

Was this it, then?

Had I completed my mission?

I still couldn’t believe this was real, but I allowed myself a moment of relief. I fucking needed it. I was the one who’d brought Cali into this horrible mess when my past had come to bite me in the ass, but at least I’d finally pulled her out of it.

And maybe someday, I’d forgive myself for endangering my mate.

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The next thing I knew, I was back on my motorcycle, speeding wildly down a lone stretch of highway. I let out a shout when the tires slipped through a shiny substance on the road. I nearly lost my balance, careening into the shoulder. The bike spewed stone, and I came pretty close to crashing into a ravine until the bike finally came to a halt.

Panting, I looked around.

I knew this area. This was Oregon. The normal parts, nothing shady about them.

What the fuck was happening?

The Courier was gone. The creatures were gone too, thank fuck. I reached for my backpack only to find the tablet inside—it was there, secured and unharmed. I looked around again, wondering how the hell I’d gotten here. How long had I been gone? I had no concept of time or space, but now that my brain had refocused, one name barged right into my mind.

*Cali.*

I grabbed my phone. At the same time, it buzzed. I had a couple of texts from Cali. Her texts were worried, normal, and so *her* that I finally felt grounded. My relief felt more real. It finally started settling in…

Until I saw her last text and scowled.

What the actual hell was she doing at the Vanguard palace? Fuck that.

I revved the engine and peeled out onto the road.

# Episode 3380

Lola had been right. The moment we’d arrived at the Vanguard palace, I’d gotten a string of texts from Xavier.

*On me way back*

*Ashes r take care of*

*Love your*

A lot of typos there, but I was still stupidly grinning at my screen.

*Oh my god, I can’t believe this is real!*

“It looks like… like it’s over,” I whispered, showing the phone to Greyson.

He stared at me, his gaze assessing. “How are you feeling?” he asked gruffly.

*Like I want to crawl up the walls and throw up and start sobbing and laughing all at the same time?*

I kept those thoughts to myself, because TMI. Instead, I sniffled, chuckling as I rubbed the corners of my eyes. The hollow pit in my stomach had filled up with this brand new emotion that I knew was relief, except ten times bigger than usual.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It feels like a dream—like, I don’t know. I can *breathe*.”

Seluna’s torment was over, and I could breathe. My shoulder didn’t hurt. My chest felt light, but my heart was pounding. We stood on the marble Vanguard staircase that led to the entrance of the palace, and the starry sky above me suddenly looked gorgeous. It framed Greyson’s face in a way that made my throat feel scratchy.

“Xavier made it. I’m free, aren’t I? Is this real?” I asked dumbly.

Greyson let out a breathy laugh before he scooped me into his arms. He kissed my lips, my cheeks, my forehead, then settled me down and pushed my hair back. His touch was like an ointment.

“Xavier completed the mission, so you *are* free,” he said hoarsely. “And we can scratch the most important problem we’ve had in goddamn ages off our list.”

I laughed, wrapping my arms around his torso. He kissed the top of my head, and I breathed in his comforting scent. The atmosphere remained chilly but mild, a normal winter’s night for Oregon, and I thought of something.

I twisted around to check on the handprint. I pulled down the neckline of my dress, and I deflated a little to see the handprint still there. I remembered what Vander had said about residual magic; maybe in time it would go away, or maybe I’d have a scar. Either way, I was *free*.

“Hey,” I said, “according to Vander, now that Seluna’s ashes are gone, the balance of the world should return to normal. No more freak snowstorms, and I can blast anything I want, any time I want!” I looked over at one of Lucian’s flower displays. “*Oh*, maybe I should try it out right now to celebrate!”

Greyson smirked. “I understand your enthusiasm, but maybe we shouldn’t do anything to provoke the Vanguards or the other packs, including the Samaras. Especially while we’re still trying to gain their trust.”

I paused. “Okay, that sounds very logical.”

He raised an eyebrow. “So you hate it?”

“Of course.” I scoffed. “Logic is my enemy.”

He chuckled, kissing my cheek again. “Once we get back home, you can blast whatever you’d like.”

I grinned. “Yay! Oh my god, I’m going to tell Artemis, and we’re going to do a little target practice.” I looked around to spot the others getting out of the cars. “I can’t wait to tell everybody! Though maybe not here, because the Vanguards are probably eavesdropping.”

“True,” Greyson said. “What do you want to do now?”

I was smiling so wide, my cheeks hurt. “I feel like dancing!”

Greyson offered me his hand, nodding toward the entryway. “I’m hearing music in there, so that can be arranged.”

Greyson and I gave our coats to one of the attendants, then headed over to the main hall. Lucian had gone all out with the New Year’s decorations, and I couldn’t wait to dance.

*Apparently, the Seluna-free version of me loves dancing!* I mused. *Who would’ve thought?*

“Let’s do this,” Greyson said, offering me another dazzling smile. But before he could lead me into the ballroom, I heard a familiar voice.

“Caliana!”

Greyson stiffened. He pulled me closer, and we both turned to see Lucian descending one of the large staircases. He was dressed more royally than ever, if that was even possible. A disgustingly ravishing Aysel and two attendants accompanied him.

“I’m so happy to see the two of you!” Lucian exclaimed.

*The feeling is definitely not mutual*, I mind linked to Greyson. He choked out a snort as Lucian asked me, “And where is your other mate, dear?”

“Xavier will be here soon,” I said.

Though I wasn’t really sure what *soon* meant. Xavier had been a little vague in his messages, but that was Xavier, and it was fine as long as he was alive. Of course, I said none of that to Lucian, because it was none of his goddamn business. Greyson’s cool expression said that he agreed.

“Thank you for the invitation, Lucian,” he said. With only a glance at Aysel, he said, “Aysel.”

There was a tiny little monster inside me—round and pink and fluffy for some reason—that showed its teeth and preened when Greyson didn’t pay attention to her.

“Greyson, welcome,” Aysel said with a smirk. “And Cali! Darling, I love your dress!”

“Thank you,” I said. “I love my dress too.”

I didn’t compliment *her* dress, which didn’t go unnoticed. Greyson looked so amused that his hotness levels skyrocketed.

*Did you just act all shady with Aysel, love?* Greyson teased via mind link. *I didn’t think you had it in you!*

*Lola’s been trying to teach me how to deal with mean girls for years now. I guess I’m finally a worthy apprentice*, I replied.

At the same time, Aysel said, “And Greyson, of course you look wonderful.”

Greyson’s amusement vanished. Still, he told her, “Thank you.”

Aysel fluttered her eyelashes at him. *Ugh*. “Actually, I just have to introduce you to a few of my distant cousins—they’ve heard so much about you!” She held out her hand, and I couldn’t help but notice the giant jeweled ring on Aysel’s finger.

“I would love to meet your cousins,” Greyson told Aysel with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, “but first I owe my mate a dance.”

Aysel’s hand dropped, and she looked thrown. The tiny pink monster was gleeful again, but I smothered it because I’d been petty enough for one day.

“Excuse us,” Greyson said with a nod to Aysel and Lucian, who offered their own formal replies. A moment later, Greyson was leading me into the ballroom, to the center of the dance floor. I whistled when I took in the fabulous décor, and Greyson snorted.

“Lucian has many flaws, but he doesn’t do anything halfway.”

The fancy orchestra started playing some sort of waltz. A little panicked, I said, “I’m pretty sure I don’t remember how to dance this.”

Greyson pulled me closer, lacing his fingers through mine and resting his other hand at the small of my back. “We don’t have to follow any steps. I’ll take care of you,” he murmured in my ear. His warm breath sent chills down my spine.

“I like the sound of that,” I squeaked like a dork, gripping his hand tighter.

His grey eyes gleamed with mischief, and he looked around before leaning forward to speak into my ear again. “I told you this would happen when you wore that dress.”

“What do you mean?”

His smile was breathtaking. “You’re stealing the show, love. Everybody’s looking at you.”

A sudden wave of self-consciousness hit me, but I forgot all about it as Greyson and I started dancing. It really was easy to follow his lead—he’d definitely learned how to avoid me stepping on his feet. Either way, I was happy. I was laughing as we twirled around, and that same sense of relief tugged on my heartstrings. The lump in my throat had vanished. Right now, I felt like I’d swallowed honey.

How fitting that I’d learned about Seluna being gone right here, at the Vanguard palace.

*Right where everything started.*

“I never thought I’d say anything like this while at the Vanguard palace,” I told Greyson, “but this could possibly be the best New Year’s ever.”

Greyson offered me another smile. “I agree.”

He twirled me around the dance floor, and I spotted the rest of the pack. The song had changed to something slower. All the couples were dancing together—Jay and Lola, Artemis and Rishika, my mom and my dad, Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, Charlie and Violet, Sage and Zainab, Tabitha and Adair… Elle was stepping on Ravi’s feet, Gabriel and Mikah were laughing, and then there were Marta and Dani, drinking champagne.

“Everyone’s having fun,” Greyson said. “This is how I always envisioned the Redwood pack. I’m glad I can finally see it happening without thinking that we’re all about to die.”

I cringed and laughed at the same time. The only thing missing right now was Xavier.

*I can’t wait to see him!*

My thoughts were interrupted by a tap on my shoulder.

Lucian smiled brilliantly. “May I cut in?”

I wasn’t scared of him—not after everything we’d been through. I could blast him if I needed to. Mostly, I just didn’t want to let go of Greyson right now.

“You should dance with Lucian, Cali,” Aysel said, popping right over. “I can keep Greyson occupied in the meantime.”

*Oh my god, just go away!* I thought, scowling internally.

But seeing as I didn’t want this to turn into an inter-wolf-ian diplomatic incident, I conceded and took Lucian’s hand.

*I’ll be keeping an eye on him*, Greyson mind linked.

When Lucian and I started slow dancing, he seemed deliriously joyful.

“I’m so happy you made it, Caliana,” he enthused, gesturing around. “What do you think of the décor? I’ve been experimenting with different styles.”

“Everything’s always beautiful, Lucian.”

He grinned. “I’m thinking about adding a new wing to the palace, perhaps something to host board game nights and…”

Lucian kept rambling about making the place bigger, which was ridiculous, because it was already fucking massive and ostentatious. But whatever. I tried to pay attention while searching the swirling couples for a glimpse of Greyson.

“… it needs something fresh!” Lucian was saying. “Maybe a greenhouse or a new library or—I know! An aquarium!” He adjusted his hand, planting it solidly on my shoulder.

I flinched without thinking, letting out a gasp.

My heart was pounding.

“Caliana?” Lucian paused. He looked oddly worried. “Is everything okay?”

I breathed in and out and focused on my body. My reaction had been pure surprise, really. There had been no Seluna handprint reaction when Lucian had touched my shoulder. No burning, no pain. For the first time in so long, it felt like the skin I lived in was… my own.

*I* was my own.

“Everything’s great,” I said, offering Lucian a genuine smile.

And then I saw Ava appear in the ballroom, wearing a stunning gown.

# Episode 3381

**Greyson**

Aysel had been whining about Lucian’s renovation plans for the past five minutes. I’d been trying not to die from boredom.

“… Lucian’s thinking about building an aquarium! An aquarium, Greyson, and I hate fish! Not to mention octopuses—did you know that an octopus has the intellect of a child? I do *not* want children locked up in a watery prison underneath my feet!”

I was fed up enough to calmly say, “You didn’t seem to have an issue with imprisoning me, though. Not to mention Cali.”

Aysel didn’t even flinch at the comment. “That’s different! We were at war, kind of, and you’re just so beautiful it’s hard to think!”

“Indeed, I am. By the way, have you ever heard of victim blaming, Aysel?” I asked her in my best conversational tone. Aysel just breezed by again. It was good to see that I could basically say anything to the Vanguard royals as long as I kept up a civilized façade.

“Anyway, the point is that I cannot agree to an aquarium—the humidity alone would be a nightmare for my skin! Did you know that…”

While Aysel rambled on, my gaze drifted over to Cali. I wasn’t worried that she was with Lucian—I didn’t think he’d try anything funny, and if he did, Cali could just blast him to oblivion. My mate was a badass, and she’d grown so much since the last time we’d been in this place.

Of course, the idea of Lucian monopolizing her attention was still goddamn appalling. But this was how politics worked, and we both knew that interacting with the Vanguards would be the best thing for the Redwoods at this stage. Especially considering the Samara situation.

“… Greyson, are you listening?” Aysel’s voice pulled me back to the present.

When I looked at her, she seemed annoyed.

“Apologies,” I said. I could tell she knew I wasn’t sorry at all. “I spotted Cali and got distracted.”

Aysel wrinkled her nose, glancing at her brother and my mate. “I must admit, that dress is gorgeous. Where did Cali get it?”

“Not sure. But I agree, she looks gorgeous,” I said.

Aysel raised her eyebrows. “I said the *dress* is beautiful.”

The music changed, and I smiled at Aysel. I made sure to make it extra fake, because if Aysel wanted to be a mean girl, I could play that game. There was a line between being allies with someone and letting them walk all over you, and I wasn’t about to let her cross it.

“I know what you said,” I told her. “And I say that my mate is always gorgeous, no matter what she wears. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

Aysel looked like she was about to explode and turn into a pile of jealous green goo. Sad for her.

With yet another smile, I offered her my arm. “How about we go grab something to drink?”

She didn’t say a word, but she did take my arm, her head held high.

“Greyson, hey.” Mace appeared in front of us. He was dressed in a dark navy suit, looking much less unkempt than usual. I took that as a good sign—he’d been grieving Pip for a while now.

“Mace,” I said. “How are you?”

“I didn’t expect to see you until the council meeting,” Mace continued, his gaze drifting to Aysel. His voice dropped slightly when he said, “Aysel, I’m grateful for the invite tonight.”

Mace was shockingly formal, so unlike his usual self, which—for a guy—meant only one thing. When he looked at Aysel, he liked what he saw.

“Of course, darling, it’s a delight to have you and your pack here tonight,” Aysel said, like the most gracious hostess.

“The décor is…” Mace cleared his throat, looking around. “Something, all right.”

And that was my in. “How about you give Mace a tour of the palace, Aysel? Show him all the New Year’s décor?” I said, letting her arm go.

Before Aysel could speak, Mace said, “That would be cool.”

Aysel shot me a look, then shot one at Mace, then smiled wide and nodded. “But of course! I’d love to.”

She took Mace’s hand and led him away.

Could anything come from that? Because my life would be a lot easier if Aysel was into Mace. He had Alpha blood, so that had to count for something. Though the fact that he already seemed to find her hot was a bit alarming. But if he wanted to make her his problem after knowing all the shit she’d pulled, that would be fine by me. And by Cali. She’d looked annoyed when Aysel had taken my hand to dance.

I looked over at my mate while standing in line at the bar. She smiled when our eyes met, and my heart pounded. I offered her a nod, just as my phone vibrated in my pocket.

*Should be arriving soon*, Xavier had texted.

My smile faded. Yeah, of course I wanted my brother to return safely. But I would’ve preferred to spend New Year’s Eve alone with Cali—or as alone as we could be in a party of this size. Not to mention, Xavier was probably still pissed at me about the whole “not letting him pursue Adéluce to the bottom of that frozen lake” thing.

There was a huge chance that I’d been wrong to stop him, but the idea of him freezing to death just to make sure Adéluce was dead hadn’t sat right with me. Especially because I knew that Cali would’ve been devastated if I’d let him dive in. We had the ashes, and that was the most important thing. Xavier had been able to get rid of them, and now he was on his way back, and this whole nightmare was over.

Cali was safe.

*Finally*.

I’d just try to smooth things over with Xavier when he arrived. It was New Year’s Eve—perhaps we could make a resolution to try and get along better.

“Did you know Ava was here?” Cali’s voice came from behind me, and I turned to face her. She looked a bit… miffed.

“I thought you were still dancing with Lucian,” I said.

She shook her head. “I was dancing with him, but then I saw Ava. So yeah.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, so I just powered through. “Lucian invited all the packs, so of course Ava’s here. It’s a good thing she came—the Samara pack has become very small, and this gives them some visibility.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Cali said with a sigh, locking her arm with mine just as we got to the front of the line.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked.

“Scotch, neat, for me,” I said.

“White wine for me,” Cali said.

As the bartender went off to fix our drinks, I leaned down to whisper in Cali’s ear. “Xavier should be here soon.”

She smiled. “I know—he’s been texting me.” She rested a hand on my arm, tilting her head coyly to the side. “I hope you’ll understand if I spend a little time with Xavier. I know you wanted to keep me all to yourself, but—”

“Life is hard, and I’ll handle it,” I completed her sentence in a mock-serious tone.

She giggled. I loved to see it.

“Until my brother arrives, though…” I raised an eyebrow, tilting her chin up. “You’re all mine.”

Cali’s breath caught before I brushed my lips over hers. Her grip on my arm tightened. She felt so warm and amazing against me, her scent engulfing me. The mate bond between us was a live, vibrating, tangible thing.

And for once, I wasn’t waiting for the sky to fall on our heads.

I wished this moment could last forever.

“Your drinks.” The bartender’s voice, accompanied by a loud throat clear, cut us off. Cali looked all flushed and lovely, and I smirked. We took our drinks and moved over to a corner to enjoy them.

“Lovely, thank you!” Lucian called out as we got settled, clapping his hands together. “Let’s pause for now, though—I have some announcements to make!”

The orchestra stopped playing, and I sighed. “What now?”

“It’s probably nothing,” Cali said. “Lucian just likes to be the center of attention.”

I snorted, pulling her closer while Lucian stood on an actual golden podium that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

“Thank you all for coming tonight,” Lucian said loudly. “It’s so wonderful to see the packs enjoying themselves instead of fighting!”

I tuned Lucian out and looked around for the rest of the pack. Elle was standing with Lola, Jay, and Marta. I’d had my reservations about bringing her tonight. I hadn’t been sure she was ready to handle such a big event, not after her recent troubles. But I knew I couldn’t leave her at the pack house, and I hadn’t wanted to burden anyone else with the responsibility of watching her. At least here, I could keep an eye on her.

“… it is peace what we all seek, and what will make us all heal after…” Lucian kept droning on. I was about to look away from Elle when I noticed something odd about her. She had this dazed look on her face as she stared at the princeling.

For a moment, I worried that she might still be interested in Lucian—I remembered the time she’d said she thought they could be mates.

But then she looked away toward the banquet tables as Lucian blathered on.

“I’m gonna check on Elle,” I muttered in Cali’s ear, and I was about to leave when I felt a strong grip on my shoulder.

“Hello, brother,” Xavier said.

He was back.

# Episode 3382

**Xavier**

Greyson’s eyes were wide. I scoffed, gripping his shoulder harder. “What’s with the shocked face? Didn’t you believe I’d be back?”

“That’s not it at all,” Greyson said. He then had the motherfucking gall to look me up and down before saying, “It’s just that you look like you’ve been through hell.”

“That’s because I have been,” I said. “Or at least as close to it as I ever want to get.”

Greyson looked both cautious and intrigued, now. “How long did the whole thing take?”

“Getting there took the most time,” I said.

“And how did you get back so fast?” he asked.

“I called Kira, and she met up with me. She blipped us and my bike back.”

Greyson grinned. “And you hated it?”

I nodded solemnly. “And I hated it.”

“Xavier!” I turned to see Cali, looking stunning in a gorgeous dress, with a huge smile on her face. “You made it!” She basically jumped into my arms, peppering my face with kisses. In a sweet, hushed voice, she whispered, “Oh my god, I’m so grateful. I missed you so much. Are you okay?”

I didn’t speak for a moment, just held her tight. I breathed her in, grounded myself in the knowledge that I’d pulled off the mission. She would finally—fucking *finally*—be safe.

“You’re going to stain her dress with demon goo,” Greyson muttered wryly, but I didn’t let Cali go. I could tell he wasn’t the only person surprised to see a dirty, bloodied guy show up at a party like this, but I didn’t give a fuck.

“I couldn’t go home without seeing you,” I said, facing Cali. “I had to make sure you were okay.”

The way she looked up at me took my breath away. Her beautiful eyes glistened with emotion. When she caressed my cheek, my breath caught.

“Everything’s great now,” she whispered.

I pulled her in tighter, shooting Greyson a look. I hoped the message was loud and clear—I was the one who’d risked his life to deliver the ashes, and Cali was my reward. End of fucking story.

I could hear people muttering all around me, staring at us while Lucian rambled on in the background about one thing or another. Probably something to do with how fat his ego was. Either way, I didn’t give a damn. I only cared about Cali, and the way she was holding me.

I could feel her love, and it was the best medicine in the world.

She was safe, in my arms, and if you wanted to talk semantics, *I* was the hero of the hour.

I turned to Greyson, contemplating how to rub that in his face. But my brother didn’t look jealous or antagonistic. His expression was somber when he gripped my shoulder and squeezed.

“I’m glad you’re here, in one piece.” He glanced at Cali. “And that she’s safe. I appreciate that more than anything in the entire world.”

I believed Greyson’s words. I knew I’d feel the same in his position, so I gave him a curt nod. I was still miffed about the way he’d stopped me from going after Adéluce, but I didn’t think that starting a fight about that while Lucian made a speech about how great his party was would be the best idea.

Greyson interrupted the awkward silence that had fallen between the three of us, then.

“I’m going to see how the pack is doing, give them the good news,” he said.

Shooting a parting look at Cali, he stepped away. I had to give him credit for that—two was company, but three was a crowd. The moment he was gone, I turned to Cali. Her hands wrapped around my neck, and she gravitated toward me, her eyes fluttering shut before I kissed her softly.

“Seriously,” I said against her mouth. “How are you feeling?”

Her smile took my breath away. “Better than ever. I love you so much.”

I said I loved her too. I got to be the hero and receive a love declaration from my mate in the middle of a fancy-ass ballroom. All in all, this was a good day for me.

“I have a million questions,” she said in a low voice. “What happened? Where did you go? Was it awful? Dangerous?”

My first urge was to toot my own horn, but then I took a step back and reassessed. I had grown as a person and stuff, I supposed. I didn’t want Cali to worry.

“It was an experience I hope I never have to go through again,” I said. “But I did what I set out to do, and that’s all that matters right now.” I gestured down at my dirty clothes. “I’m sorry about my appearance, though.”

“I don’t care about that!” Cali said with a huff, placing a hand over my heart. “As long as you’re safe, I—Wait, is that blood on your jacket?” Her voice was an alarmed hiss, and her eyes went wide with concern.

“Not mine,” I clarified. “I had to set a few things straight, and it got a little physical, but I’m fine.”

“Hmm…” Cali seemed skeptical, and she started patting me down to make sure I wasn’t injured. That was pretty nice, actually. I wished I could just scoop her up in my arms right now and carry her back to the pack house. I couldn’t wait until we were locked up in my room without the rest of the pack interrupting. Speaking of…

“I can’t believe all the Redwoods are here,” I said, scanning the crowd.

“Greyson said it was to uphold the alliance with the Vanguards,” Cali explained. “And why not celebrate, now that we really have a reason to?”

I spotted Jay talking to Lola and Jacqueline. My eyes narrowed. “Is that my jacket that Jay’s wearing?”

Cali chuckled. “Funny story, actually—”

“Xavier!” Lucian’s voice sounded strangled. I turned around to see him marching toward me, his eyes wide as he checked me out from top to toe. I hadn’t even realized he’d finished his lecture.

“Good to see you, as ever, but did you not realize that this is a formal event?” Lucian whisper-hissed while literally inserting himself between Cali and me. He looked annoyed, disdainful, and a little bit panicked all at once. “It doesn’t reflect well on the Redwood pack to have you here looking like roadkill.”

I wanted to tell Lucian to eat shit and die. But I supposed that wouldn’t be good for diplomacy and all that crap. With a tight-lipped smile, I said, “Yeah, I was running late.”

Lucian scowled. “Well, you cannot possibly stay like that! You must clean up and choose something of mine—we’re about the same size.”

I wasn’t about to let Cali go right now. No fucking way.

“I’ll do that, but only if Cali comes with me to help me choose something suitable,” I said before clarifying, “I mean, I know you have an extensive wardrobe, and I might get overwhelmed, so I need my mate’s guidance.”

I was overselling this, but Lucian immediately bought it. “But of course!”

He called for an attendant to take us to one of his dressing rooms, and I took Cali’s hand with a smirk. She smirked back, clearly aware that I was full of shit. I thanked Lucian—for being an idiot—and we followed the attendant. He led us through the party, up the staircase, and into one of Lucian’s many huge closet-slash-dressing rooms.

“Just ring the bell if you require assistance,” the man said with a bow, and then he skedaddled.

The moment we were alone, Cali gave me an amused look. “What was that all about? You don’t need my help—you have more fashion sense in your pinky finger than I have in my entire body.”

I reached out to her, pulling her closer. Staring at her mouth, I muttered, “It *was* your body that I was thinking about, actually…”

Cali’s breath caught. I pulled her into a kiss, wrapping my arms around her waist. She smelled so amazing and felt so fucking good that I deepened the kiss. She leaned into it, letting out an achy little moan that got me rock hard.

But then, when she ran her fingers through my hair, she broke off the kiss. “Oh my god, Xavier… You have sand in your hair!”

I laughed. “And?”

Her lips were red and swollen from the kiss, but she still stepped back and shook her head, staring at me fondly. “We have to be good before Lucian comes over to hunt us down. You take a quick shower while I find something for you to wear. By the way, you have to be honest—if you don't like what I pick, just tell me,” she said seriously.

“Of course,” I said, stealing one more kiss before I moved to one of the bathrooms. I quickly stripped down and stepped into the shower. I rinsed off the dirt and dried blood using one of Lucian’s fancy soaps. I washed as quickly as possible so I could be with Cali again. I hadn’t come all this way and almost fucking died so I could hang out in Lucian’s bathroom.

Five minutes later, I shut off the water. As I wiped my eyes with my hands, Cali thrust a towel in.

“Thanks, baby,” I said, picking up the towel and wiping myself down.

When I stepped out of the stall, though, it wasn’t Cali I saw.

It was Ava.

# Episode 3383

I was in Lucian’s massive walk-in closet, looking through his racks and racks *and racks* of suits. Most of them were far too garish for Xavier. Did Lucian’s every lapel need to be embroidered with golden thread? Would he simply implode if his buttons didn’t have tiny sparkly diamonds on them? And the red—why did he wear so much red? I thought he had been into the *moon* before all this. Shouldn’t there have been way more blacks, greys, and whites?

*This is ridiculous.*

Anyway, Lucian was the king of unsubtlety in more ways than one, so I wasn’t surprised by the selection in here. What did semi-shock me for a moment, though, was the fact that I was hanging out in Lucian’s closet to begin with. Not too long ago, Lucian had kidnapped me—multiple times—in order to let a demon possess my body.

*Just look at us now...*

Yes, I’d basically saved Lucian from Seluna, and Greyson had very graciously not decapitated him, but still. It wasn’t like I wanted to be BFFs. The whole thing was surreal—especially the part where I was at Lucian’s New Year’s Eve party and having fun. Oh, and the part where Xavier had actually *agreed* to wear Lucian’s clothes.

My cheeks felt hot when I thought about kissing Xavier earlier. It was amazing to have him close, to feel him in the flesh after worrying about him so much. I couldn’t wait to dance with him before the night was over.

*More dancing… Who even am I?*

I grinned to myself, relief still running through me. The more time I spent *not* dreading anything, the more the reality of not having to deal with Seluna settled in. All in all, this was an amazing evening. I’d even managed to find two suits of Lucian’s that didn’t look like they’d been pulled out of some sort of fashion museum.

One of the suits was black and sleek, and I realized that it closely resembled the one I’d loaned Jay. I decided against it. Lola would either throw a fit because Jay’s outfit was the same as Xavier’s, or become way too excited and ask for the four of us to take a hundred pictures as a quartet. You never knew with her.

In the end, I decided to go with the other suit—it was a midnight shade of blue that would look incredible with Xavier’s sapphire eyes. I smiled to myself, draped the suit over my arm, and walked out of the closet and toward the bathroom. The shower had stopped—he had to be done already.

“I found something for you to wear!” I called, hurrying over to the bathroom. “I think you’ll love—”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Xavier snapped.

I flinched, shocked and confused before I realized that Xavier wasn’t even looking at me. I followed his line of vision to see him talking to… Ava?

*What. The. FUCK?*

Here we were, then. My mate, naked, dripping wet, holding a towel in one hand while glaring at his ex, who just stood there. Staring at him in all his undeniable, super-hot, naked glory.

*Unbelievable!*

I stormed into the room and declared, “What do you think she’s doing here, Xavier? It’s obvious!” I turned to Ava. “Are you for real right now?”

Ava crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. “Both of you, stop it. It’s not what you think.”

“Isn’t it?” I gestured at Xavier. “He’s naked! And you barged in like a creepy Peeping Tom!”

She rolled her eyes. “Can you stop being so dramatic? I just gave him a towel.”

“You know what, Ava? I thought you’d gotten past your hang-up with Xavier, even thought that you and I may be…” I wasn’t about to say “friends,” because then the sky would start falling. “… acquaintances! But now you go ahead and do *this*!”

“I didn’t do *anything*,” Ava deadpanned.

I pointed at Xavier. “He’s fucking naked!”

“He’s wearing a towel, and I was the one who gave it to him, so—”

“So *he’s* right here and needs a minute to figure out what the hell is happening right now,” Xavier declared, wrapping the towel tighter around his waist as he stared at Ava. “Ava. Explain.”

She actually had the nerve to look calm. Also, incredibly sexy. Her dress was flowy at the legs but snug at the top, with a very revealing bustier that made her ample chest look fucking phenomenal. It was *infuriating*.

“I’m not here to cause trouble,” Ava said, interrupting my mental boob envy. “In fact, I’m trying to *avoid* trouble—that’s why I need to talk to Xavier.”

I felt like grabbing the showerhead and drenching her.

*Cali, no!* I scolded myself*. You have to be civilized!*

Goddammit.

“So that’s the only reason why you’re here, talking to my naked mate in a bathroom?” I asked impatiently. “Why didn’t you talk to Xavier downstairs, while he was clothed?”

At the same time, I offered Xavier Lucian’s suit, and he mumbled a “thank you,” walking over to the dressing screen.

“I just need to speak to him in private,” she said.

“Of course you do,” I said with a sneer.

Xavier spoke from behind the screen. “Cali’s not going anywhere, Ava. If you have something to say to me, you say it in front of her.”

Ava rolled her eyes yet again. “Cali is welcome to stay, obviously. I just didn’t want the others to hear. I’m having some trouble with the Samara pack.”

Xavier walked out—he had the pants and belt on and was buttoning up the dark shirt. He looked amazing, obviously, but I didn’t have time to focus on that while Ava was on the prowl.

“How’s your Samara pack trouble my problem on New Year’s Eve?” he asked Ava. He didn’t seem hostile, just serious.

“It’s in your interest—the Redwood pack’s interest—to make sure the Samara pack recovers from Knox’s corruption, Xavier,” Ava said firmly. “You know that.”

“But what kind of trouble are you talking about?” I asked. “I really hope a pack war is no longer on the table.”

*Hasn’t there been enough drama lately?*

“A pack war is always on the table, Cali,” Ava said. “And it could be worse—I think Zeke is about to abdicate.”

Xavier was expressionless. “I’m surprised he lasted this long.”

“Wait, what makes you think he’s stepping down?” I asked.

“I overheard Zeke complaining to one of his friends about how much he hates being Alpha,” Ava admitted.

I groaned. “Jeez, why does this have to be so complicated? Isn’t there anyone else who’d take his place?”

In my experience, that happened all the time in werewolf packs. At least it did in ours—Xavier wouldn’t hesitate to fill Greyson’s role as Alpha, if necessary. In fact, he’d probably do cartwheels if he got the position, and he’d made no secret of that.

“That’s not how it works,” Xavier said. “Definitely not in this case.”

“Why not?” I asked. “I thought werewolves loved being in power. Isn’t that what the Lupo Finale is all about?”

Ava laughed bitterly. “This isn’t a common situation, Cali. It was difficult enough to get Zeke to be in charge—there isn’t anybody else who’s strong enough and has Alpha blood. I was hoping Zeke would work out long enough to allow the pack to attract new pack members, reclaim some who left, and find a suitable Alpha. A good, strong Alpha who knows how to lead.”

Ava’s pale blue eyes had drifted over to Xavier. The way she stared at him, as if he were the answer to all her prayers, made me feel very uncomfortable. I stepped between her and Xavier and blocked her view of him, because *fuck that!*

“And what do you expect Xavier to do?” I asked sharply. “Xavier is a Redwood. Not a Samara.”

“I know that,” Ava said wryly. “But Xavier spoke to Zeke before, and it actually seemed to help.” Ava looked over my shoulder, at Xavier. “Would you be willing to speak to Zeke again?”

Xavier laughed, putting on the jacket. Sidenote: I wanted to pat myself on the back for how good he looked in this.

“Ava, be serious,” he told her. “At this stage, no amount of talk is going to turn that man into an Alpha—you have to be a leader, have to want it.”

“But it might help,” she insisted. “Just to buy enough time for us to find someone else to lead. After you spoke to Zeke, he actually spent a few days making an effort to be a true Alpha. It all went down the drain afterward, but it did give him a boost that could help us right now.”

Xavier’s face was unreadable. He turned to me and asked, “What do you think?”

Frowning, I opened my mouth to answer—

Then the entire palace shook with a loud *BOOM!*

# Episode 3384

**Greyson**

My ears were ringing, and my eyes were burning from the smoke as I tried not to inhale it. I watched as Lucian pulled plugs from his ears, flicked his hair back, and stepped down from the platform where his latest toy was.

Had this imbecile just fired a fucking cannon that looked like it had been built in the 1700s? Yes.

Was he the only person to wear earplugs among a sea of werewolves with very sensitive ears? Also yes. Of course he hadn’t offered anyone else a set—that would’ve been considerate, and the only thing that Lucian cared about was himself. And his weird, dick-shaped gadgets, clearly.

“Behold!” he said, gesturing at the cannon. “Isn’t she a beauty?”

A murmur went through the crowd. I had to take a break from diplomacy to roll my eyes, otherwise I was pretty sure they’d explode from all the disdain I felt.

“This weapon once belonged to the infamous pirate Samuel Bellamy, and it was recovered from the bottom of the Atlantic!” Lucian puffed out his chest. “I had it authenticated.”

“Kinky,” I deadpanned under my breath.

Rishika, who was standing right next to me and heard my comment, choked on her drink. I patted her on back while wondering why the flying fuck Lucian had felt the need to obtain an authentic cannon, let alone shoot one during a party without warning. He just *screamed* small dick energy. Somebody needed to say that to his face one day. Maybe me, if I could pass it off as a joke.

A man could only hope.

“Greyson!” Cali’s frantic call cut off my thoughts. I immediately turned in the direction of her voice, wading through the crowd to get to her. She, Xavier, and Ava had just come running into the courtyard, looking surprised. What surprised *me* was the fact that all three of them were together. What was that about?

I reached Cali, glancing at the other two.

“Greyson, what happened?” Cali’s concern made me refocus on her. I hated seeing her worried. She deserved ice cream and rainbows and orgasms all day long.

“It’s just an old cannon—the princeling felt the need to play pirate,” I explained quickly.

Cali exhaled in relief, and I didn’t need to ask her why. There was a history of explosions and danger at the Vanguard palace, and I hated remembering everything she’d gone through in here. I wrapped an arm around her shoulders as Xavier stared. He looked more like himself, even if it was Lucian’s suit that he was wearing.

“I need a drink,” he said gruffly, leaning in to kiss Cali’s cheek before walking off. Without another word, Ava wandered toward the cannon along with others who had gathered around it.

“Should we go check out the cannon?” Cali asked me cautiously.

I shook my head. “I’d take Xavier out on a picnic and ask him to talk about his feelings before I fed Lucian’s ego by fawning over a relic.”

Cali took in my composed expression and let out an incredulous laugh. I smirked—seeing her like this was much better. I led her to the side a moment later, leaning down to speak in her ear. “So what’s up with Ava? Why was she with you guys?”

“It’s Zeke,” Cali whispered, then started explaining the situation. I’d heard of this before—at this stage, Zeke’s behavior wasn’t unexpected.

“Xavier talking to him would only be a Band-Aid, Cali,” I said, just as I noticed Aysel walking past us. But she wasn’t alone—*Elle* was with her. I hadn’t had time to check in with Elle earlier, and I still felt uneasy about her being here after her feral incident. Especially considering the spacey look she’d had while staring up at Lucian.

“Do you think Elle’s been acting weird tonight?” I asked Cali.

Cali frowned. “I haven’t noticed. Why? Is everything okay?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, staring after Elle and Aysel. “But I’m going to find out.”

“I’ll come with you,” Cali said with a determined nod. But then she looked over at the entryway. Xavier was there, holding a beer, motioning for Cali to join him inside.

“It’s fine, I can handle this on my own,” I said. “Go with Xavier and have fun—you deserve it.”

Cali smiled up at me, kissing my cheek before she skedaddled. I wanted to just stand there and watch her walk away like a fucking lovesick idiot puppy, but I had to get a goddamn grip and focus on my mission. Elle business was pack business, and I was the Alpha.

I walked in the direction that Aysel and Elle had vanished, picking up Elle’s scent to guide myself. I found the two women easily in one of the palace’s many fancy sitting rooms. The door was wide open, and when I paused by the entryway, both women smiled widely.

“Greyson!” Elle enthused, waving at me.

“Would you care to join us?” Aysel asked.

“Sure,” I said, walking inside. I eyed Aysel. What the hell was her game, pulling Elle in here? “What’s going on?” I asked. I tried to sound cool, but the truth was, I was very curious, and a bit worried.

“Well, Elle over here has been asking questions about the Vanguard pack, about royalty, and about my brother,” Aysel said simperingly.

I forced my expression to remain neutral. It took some effort, because I recalled the dazed look that Elle had been giving Lucian earlier while he gave his speech. I didn’t fucking like this.

“Oh,” I said calmly, taking a seat with them. “What kinds of questions?”

“I want to know more,” Elle announced with a huge smile. “I didn’t ever hear that werewolves had royalty. A king!”

I nearly choked with laughter. “Lucian isn’t a king, Elle.”

I wanted to add that I wasn’t even sure he was a prince, but I didn’t want to raise my doubts in front of Aysel. Besides, Elle already seemed confused. Her nose scrunching up, she said, “Lucian is Alpha but says he is a king?”

“My brother is a prince, darling.” Aysel smiled at Elle indulgently before turning to me. “Greyson, Elle has to visit me again. I would love to spend more time with her—she’s so cute, and I just adore her!”

Right… At one point, Aysel had been clearly jealous of Elle. Now she wanted to be best friends and hang out? Hah, that would be a no.

“Perhaps later on,” I said, keeping things vague. “I think she might need a little more time to get accustomed to the Redwood pack first.” Aysel opened her mouth to protest, but I was done with this conversation, so I faced Elle and redirected. “Elle, would you like to rejoin the party? Perhaps dance?”

Elle’s eyes widened in excitement. “Dance with Greyson?”

I didn’t see why not. I’d rather dance with Elle than have her bond with Aysel. She’d probably force the girl to eat a poisoned apple, like Snow White’s stepmother.

“Let’s go,” I said, holding out my hand for her.

Elle gave me a giant grin, taking my hand just as Lucian came in. “Elle, my dear! There you are!”

A faint blush appeared on Elle’s cheeks. I had to stop myself from frowning.

“What’s going on, Lucian?” I asked.

“I’m just so curious about Elle,” he said, approaching the girl with a glint in his eye. “Her beauty rivals my own.”

Aysel grinned. “Elle has been asking about you, actually.”

Lucian beamed at Elle. “You have?”

Elle nodded coyly, and now I really did frown. What fresh hell was this?

“Would you like to tour the palace with me, dear?” Lucian asked Elle. “I can answer all your questions.”

“Yes!” Elle immediately let go of my hand and moved over to Lucian. He wrapped his arm through hers, murmuring something that sounded like, “Lovely.”

I was about to fucking gag here.

“Elle, wait—” I started, but Elle didn’t even turn to look at me as Lucian led her out of the room.

I felt slightly queasy at the idea of Elle, someone so obviously innocent, hanging out with Lucian of all people. He wasn’t a *complete* psychopath as of late, but a tiger didn’t change its stripes. I made a move to walk after them, but then Aysel blocked my way.

“Oh, Greyson…” Aysel tsked, a look of amusement on her face.

“What?” I asked.

Aysel tilted her head. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were jealous. Am I wrong?”

“Jealous?” I was genuinely confused. “Of what?”

Aysel moved closer, smirking. “Why else would it bother you that Elle has taken an interest in Lucian?”

I forced myself to keep my tone even. “This has nothing to do with jealousy. I feel responsible for Elle. She’s had some trouble lately, and she needs looking after.”

Aysel raised an eyebrow, looking skeptical. “Well, if you’re not interested in her, I believe my brother is.”

# Episode 3385

**Marta**

Lilac looked so handsome tonight. I kept stealing glances at him, and it definitely felt like he’d been doing the same. But neither one of us seemed willing to approach the other. What was I supposed to say to him after our last talk, anyway?

Everything just felt so… hopeless.

I knew I should’ve been celebrating the new year, enjoying the food and drinks, and partying in this fancy palace, but I didn’t have it in me. Just knowing that Lilac was so close yet not beside me was upsetting. I felt all jumbled up inside, my stomach in knots at the idea of going anywhere near him.

I wasn’t sure what to do, how to resolve this thing between us. It felt like the situation was out of my hands, anyway. Mates were about fate, and free will went on the backburner, so I couldn’t believe Lilac when he said that having a mate wouldn’t be a problem for us.

I’d learned enough about mates while living in the pack house that I was certain Lilac was either in denial about this or just plain lying to me. He’d grown up with these myths and legends about mates—how could he be so naïve? Especially when he had so many real live examples to draw from?

Cali and Xavier, for example—they were dancing right now, looking into each other’s eyes and smiling. Hadn’t Xavier literally just risked his life to save Cali? That was what mates did. And if Perrie was Lilac’s mate, he would probably want to do the same thing for her, if it came down to it. The thought made my eyes burn with unshed tears.

My misery had no place in here, though—everybody seemed happy, while I couldn’t even pretend to laugh at people’s jokes anymore. Maybe I could slip out? But then I had no way of getting back to the pack house. Asking to take one of the cars and drive home would raise suspicion and make others worry about me.

But perhaps some fresh air would help. Just so I could clear my head, or cry without any witnesses. Either one would do. Or both. Swallowing roughly, I looked around for the terrace and then made a beeline for it. Halfway there, though, Violet appeared to block my way.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Violet’s tone and expression were uncharacteristically tense. I was startled for a moment.

“I was just—”

“Oh my god, Marta, I can’t stand it anymore!” Violet hissed, grabbing me by the shoulders. “My brother has become a brooding bore! He doesn’t even talk to me anymore!”

I blinked, still startled. “Um, I thought the fact that he never shut up frustrated you most of the time?”

“That was before I knew the alternative,” Violet declared. Her usual mild-mannered sweetness was gone. She firmly added, “He hasn’t made any dumb jokes for days now—do you realize how dire things are?”

My stomach throbbed. “That’s not something I—”

“If you two won’t talk to each other, I’m going to lock you up until you figure this shit out. Cali says that works.”

Violet’s passionate tirade made me wince. The urge to cry intensified, and as she stared at my face, her own expression shifted.

Her voice lowered. “I’m sorry if I’m being a pain right now, but it’s just…” She took my hands, her eyes pleading. “Why aren’t you two talking about this?”

“Lilac tried to talk to me before to convince me that having Perrie as a mate doesn't change anything,” I whispered. “But I find that hard to believe. You have a mate—you know how it is.”

Violet opened her mouth to speak, then paused. Finally, she sighed. “My brother can be annoying, but I love him. And I feel like you two should at least talk. You have so much history. You brought him back from the dead, Marta—I don’t think that’s something that can be forgotten.”

Violet walked away a moment later. I just stood there alone afterward, hugging myself. Instead of encouraging me, her words had made me feel even worse. Lilac and I had history, life-and-death kind of history, but not even that could break a mate bond.

*Could it?*

“Hey!” I looked up to see Ravi approaching me. He looked chipper and dashing in his suit. “What are you doing here all alone? Wanna dance?”

I forced a smile and shook my head. “I don’t quite feel like it, but thanks.”

Ravi’s grin dimmed. “This is about Lilac, right?”

I chuckled bitterly. “How much do you know?”

Ravi shrugged. “Maybe enough. You know how the pack house talks.”

“You mean gossips.”

Ravi waved that off, his eyebrows knitted together. He looked thoughtful for a moment before he glanced over his shoulder, then faced me again. “Why don’t you ask Lilac to dance? Dancing fixes things, especially in movies,” he said with a wink.

I thought that Ravi had to be joking, trying to cheer me up. But when I shook my head, he didn’t drop it.

“Marta, come on,” he said. “It’s not the seventies anymore—it’s normal for girls to ask guys to dance. And I’m pretty sure Lilac won’t turn you down.” Ravi looked over his shoulder again, and I noticed Lilac standing by an ornate chocolate fountain, looking miserable. He hadn’t been there a moment ago.

“I don’t think…” I trailed off as Ravi came up behind me, giving me a little shove toward Lilac as he said, “You can do this!”

Lilac almost dropped his drink when he saw me approach, his eyes widening with hope. The suit he’d chosen looked incredible on him. He was so damn beautiful, it hurt to look at him.

My voice cracking, I muttered, “I, uh, maybe we could—”

“I’d love to dance!” Lilac blurted out, before I could even get the words out. He took my hand, as if afraid I’d change my mind, and led me to the dance floor.

The band was playing some sort of slow orchestral composition, and neither one of us was going to win a ballroom dance contest, but I didn’t care. Just being close to Lilac, touching him, made my heart flutter.

“I thought you’d never ask to dance,” he muttered. His gaze was intense, as if he’d longed to be near me as much as I’d longed to be near him. “I mean, I was about to ask you myself when you came over, so…”

I swallowed thickly. “Why didn’t you?”

That wasn’t a good question, because the answer was obvious.

“I didn’t think you wanted me to.” Lilac’s smile was sad, and seeing him like this made me want to sniffle. “You’re the one who asked to break up with me, Marta.”

“It’s not like I *want* to break up with you.”

“Then what *do* you want?”

Lilac’s voice was gentle, but his words felt loud and sharp, cutting through me. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes.

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

We didn’t speak for a moment. Lilac looked away, as if lost in thought, and I fought down tears. We occasionally bumped into couples who were far better dancers than we were, but I still didn’t care. I felt wounded and raw, and Lilac seemed to share the emotion. It made everything a million times worse.

Finally, he met my gaze again and whispered, “I meant what I said before. Having a mate won’t change the way I feel about you. But if you’re having doubts, you’re the one who’s going to have to figure things out.”

His words landed with a thud inside me, and the music came to an end. He kept staring at me, his fingers still locked with mine. I knew he could feel my hands shaking at his touch.

“I’m willing give you some space, but I can’t take this much longer.” His glanced at my mouth, and I felt like I was ready to vibrate out of my skin. “Please let me know when you know what you want. Because I already do.”

His intense gaze dropped to my lips again, and I held my breath. It looked like he wanted to kiss me… Was he going to kiss me?

*No.*

In the end, he squeezed my hand one last time, turned around, and walked away.

My skin tingled where he’d touched me. It felt like everybody was watching us, but I knew that couldn’t be true. I looked around, suddenly feeling trapped, like I was suffocating. When I hurried toward the terrace, the music started again, and I was suddenly blocked by a sea of dancing couples.

I had to work my way around the ballroom, with Lilac’s words echoing in my head.

*If you’re having doubts, you’re the one who’s going to have to figure things out.*

Why couldn’t I just *trust* what Lilac told me? Why was I so consumed by insecurity and fear? I knew I loved him, and he loved me, but what if…

What if he stayed with me now, only to leave me in the future?

I knew the feeling of being left behind very well. I’d spent years trapped in Bert’s house marinating over it. But Lilac was Lilac, and I knew him, and I knew how amazing we were together. The only thing standing in our way was the fact that I wasn’t his mate.

Someone else was.

And then that someone appeared before me, just as I approached he terrace.

“Marta, hi,” Perrie said. “Are you having a good time?”

It took me a second to swallow the sob I felt building inside. Of course I would literally run into Lilac’s mate.

I hadn’t even managed to reply to her first question before Perrie looked around and asked, “Are you here with your boyfriend?”

# Episode 3386

**Xavier**

“The suit’s collar is driving me nuts,” I said, rubbing my nape. “It’s chafing the back of my neck. What kind of fabric is this?”

Cali looked amused. “Maybe your skin is rejecting it because it belongs to Lucian. You’re probably allergic to him, not the fabric.”

I barked out a laugh. “Must be both.”

She grinned up at me, leaning closer. We’d been dancing for a while now. I was having the best time, holding Cali, breathing in her scent, kissing her neck or cheek whenever I felt like it. She was wearing a dress that covered up her shoulders. I wished I could take a peek, see if getting rid of the ashes had taken care of the handprint. Would it remain like a scar and simply fade over time?

I didn’t want to ask. Cali was in such a good mood that I wasn’t going to risk ruining this night for her. I took pride in knowing that I was the reason why she looked so carefree, so relieved. She was glowing, and it was all because of me.

Sure, my brother might have had his heroic moments, particularly when he’d slid across the ice and into the lake to save the ashes, but *I* had made sure the ashes were delivered to the demon world. I wasn’t going to let him forget that. Yes, Adéluce and my past had come back to haunt me, but I’d fixed things for Cali. I would do anything for her.

And again, *I* was the hero of the hour.

“Why are you smiling like that?” Cali asked.

I had to stop myself from doing something crass, like squeezing Cali’s ass in the middle of the dance floor. She’d probably squeal and turn tomato red.

“I’m just glad to be here with you, having a good time…” I glanced around, snorting. “Though I have to admit, I was initially less than thrilled when you texted me about coming to the palace for New Year’s. It seems like we just can’t rid ourselves of Lucian.” I paused. “Remind me again why I can’t kill him?”

Cali rolled her eyes. “*Xavier!*”

“What?”

She wrapped her arms around my neck, smiling up at me. “None of that matters right now. We can just ignore Lucian and enjoy our time together.”

I agreed, glancing at her full lips. “And I think we should try to enjoy it even more…”

I dipped my head and kissed my mate. The feel of her mouth on mine reminded me why I was willing to die to protect her, why I’d go to the ends of the fucking earth if it meant her being mine.

“I love you completely,” I whispered against her mouth. She melted into me, sighing. Her scent made goosebumps rise across my skin. There was a connection I felt with Cali—not just the mate bond. It was a connection I knew I’d never share with anyone else.

“I love you too,” she whispered back, her fingertips tracing my jawline. “I’m so grateful for you.”

Her words and the way she looked at me did funny things to my stomach. To my heart. I kept her close, our bodies pressed together as we swayed to the music. The rest of couples swirled past us, following the tempo while Cali and I followed our own beat, just looking at each other and smiling.

I’d never felt like this before. Not even when I’d been mated to Ava.

And I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Cali was all I could ever need.

“Cali, Xavier, hi!” Torin’s voice startled me, and I turned to see him rushing toward us, his eyes wide with alarm. Cali and I stopped dancing, moving to the side as Torin skidded into place beside us. “Sorry to interrupt, but I can’t find Tom! He’s supposed to help me carry the cake!”

Cali shook her head. “I haven’t spoken to my dad since we arrived.”

I looked around, scanning the room quickly. There were a million scents in here, but Cali’s dad was Cali’s dad, and I could spot him more easily than others. I finally found him, talking animatedly with one of the Blue Blood pack members on the other side of the room.

“He’s over there,” I told Torin. “By the chocolate fountain.”

Torin perked up, whirling around. “Yes, there he is!” Dashing away, Torin called over his shoulder, “Thank you, Xavier!”

I turned to Cali. Her expression was fond as she watched Torin go.

“They baked a cake?” I asked her, eyebrows raised.

“Why wouldn’t they?” she asked, grinning.

I squinted. “Is there such a thing as New Year’s Eve cake?”

“I am my father’s daughter, and I believe that every holiday should have a cake,” Cali declared officially.

I snorted. “I’m a little confused, though—wasn’t Torin planning a big party for today?”

“He was, yes,” Cali said, “and we were originally going to have two parties. But Lola told me that Torin is having so much fun here that he’s agreed to put it off until tomorrow. Sort of a New Year’s Eve afterparty.”

“Right,” I said wryly, looking around for more Redwoods. Sage and Zainab were giggling and pouring themselves champagne just a few feet away from Cali and me. They’d probably snatched the whole bottle from the bar. “I’m not sure the pack is going to be in much of a partying mood tomorrow,” I said. “There’s a lot of drinking going on.”

Cali snorted. “I thought werewolves didn’t get drunk so easily.”

“We can take a lot, but we still get hangovers.”

“It’ll be fine.” Cali smirked, linking her arm with mine as Gabe and Mikah swirled past.

“Dude, this is so much fun!” Gabe called at me, and I grinned.

“They are *so* cute,” Cali said with a sigh, watching Gabe and Mikah dancing and laughing. It was so weird to see the normally stoic vampire looking so happy, and I was glad for Gabe.

“The two of them work, in a weird way,” I said. “I think Mikah’s actually knocking some sense into my buddy.”

Cali chuckled. “I’m sure they balance each other out perfectly. The Redwood pack has so many opposites-attract couples.”

“Sure,” I said. “Though I still have a hard time placing someone as kind and sensitive as Mrs. Smith with someone as gruff as Big Mac.”

“Oh, please,” Cali said, “Big Mac definitely has a soft side! She just never shows it to us.” Cali shot me a sly look. “Kind of like you and me. You’re rough around the edges, but so gooey for me.”

I gasped in mock offense and pulled her in, twirling her in my arms before dipping her dramatically. She was laughing and clinging to me when the music stopped and Lucian’s loud voice ruined the moment.

“I have another announcement to make, dear friends!” Lucian bellowed. Elle was standing next to him, looking very civilized in a green dress that worked nicely with her red hair. She was staring at the princeling with a huge-ass smile on her face.

I frowned. That was weird.

“I have been made aware that the Redwood pack has brought a cake here tonight in my honor,” Lucian declared, smoothing his hair back and straightening his jacket.

“I thought it was supposed to be a New Year’s cake,” I told Cali.

“Eh, it is.” Cali shrugged. “But you know Lucian.”

The dancers separated as Tom and Torin brought out a large, frosted, three-tiered cake. Okay, that was fucking impressive. Others seemed to agree—there were lots of *ooh*s and *aah*s as they set it down on a table. Nevertheless, I wasn’t in the mood for cake, as amazing as it looked. Something about washing it down with beer wasn’t very appealing.

Across the room, Gabe glanced at his own beer, then at the cake. Then he met my gaze, arching his eyebrows. I was certain that we were thinking the same thing.

“Lucian! I mean sir, or, uh—whatever, here’s the cake,” Torin blurted out, bowing to the princeling. My stomach turned. I was going to have a talk with Torin about bowing to assholes.

After Lucian offered him a pleased nod and a regal smile—disgusting—Torin skedaddled and came to stand next to Cali and me.

“The cake looks amazing,” Cali said, patting Torin’s shoulder.

“I’m nervous, though,” Torin whispered. “What if Lucian hates it?”

“Then we’ll have another pack war,” I joked.

Torin’s eyes went wide before he noticed my smirk.

“Xavier, don’t tease Torin,” Cali said sternly. I wanted to laugh as she put a comforting hand on Torin’s arm and added, “Don’t worry—I’m sure Lucian will love it.”

I hoped it had poison in it. That would be nice.

“Ah, thank you,” Lucian was saying as an attendant offered him a slice of the cake. He picked up his fork, made a big show out of taking a bite… and frowned.

With a glare, he looked up at his attendants.

“Didn’t I say that no magic was allowed on this estate?” He turned to us and pointed at Torin. “Bring me that Fae!”

# Episode 3387

I stood there, stunned by Lucian’s outburst. I could sense tension spreading through the crowd of guests. Seriously, this made no fucking sense.

“I was joking when I mentioned a pack war,” Xavier whispered in my ear, “but now I’m not so sure it was just a joke…” I looked up at him when he added, “Come stand behind me. I’m not going to let you get caught up in any of Lucian’s bullshit.”

“Fuck that,” I said under my breath with a huff, pulling a frazzled Torin closer to me. “I’m not going to put up with Lucian’s crap either.”

*How DARE Lucian threaten someone as sweet as Torin? Unbelievable!*

And yet it was actually totally believable, because Lucian had a history of doing whatever popped into his massive, pompous head. Not on my watch, though. I hadn’t killed Seluna and kicked Odette’s ass to be intimidated by Lucian. Those days were over.

“Stay close to me,” I whispered to Torin as two grave-looking guards approached our party.

“You two had better stop, if you know what’s good for you,” Xavier snapped at the guards.

Lucian scoffed and strutted over, pointing at Torin accusingly. “It is you who baked this cake, is it not?”

From my left, I heard my father’s loud voice. “We baked the cake together, if you want to blame someone for anything.”

Lucian paused, peering at my dad’s solemn face with confusion. “But… you’re not Fae.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Xavier asked sharply.

“I need to know everything there is to know about this thing!” Lucian flailed a hand toward the plate he’d been holding. The cake looked so innocent and pink. “You!” He pointed at Torin again. “Did you use Fae magic to create this cake?”

Torin shook his head vehemently. “No. Tom and I did it the hard way. We baked it from scratch!”

“That is impossible,” Lucian declared, glaring at the plate. “This cake tastes magical!”

“If Torin says that he didn’t use magic, then he didn’t use magic, Lucian,” I said firmly. “He’s a very honest person, and he’s practiced a lot and become a gifted cook. You should respect that.”

Lucian stared at me for a moment, his brow furrowed. He took another bite of the cake and let out a groan, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. “By the gods, this is one of the most delicious things I’ve ever tasted.”

I felt Torin relax next to me. Poor man—he needed to be protected at all costs!

“I could provide you with the recipe, if you’d like,” he told Lucian helpfully.

Lucian frowned. “No. I don’t perform such mundane chores, and my chef has clearly proven himself to be inadequate. I believe it would be best if you, Torin the Fae, became the official Vanguard baker.”

I gasped*. Oh, hell no!*

Torin blinked in shock. “Uh, I’m not sure…”

“Whatever the Redwoods are paying you, I shall triple it,” Lucian said, staring at Torin intensely.

“The Redwoods aren’t paying me,” Torin said sheepishly. “They just love me very much. And of course, Xavier always lets me buy anything I want on his credit card.”

Xavier’s face was unreadable. “Torin likes diamonds and sparkly things.”

I ignored Xavier and said, “Of course we love you, Torin. In fact, you’re one of my best friends.”

I gripped his arm tighter as Torin told Lucian, “I’m flattered, but I’m very happy with the Redwood pack.”

Lucian scowled, looking between Xavier, Torin, and me. His face started to get a bit red, and I knew from experience that the princeling—as my mates called Lucian—was like a toddler. He wasn’t used to being told no.

“Perhaps Torin can make the occasional cake for you, for special occasions,” I said, trying to smooth things over. “Will that be okay?”

Lucian paused, clearly pondering. “That might work…”

“And of course a man of your standing would compensate Torin for his labor each and every time, right?” I asked sweetly. I knew I was pushing it, but the idea of Torin baking a cake for Lucian for free whenever the hell Lucian felt like it made me sick to my stomach.

*We’re* not *supposed to feed the goddamn billionaire for free!*

“Of course,” Lucian agreed immediately, so at least there was that. He eyed Torin and let out a sigh. “Though I would still like to have a royal baker who could rival Torin’s expertise. I vow not to rest until I find them!”

I squeezed Torin’s hand and said, “Good luck with that!”

Lucian smiled again and clapped his hands. “Anyhow, everyone, go enjoy the cake!”

Lucian trailed off with Elle weirdly following him, and the crowd moved in toward the cake table.

“Thank you for that, Cali,” Torin told me with a sigh of relief.

I kissed his cheek. “Of course! That’s what friends are for.”

Torin gave me a wide smile before grabbing my dad and walking over to eat a slice of the cake they’d made.

Xavier nudged me. “How you handled Lucian—that was very diplomatic of you.”

“I know,” I said, realization dawning. *Greyson would be proud*, I thought. Looking around, I frowned. *Where* is *Greyson, actually?*

“Lucian really pushed it, there,” Xavier said. “I would’ve punched him if you hadn’t stepped in.”

“I had to do something. Nobody’s going to bully Torin on my watch,” I said.

Xavier nodded. “I like the pack mentality—all for one and one for all and all that.”

Jay walked over right then, grinning from ear to ear as he ate his cake. “Goddamn, this is really delicious.”

Xavier eyed Jay worriedly. “Just make sure not to stain that jacket with frosting.”

I smirked at Xavier. “What about the ‘all for one and one for all’ thing, Xavier?”

“Don’t bring my jacket into that,” Xavier said. I laughed.

Jay rolled his eye at his friend’s antics. “Anyway, I wanted to know when we were going to leave.”

“Why?” I asked. “It’s not even midnight yet, and Torin agreed to put off his party until tomorrow.”

“I know that, but I really don’t think we should stay,” Jay said. He looked shifty.

“Does Lola agree with that?” I asked, looking over at her. She was laughing with Jacs by the bar. “She seems to be having a good time.”

Jay sighed. “You don’t understand—if I don’t get home, the spell that Kira used to make Xavier’s jacket fit me is going to wear off, and then I’ll look like a creep in a too-big jacket!”

Xavier burst out laughing. “So you’re like Jay-erella?”

Jay blushed, and I smacked Xavier’s arm playfully. “Xavier, don’t be mean to your friend!”

“But it’s true!” Xavier said, still laughing.

“Why don’t we ask Kira to do another spell?” I asked Jay.

Jay looked to the side. I followed his line of sight to see Kira with Sage and Zainab, all three of them giggling while drinking champagne. “She’s too drunk to perform any magic,” Jay said. “She’d probably glue the jacket to me or something.”

“Yeah, we don’t want that,” Xavier said, instantly sobering up.

I had an idea. “Lucian has dressing rooms all around the house with a vast selection of clothing for his werewolf guests, who tend to tear their clothes when they shift. I’m sure you can borrow one of those jackets.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea, thank you!” Jay nodded emphatically. “I’m going to talk to Lucian right now, before the jacket changes on me.”

As Jay rushed away, Greyson arrived. I was about to ask him where he’d been, but his worried expression made me pause. “Has anyone seen Elle?”

I looked over—Elle was by the cake station. “She’s just having dessert. She seems to be having a good time.” I eyed Greyson. “Did something happen?”

“She was with Lucian earlier,” Xavier spoke up. “Do you know what’s up with that?”

Greyson glanced between us, and I didn’t like how serious he looked. “Aysel told me that Lucian is interested in Elle. I hope that’s just about her being new to the pack, but…”

Xavier’s expression darkened. “As far as I’m concerned, Lucian taking an interest in someone is never a good sign. I mean, his obsession with Cali and the *due destini* didn’t end well, as we all remember. Who knows what he’d do if he found out about Elle’s… *background*?”

My stomach dropped.

*Maybe Greyson is right to worry about Elle…*

“I still can’t remember why the fuck we haven’t killed Lucian yet,” Xavier said with a scowl.

“Politics,” Greyson deadpanned, then added, “We have to keep Lucian and Elle separated.”

Xavier nodded. “I agree. We should just drag her away from him and tell her to never speak to him again.”

Greyson scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous, Xavier. That’ll only make her want to hang out with him even more—the allure of the forbidden or whatever bullshit.”

“Cali!” Lola’s voice came from my right, and I turned to see her strutting over, a drink in each hand. “Hi, I need to talk to you.”

I glanced at Xavier and Greyson, who were still arguing in hushed tones. I wanted to stay with them and strategize, rather than get sucked into whatever dramatic thing Lola had in mind.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “We’re kind of busy here.”

Lola shot a pointed look at Greyson and Xavier, her eyebrows arched. “It’s girl talk.”

She said the words in a way that made me realize there was more to this than met the eye. I sighed in defeat. “Okay, fine.”

Lola pulled me away.

“I’ll be right back,” I called back to the boys.

My mates nodded before continuing to whisper-hiss at each other. This whole thing with Elle seemed to have really riled them up, and I definitely understood why. Even if Lucian had calmed down, we couldn’t trust him.

“Have you noticed anything between Elle and Lucian?” I asked Lola as she led me toward the bar.

Lola scrunched up her face in disgust. “That’s gross—why would you even ask that? Lucian is so… *yuck*.”

I decided not to talk to Lola about this before my mates had settled on a solution.

“Never mind,” I said. “Now, what was so important that you had to pull me away?”

Lola stopped right in front of Jacs, who eyed me with a smirk. Her expression spelled out trouble, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“Jacs,” I said carefully. “What’s going on?”

“Jacs and I made a bet,” Lola announced.

“About what?” I asked cautiously.

Jacs’s smile turned into a shit-eating grin. “Who are you going to kiss at midnight, Greyson or Xavier?”

# Episode 3388

**Greyson**

“You know what?” Xavier huffed. “I refuse to get involved in Elle’s problems.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Didn’t you just agree with me that she needs to be protected from Lucian?”

“That was before you rejected my idea of just ordering her to stay the fuck away from him and getting this over with,” Xavier declared.

“And I told you that *ordering* her to do anything would backfire like a goddamn—”

“You know what?” Xavier interrupted. Because he obviously wanted me to beat his ass. “It’s New Year’s Eve,” he said, “and I just came back from a trip to the demon world portal—I want to enjoy myself. This is a party, not kindergarten, and I’m nobody’s fucking babysitter.”

Xavier was nobody’s babysitter, but he sure acted like a toddler.

“I’m not asking you to watch Elle,” I said patiently. “I could just use some help keeping Lucian away from her and vice versa during the party. Subtly, so as not to start a pack war out of nowhere.”

Xavier scoffed. “I don’t *do* subtle, brother. I would never—”

“Lucian being interested in Elle, in any capacity, is not a thing we want to encourage,” I snapped. “As you pointed out earlier, the last time the princeling expressed an interest in someone, Cali got mixed up with a demon.”

Xavier fell silent, his expression grave. Shaking his head, he finished the last of his beer in one huge gulp. “I’m done talking about this. I’ll go get another beer and kiss my mate on the dance floor.”

I gritted my teeth. What do you know, that was exactly what *I’d* been planning to do before Xavier had arrived.

“The point is, Greyson”—of *course* Xavier was still talking while I contemplated violence— “you’re the one who turned Elle. She’s your problem, not mine. After all, you’re the Alpha.”

Before I could tell Xavier that I might have been the Alpha, but we were still a pack, and *he’d* make a shitty Alpha for not recognizing that, he sauntered away. I took a deep breath, telling myself that this was for the best. I didn’t need Xavier’s bullshit, and I definitely didn’t need to be reminded that Elle was my responsibility.

My gamble had helped us rid ourselves of LIPS, but Elle was more than a tool. She was a member of our pack, and I had to make sure she was safe. I considered talking to Lucian, warning him to stay away—even if Lucian rarely listened to anyone’s advice, I had to set some ground rules there.

Before Lucian, though, I needed to speak to Elle. I wouldn’t *order* her to do anything; I would just try to figure out what was going on in her head and reason with her. Firmly. If anything, she looked up to me, so in theory she would at least want to hear what I had to say.

I looked around for Elle and spotted her with Torin, by the food tables.

“The food is fine, but Tom had a much better menu,” Torin grumbled as I arrived.

Elle shrugged and put down her partially eaten cake. “I want meat, not cake.”

Torin frowned while Elle grabbed another plate and started piling it up. “Elle,” he said, in a tone that reminded me of Cali’s dad, “you have to add some vegetables to that. Your diet cannot consist of meat alone.”

Elle actually rolled her eyes—she must’ve picked that up from Lola or, even worse, Jacqueline. Before she could say anything to Torin, I stepped in. “Hey, you two. Are you having a good time, Elle?”

Elle looked up at me and spoke as if she was giving me an official report. “The palace is pretty but too big. Not good for a pack—too hard to protect.”

Her observation was smart, actually. Then she followed it up by stuffing a very large piece of grilled meat into her mouth with a fork. At least she was using cutlery.

“You know,” I said, “when you’re human, it’s best if you slow down and chew your food. I’m pretty sure Lucian has enough for everyone.”

“That’s true,” Torin said under his breath, wrinkling his nose as he eyed the buffet. “Plenty of food, all of it mediocre.”

Torin’s disdain would’ve been amusing under other circumstances, but right now, I had other shit to deal with. As the Fae took a few steps to the side to further examine the not-so-delicacies, in his opinion, I turned to Elle again.

“I agree about the palace being too big,” I said. “How was the tour that Lucian gave you?”

Elle shrugged. “The tour was okay. Lots of rooms. Too many paintings of Lucian not wearing his clothes right—they’re always falling off.”

I pressed my lips together and fought to sound nonchalant. “Did Lucian, uh, do anything odd while you two were alone?”

Elle snorted. “He *is* odd.”

Feeling antsy, I asked, “What do you think about him in general?”

“He’s very pretty,” she said right away. Then she seemed to catch herself, and she added, “But he talks too much about himself.”

I allowed myself a laugh. Elle really was far more observant and astute than people—myself included—gave her credit for. Nevertheless, I still had to keep an eye out, here.

“Apart from him being pretty,” I said, “is there anything else about him that you like?”

Elle paused her chewing. Then she swallowed her mouthful and said, “The only reason I went on the tour was because my Alpha wants the Vanguard pack to be friends with the Redwood pack.”

I blinked in shock. “So you went with him… for me?”

Elle nodded, her face serious. Well, then. Who would’ve thought that Elle’s diplomatic chops were so sharp? I couldn’t imagine Lola or Kira or Jacqueline tolerating Lucian just for my benefit.

“Thank you for your help,” I told Elle, “but I think you’ve already done more than enough for the Redwood pack. I feel that it would be best if you avoided Lucian for the rest of the night. How do you feel about that?”

I was *really* trying not to make this sound like an order, because I really didn’t want to provoke a rebellious side of Elle. Thankfully, it worked, and Elle didn’t seem peeved.

“Sounds good,” she said with a shrug, piling more food onto her plate.

I was both impressed and pleasantly surprised that this had been so simple. Before I could say another word, though, Lucian was sauntering over with a massive man in tow.

“Greyson and Elle!” Lucian said with his usual flourish. “Let me introduce you all to my new right-hand man, Armin.”

This had to be Andre’s replacement—an unenviable position, if ever there was one. This guy was even bigger than Andre, but Elle didn’t seem intimidated at all. She stared at Armin’s hands and said, “What does right-hand man mean? He has both right and left hands.”

Lucian laughed—a little too much. “Oh, dear. She’s just adorable.”

Elle glared up at Lucian. Her voice sounded more like a growl when she said, “I’m not *adorable*.” She emphasized that by tearing at a piece of meat with her teeth.

The positively furious look she was giving him made me feel really good about my whole keep-Elle-away-from-Lucian plan.

“Torin,” I said, looking over my shoulder, where Torin was still internally judging the food. “Could you please take Elle to the bar and get her something nonalcoholic to drink?”

Elle left with Torin, but not before she shot Lucian one last glare.

“Oh, dear. I didn’t expect Elle to snap like that, just because I complimented her,” Lucian said with a chuckle once she was gone. “She’s such a spitfire; I love it!”

“Elle is still getting used to being social,” I said. “You know, as a former Rogue. So she might misinterpret your compliments and take them the wrong way, Lucian.”

He snorted. “Ah, she’ll get used to them.”

My tone was even. “Or you can keep your comments about her to yourself. That’s always an option.”

Lucian snorted, exchanging a look with Armin. “Oh, come on, I think you’re exaggerating now! Elle is fine—no harm, no foul.”

“I believe you should steer clear from her for the time being. I don’t think there’s a reason to risk upsetting her,” I told Lucian in a mild tone.

He laughed, sharing another look with Armin. “You must be joking!”

“I’m not,” I said. I didn’t smile. I just stared at Lucian and said, “Elle is not going to become another Cali—someone for you to obsess over and play with.”

Lucian raised his eyebrows. Patting me on the back, he said, “Whatever, Alpha.”

It took everything I had not to attack right then and there. In a low voice, I said, “Remember when you were depressed, Lucian, because your demon mistress never loved you? I spared your life then, even after you endangered my mate. One could say that you owe me. Or am I wrong?”

Lucian’s eyes darkened. He looked to my side. I followed his gaze to see Ava. Nodding toward her, he changed the subject. “I understand the new Samara Alpha isn’t working out so well.”

“Zeke is just a temporary Alpha,” I clarified.

Lucian shrugged. “Since the Samaras don’t have a true leader, they’re not much of an ally.”

I eyed him. “Where are you going with this?”

Lucian turned to face me. “I’m going to invite the Samara pack to disband and join the Vanguard pack.”

# Episode 3389

I stood there, frozen for a moment. I couldn’t believe that Lola and Jacs would make a bet about who I was going to kiss at midnight. Well, I wasn’t surprised that Jacs would do it—she was mean like that—but Lola was my *friend*. Nay, my best friend!

“Lola,” I said, feeling a little shaky. “You know all about the horrible position I’ve been put in with the *due destini*—why would you even bring up something like this?”

Lola shook her head, patting my shoulder. “I’m trying to prove a point here!” She shot Jacs a look and added, “I told Jacs that you won’t kiss either of them, but she won’t believe me!”

Jacs rolled her eyes. “That’s too easy. I have my money on Xavier. He just risked his life to deliver those ashes, and I saw the two of you kiss at Christmas and it seemed…” She raised an eyebrow. “Very intense.”

The way Jacs was looking at me, full of meaning and sass, had me feeling all flustered. I refused to get into this with her, though. In fact, I didn’t want to get into it at all, and frankly, this whole thing was making me anxious. I didn’t want my night to be ruined—I’d been so happy only moments ago.

*Bring that feeling back, dammit!*

“I’m not sure how this is any of your business, Jacqueline. I don’t feel comfortable discussing it with you,” I told the vampire. “As for you, Lola—”

“You have to hide,” Lola blurted.

I frowned. “What?”

“I’m really just trying to help here,” Lola rushed to say. “I think the only way to get out of this painlessly will be to get ‘lost’ when the clock strikes midnight.” She waved a hand. “Like, make yourself invisible. That way, you won’t have to make a choice.”

Lola looked like she’d just given me the key to the entire universe. I shot her a flat look. “Lola. I’m a Fae, not a witch. I can’t just cast an invisibility spell.”

Lola gave me a flat look of her own. “I mean, like, go hide in the bathroom or something, so you can avoid kissing anyone.”

I paused. “Okay, that makes more sense. And it *is* kind of genius.”

“See?” Lola said enthusiastically, pointing at me while turning to Jacs. “Cali agrees with me!”

Jacs huffed. “Oh, please, that’s cheating!”

I frowned at Jacs. “I don’t think you fully understand the seriousness of the *due destini*. It is literally a curse. I’m not playing games with it.”

Jacs snorted, waving me off. “Whatever—I’m sticking to my original theory. You will kiss Xavier, at midnight, on the dance floor. And then you’ll deal with the consequences, I guess.”

Lola crossed her arms over her chest. “Jacs, stop being so insensitive!”

“I’m a vampire,” Jacs told Lola dryly, as if that explained everything.

I shook my head and took a deep breath. “If you two are done talking about my life like it’s a reality TV show, I’m going to go.”

I excused myself after Lola hugged me and offered some words of encouragement. Jacs, of course, didn’t stop acting like an asshole—not because she was a vampire, but because that was just her. Mikah was a vampire too, but he was actually very empathetic, thank you very much.

As I walked away, I scanned the crowd for my mates. Xavier was talking to Jay, while Greyson was occupied with Lucian. I thought about what Lola had said—her point hadn’t been half-bad, actually.

*If they don’t see me at midnight, I won’t have to make a choice about who to kiss. Problem solved!*

Well, not really, because my mates would wonder where I was. And we *were* in Lucian’s palace, so they’d probably assume the worst and accidentally start a war or something. Perhaps the smartest decision here would be to explain my problem to Xavier and Greyson. They’d probably understand. Or not. Like, I was sure Greyson would understand, but Xavier was always a wild card.

“Cali?” Torin’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts. He held my arm gently and asked, “What’s going on? Why do you look so stressed out?”

I quickly told Torin about the kissing situation.

“I know it’s silly,” I rushed to add.

Torin sighed longingly. “Well, at least you have options and a choice. I wish Kevin was here.”

“Hah, but that’s exactly what I’m saying!” I shook my head. “I don’t *want* to have a choice. I can’t make a choice—not only would it not be fair, but I could kill one of my mates!”

Torin looked confused. “Wait, what? I thought that problem was over. Didn’t Big Mac tell you?”

The memory popped into my head, and my stomach twitched with anxiety. “Big Mac knows whether or not the killing curse is over. She asked me if I wanted to know the truth, and I said I didn’t.”

Torin sighed. “Cali…”

“I know, I know,” I said, groaning. “But knowing for sure would just force my hand, and I don’t want that—it would mean *not* choosing one of the two men I love.”

Torin winced. “I’m sorry, but it sounds… It sounds a little bit like you’re in denial.”

“I suppose so,” I whispered. “The whole Seluna thing was a fucking nightmare, but at least while that was going on, I wasn’t thinking about the *due destini* and making a choice that will cause so much heartache.”

Torin rubbed my arm, his gaze gentle on me. “I wish your problem was something I could heal.”

“I wish that too,” I said. My voice cracked, tumbling over the lump in my throat.

*Cali, no!* I told myself. *It’s New Year’s Eve, and you just survived Seluna! You’re NOT allowed to cry!*

“I’m just tired of everyone judging me,” I murmured.

Torin huffed. “Ignore them. Sure, I didn’t understand the *due destini* either in the beginning, but I’ve seen what you’ve been going through, and I know how difficult it is.” He pulled me into a fierce hug. In my ear, he murmured, “Forget about everyone else, and don’t let that stupid curse spoil your New Year’s Eve. Okay?”

I smiled up at him, sniffling like a dork. “Okay.”

His eyebrows arched, and he looked around. “Though I still think my party would have been more fun. Have you tried the calamari here?” He made a face. “Too soggy.”

I laughed. “Torin, you’ve become such a tough food critic!”

Torin’s expression turned serious. “Food is my passion, and I know what I’m about.”

Grinning, I leaned up to kiss his cheek. “Thank you for listening to me.”

“Of course,” he said, smiling again. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go see if the guests have already eaten all of my delicious cake. I also need to discuss our future baking strategy with your father.”

I nodded and told him I’d go get myself something to drink. Feeling much better about everything—Torin was just so nice! People should be more like Torin! *I’m talking about you, Jacs*—I headed over to the bar.

Elle was there, looking lovely in her green dress, grabbing something that looked like pink wine with a very satisfied expression on her face.

*Oh, that looks kind of good!*

I’d only had a sip of my drink earlier—I liked wine more than any other type of alcohol—so I decided to ask for a rosé when it was my turn.

“Coming right up,” the bartender told me pleasantly before his gaze flicked to my side and widened. I followed his line of sight to see Ava.

Of course.

How could any living, breathing organism NOT notice her when her spectacular cleavage could’ve been seen from outer space while she was wearing that dress?

*This is so great, ha ha ha!*

I was not laughing.

Ava and I exchanged a look, and I cleared my throat. “Hey.”

Her face betrayed nothing. “Hi.” Pause. “Scotch, on the rocks,” she told the bartender.

We both stood there awkwardly after that delightful exchange. She wouldn’t even look at me, which made me feel some type of way. A *ragey* type of way, given our little bathroom incident with Xavier, earlier.

As it turned out, anger gave me courage, so I spoke first.

“You know,” I said in a low voice, “if you really only wanted to talk to Xavier, you would’ve knocked.”

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. “Excuse me?”

I turned to face her fully and doubled down. “You acted like I was paranoid to call you out earlier. But if you just wanted to talk to Xavier, you could’ve knocked. You didn’t need to go into the bathroom while he was showering and naked to give him a towel. He’s perfectly capable of getting himself a towel. You could’ve waited.”

Ava mirrored my position, finally facing me. Cocking her pretty little head, she said, “I wasn’t aware that Xavier had any objections.”

I scoffed. “Um, Xavier didn’t seem happy, did he? Next time, just knock. It’s not that hard.”

The bartender placed my drink in front of me. I thanked him and picked it up, taking a sip just as he brought Ava her drink as well. I felt her eyes burning holes into the side of my face.

And then she spoke again. “Are you jealous, Cali?”

# Episode 3390

**Marta**

I didn’t know how to answer Perrie. It wasn’t her business that I, technically, didn’t have a boyfriend anymore. But I shoved down the bitterness and reminded myself that—again, technically—Perrie wasn’t to blame here. In all the stories I’d heard, a mate was a mate. It wasn’t like Perrie had made the bond with Lilac happen.

But no matter how hard I tried, the bitterness remained, and my jealousy didn’t budge. It only grew as I stared at Perrie, because the reason why I wasn’t with Lilac right now was standing right in front of me. But instead of lashing out, I took a step back.

I decided to be honest.

“Lilac and I broke up,” I said.

If I’d expected a little sympathy, I’d been wrong. Perrie simply shrugged. “Too bad.”

When she looked across the room at Lilac, the urge to step in front of her and block her view was intense. But I made myself take a deep breath and remember what Lilac told me. He’d repeatedly assured me that he wasn’t going to let his mate bond with Perrie change anything between us.

Violet, even if she’d loved seeing me with her brother, had been less than optimistic. She would always believe in the power of mates. Ravi had a different take—he believed in the power of love. Love conquered all. If that was true, and if Lilac truly believed what he’d told me, then no matter what, he and I would end up together.

Even if Perrie *was* his mate.

“I hope you don’t mind if I go talk to Lilac?” Perrie asked. She didn’t seem embarrassed or anything. Just perfectly calm. I wanted to tell her that I did not, under any circumstances, want her to speak to him, but at the same time, Lilac had repeatedly reassured me that he would fight the mate bond.

Perhaps I could take this moment to put Lilac’s words and our love to the test. It didn’t feel like I had another choice, anyway. All this uncertainty would drive me mad.

“No problem,” I told Perrie, lying.

I watched as she walked over to Lilac.

Over and over, I told myself, *This is just a test.*

That thought didn’t keep my hands from shaking when I covertly positioned myself in the corner. Standing behind a group of guests, I could see Lilac and Perrie talking. His expression was unreadable, but Perrie seemed… animated. I’d actually never seen her look so animated.

I watched as they spoke, my head pounding, and then suddenly, Perrie took Lilac’s hand.

I stopped breathing.

He looked at their joined hands, and he didn’t stop Perrie from leading him to the dance floor.

I turned my hands into fists, so hard it hurt. The party faded around me—it was just me, watching the two of them sway to the music. Perrie spoke, and Lilac stared at her, and as it turned out, this had only been a good plan in theory.

In practice, it was a huge mistake.

Lilac was talking to her now, and Perrie was smiling, and they were dancing, and I was watching, feeling sick to my stomach.

I took a deep breath, but the sensation didn’t go away. I told myself that this had been sort of my idea. I had told Perrie to go for it. I needed to believe that if Ravi was right, nothing more would happen. Or even if it did, Lilac and I would end up together anyway.

Because true love conquered all.

“Marta.” A familiar deep voice said my name, accompanied by a gentle tap on the shoulder.

I nearly jumped, spinning around. Blinking rapidly, I took in the man before me. My heart was running a mile a minute, like I’d just been caught doing something bad. Or perhaps because I was shocked to see him.

“Okorie, hi,” I said. For some reason, my fisted hands relaxed.

I’d never seen Okorie dressed up like this. His suit was all black; dapper and crisp. He’d always had an air of superiority about him, one that typically made me want to smack him, but right now, it just translated into elegance and regality.

I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed. I could feel eyes on us. A group of women I recognized as members of the Blue Blood pack were staring at him and whispering among themselves. But Okorie only looked at me.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said, tilting his head to the side.

“No, I—” I tucked my hair behind my ear. “I just didn’t know you were coming.”

Okorie’s eyebrows arched. “I got a weird invitation. I don’t even know how Lucian got my information, but I was intrigued.”

“Intrigued?”

He shrugged. “Sure. The last time I was here, I was helping the Redwood pack kill some demons. Returning to the scene of the crime is always interesting, so I thought I’d check it out.” His dark eyes moved from my face, down my dress, then back up to stare into my eyes as he said, “I’m glad I did.”

The way he looked at me made a strange warmth tickle my stomach. This felt… weird. Kind of. I felt a little awkward around Okorie, like I didn’t know what to expect from him. He had been much less of a dick lately. Or, he was still a dick, just in a less dickish way. Or his dickish ways were balanced out by all the good deeds he did, so he seemed like less of a dick as a result.

God, I wasn’t making any sense.

“So, why are you hiding back here?” he said, leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets. “Why aren’t you out there dancing with Lilac?”

Two things hit me at once. One, the realization that I hadn’t thought about Lilac while talking with Okorie for the past couple of minutes. Two, the fact that the warmth I’d been feeling had turned into ice.

“Lilac and I broke up,” I said. My voice was low, weak.

Okorie pursed his lips. He was still leaning against the wall. “I suppose I should tell you I’m sorry to hear that,” he said.

I paused. “Yes?”

“I mean, that’s what a polite person does when someone tells them they broke up with their boyfriend,” Okorie continued in that same strange tone.

I swallowed. “I guess?”

He looked out at the dance floor, spotting Lilac and Perrie. “Oh.” He paused. “Well, that must suck.”

If he really thought that sucked, why did he look so weird? I had no idea how this man’s brain worked.

“Is this your attempt at comforting me?” I asked, genuinely curious.

He smirked. “Obviously. I’m very good at it.”

“You really are such a dick,” I blurted out without thinking.

Instead of getting annoyed, though, Okorie laughed. He was staring at me and smiling in a way that was—*fond*? Was that the right word to describe it? He was so different when he smiled, like a whole other person. It was difficult to look away from him.

This was so *confusing*.

I was struggling to keep my emotions in check. I was obviously upset about Lilac and Perrie dancing, but seeing Okorie right now, like this, had gotten me all jumbled up inside.

Okorie was just distracting. Very distracting.

“Why don’t we dance?” he said, then, his tone gentle as he took my hand.

Sensation shot through me, inexplicable tingles racing down my arm. And then Okorie tugged me closer.

Before I realized it, we were on the dance floor, and Okorie was leading like it was nothing. He knew how to dance, how to hold me just right, and I wanted to tell him he was really good at this, but it felt like I’d swallowed my tongue. I felt disoriented, and when I looked over at Lilac and Perrie, Lilac wasn’t looking at me.

There was a pang of disappointment in my chest.

“So, I actually wanted to talk to you,” Okorie said, and my attention snapped back to him. I was so aware of his grip on my waist, of his large palm and long fingers. The heat and pressure of it was just—*distracting.*

“About what?” I asked, fighting to focus.

“One of the reasons I came to the party tonight was that I was hoping to catch you before I go to San Francisco,” he said. “I have to finish up some paperwork for the witch council.”

His words made my stomach twist for some reason. “How long are you going to be gone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you talked to Dani? Does she know?” I asked. There was an edge to my tone, and I had no idea where the heck it had come from.

Okorie noticed, and he looked puzzled. “Well, yes, of course I was planning on telling Dani.” He paused, staring into my eyes. “But I wanted to tell you first.”

The way he spoke made me think that he’d come all this way to this party to tell me when he could’ve simply called. The thought made my throat dry, and my heart hammered even harder. The music slowed, and Okorie adjusted our position, pulling me closer. My chest brushed against his, but he didn’t move away.

He just moved even closer.

“I hope you don’t mind me coming here to talk to you in person,” he said. He spoke in a low voice, and I…

“I don’t mind,” I said. And that was the truth.

Which made me feel even more confused. Yeah, Okorie could be the worst, but I’d gotten to know him, and I’d seen he was much more than all that judgy sarcasm. My impression of my mentor had changed a lot since we’d first met. A little too much, perhaps.

He had become very, *very* distracting.

But then, his gaze flickered somewhere to the side, and the spell was broken, and I looked over his shoulder to see—

Lilac.

Lilac and Perrie, *kissing*.

I gasped. Okorie paused, pulling back. He sounded concerned. “Marta, is everything okay?”

I felt like I was underwater. I looked up at Okorie, looking into his eyes before my gaze dropped to his mouth.

And then I pulled him into a kiss.

# Episode 3391

**Xavier**

“Oh, shit,” Jay said, looking over at the bar. Cali was there, speaking with Ava. Neither of them looked particularly happy, but that was no surprise. Jay shot me a sideways look. “I wonder what they’re talking about.”

I grunted. “I don’t want to know.”

Jay snorted. “Want to bet it’s all about you?”

I winced. “Being at the same party as my ex is not my ideal New Year’s Eve, let me tell you that.”

Jay patted me on the shoulder, and I suspected that he was right about the girls’ conversation. Cali had been pretty annoyed to find Ava in the bathroom with me. I watched the two of them, trying to listen in, but the bar was too far away, and it was hard to make out what they were saying with all the talking and music. Their expressions told me it was nothing good, though.

“Should I intervene?” I asked Jay.

He shrugged. “I think that would only make things worse right now. Let Cali deal with this—she’s survived far worse than Ava’s bullshit.”

Jay had a point. Cali was kind of a badass, even if she didn’t realize it, so I knew she’d settle things with Ava without me acting like her chaperone.

“Hey, hey!” Gabe blocked my view of the two women, making jazz hands right in my face. I wasn’t even surprised. “Having fun?”

Before either Jay or I could reply, Gabe barreled through, vibrating with excitement as he looked around.

“You know, I gotta hand it to Lucian,” he said, “the guy knows how to throw a party.”

Mikah’s deadpan expression mirrored my own feelings. “I’d expect nothing less from someone so pompous.”

Jay chuckled. “Well, I don’t think I’ve ever been to a New Year’s as fancy as this.”

“It’s not just fancy, it’s also got a good vibe!” Gabe said. Nudging his mate with a wink, he said, “Even Mikah is having fun, and he doesn’t usually like these kinds of events.”

Mikah rolled his eyes. “Please, I can party with the best of them.”

I raised an eyebrow at Mikah. “Even if the crowd is full of werewolves?”

“I’m not worried about werewolves,” Mikah said with a shrug. “Never have been.”

Gabe smirked, throwing an arm over Mikah’s shoulders. “He did invite one of them into his bed and profess his undying love, *so*—”

“So how did the trip to deliver the ashes go?” Mikah asked me, changing the subject.

“Oh, yes!” Gabe said, releasing Mikah, but only slightly. “I want to know about that too. Was the demon world as wicked as everyone says?”

“I didn’t actually go into the demon world,” I clarified. “I came close, but I managed to avoid it.”

“That makes sense,” Mikah said. “If you’d paid it a real visit, you wouldn’t be here celebrating. I’ve dealt with demons before, and the further you stay from them, the better.”

Jay raised his glass. “A toast, then. To no demons!”

We all joined in, our beer bottles—and Mikah’s martini glass—clicking together.

“Hey, do you want to go check out Lucian’s cannon?” Gabe asked, all excited.

“I hate the man, but I really fucking do,” Jay said.

Grateful for a chance to avoid thinking about demons and Ava, I followed the guys out to the courtyard.

“I can’t believe Lucian installed this thing in the palace,” Jay said, eyeing the cannon. “It’s hardly an effective defensive weapon.”

“He didn’t get the cannon to use it,” Mikah said dryly. “He got the cannon because he probably has a small penis and likes to overcompensate by buying macho phallic-shaped objects.”

Jay sputtered, Gabe cackled, and I decided that Mikah wasn’t half-bad company.

“He’ll probably get a rocket next,” I said. “And if we’re lucky, he’ll go to outer space and get stuck there.”

“Amen,” Gabe said, grinning.

“All jokes aside,” Jay said, “if Lucian isn’t careful, he’ll destroy the palace with a few errant shots. He nearly did with Seluna.”

I shrugged. “That’s probably a blessing.” I eyed the cannon. “Maybe we should take a few shots ourselves.”

I imagined blasting holes in some of the palace walls, taking out one or two of Lucian’s ostentatious portraits in the process.

“That is a fucking awesome idea!” Gabe said happily, picking up a cannon ball from a pile. “Does anybody know how this thing works?”

Mikah calmly took the ball from his mate. “No, and we’re not going to find out.”

Gabe pouted, mumbling, “But that would be fun,” just as Jay said, “Hey, what’s that?”

Jay was pointing behind me. I turned to check out the expansive lawn and spotted a group of Vanguard wolves standing near a large, covered object.

I groaned. “Oh god, what does the princeling have planned now?”

“Probably another sculpture of himself,” Gabe joked, striking a bodybuilding pose. “Look at me,” he said in a mock deep voice. “I am Lucian the Cannon-Wielder!”

Everybody laughed, and then Jay struck his own pose, imitating Lucian as well. “My dick is small, but my ego is massive, so here’s another naked statue!”

Just as Gabe struck another pose, and I laughed again, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Still grinning, I turned to see…

My brother.

Great.

“What do you want?” I asked, smile gone.

“I need to speak to you. Right now,” he said seriously.

I scowled. I’d told Greyson that I wanted to enjoy myself tonight, yet here he was, fucking pestering me again. I had no doubt he wanted to talk about Elle or some other pack-related business. I tried to distract him.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “We were just planning to blast a hole in Lucian’s palace. Want to join?”

Greyson didn’t crack a smile. Without another word, he gripped my arm and led me away.

Rolling my eyes, I scoffed. “Seriously, can’t this wait? I was finally having some fun tonight, but apparently you just can’t stop yourself from getting all up in my business!”

“This situation involves you, Xavier,” Greyson said firmly. “I’m worried about Lucian’s plans for the Samara pack.”

My good mood vanished. I had mixed feelings about the Samara pack, mainly because of Ava, but I also didn’t want to see any connection between the princeling and Ava’s pack.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked gruffly.

“Lucian’s talking about absorbing the Samara pack,” Greyson said.

I blinked in shock. Then I laughed. “There’s no way the Samaras would agree to that.”

“I know,” Greyson said. “I think the only reason Lucian is considering it is because of Zeke.”

A knot formed in my stomach.

“Zeke is weak,” Greyson continued. “Lucian knows it, and he’s ready to pounce.”

I couldn’t avoid thinking about Ava right now. She’d worked so hard to pull the Samaras together. The pack was her entire life, sort of like her only mission since she’d come back from the dead. Apart from me, that was.

The knot in my stomach throbbed.

“There’s no way Ava would accept anything Lucian offers,” I said, shaking my head. “She’d rather die than give up her dreams for the Samara pack.”

“Ava has some power over the pack as Nolan’s sister, but it’s limited,” Greyson said. “They picked Zeke to lead because he was the least painful option, but that’s not what a pack needs. They need a true Alpha, and without someone like that, Lucian could find an in.” Greyson looked over at the castle. “And if Lucian somehow succeeds, it will only make the Vanguard pack stronger, which isn’t good for anyone.”

I processed Greyson’s words. He was right, obviously. The last thing Lucian needed was more power. We’d already seen what he could do when he wasn’t restrained.

“I was planning to talk to Zeke again,” I told Greyson, glancing into the distance, where some of the Samaras were standing in a circle. “I was just hoping it could wait until after the party.”

Greyson stared at me, pressing his lips together. “I’d talk to Zeke myself, but you already have a rapport with him and a connection to the Samara pack. I hate to put this on you right after the demon world bullshit, but you’re going to have to talk to Zeke sooner rather than later.”

I snorted bitterly. “You hate to put this on me? Please—I know you just love getting me to do shit for you.”

Greyson glared. “This isn’t about me, Xavier. It’s about the pack. Last time I checked, you were a Redwood wolf.”

I rolled my eyes at his dramatics. I was ready to tell Greyson that talking to Zeke could wait, and he was being a bit too much right now. I wanted to enjoy the party with my friends, with my mate, just have a good time after the whole Seluna-Adéluce-ashes clusterfuck.

“Look, Greyson, I…”

I didn’t finish my sentence. Because just then, Greyson and I spotted Lucian heading straight for Zeke.

# Episode 3392

**Ava**

The compulsion to throw my drink right in Cali’s face was strong, but I pushed it down and fought to keep a strong grip on my glass. Of all the people at this party, Cali was the last one I wanted to talk to.

But I couldn’t just ditch her right now—I had to keep up appearances for the Samaras. Xavier was a key part of helping with that—he had been this whole time—and both Cali and I knew that.

“Well?” I pressed, when Cali just stared at me. “Are you jealous? You’re not a werewolf, but I thought that after hanging out with them for so long, you would’ve realized that a werewolf seeing another werewolf naked doesn’t have to mean anything.”

My tone was condescending, but in reality, I was full of shit. Of course seeing Xavier naked would always mean something to me. In fact, I would’ve liked to have joined him in that shower, but Xavier would’ve been pissed.

Or at least he would’ve tried to be angry rather than admit that he was affected.

Xavier wasn’t all that hard to crack when it came to the physical stuff, though. If we were both naked and I kissed him, he’d crumble. Momentarily, but still. It was a werewolf thing.

Xavier’s current “mate” wasn’t a werewolf, and something about that seemed unfair and wrong. And even though I’d told Cali and Xavier that I didn’t want to cause trouble, I had to admit that I did enjoy stirring the pot a little. There was just something so delicious about watching Cali squirm.

Now, when she finally spoke, it was to lie.

“I’m not jealous at all,” she said with a huff.

“Then stop acting like it,” I said sharply.

“I’m not acting like anything,” Cali declared. “Besides, Xavier’s told me that he’s finished with you. He’s told me that there’s nothing for me to be jealous of.”

Even though Cali wasn’t saying anything I didn’t already know, I was stung by her words. She was throwing the truth in my face, and that hurt.

I forced a smile. “Then why did you get so upset in the bathroom? Why do you keep trying to figure out my feelings about Xavier? Is it because you doubt your mate?”

Cali’s eyes flashed with anger, and she opened her mouth to respond. But before she could, I grabbed my drink and turned my back on her, leaving. There was nothing like abandoning someone in the middle of a heated conversation. I knew Cali—she wouldn’t run after me or make a scene.

That was just the reason why I’d walked away, actually. Our talk had come dangerously close to turning into a fight, and the Samaras wouldn’t have benefited from something like that. I had to focus on my pack above all else.

I’d hoped that Xavier would take me seriously and talk to Zeke, but that didn’t seem to have happened yet. As I headed toward the exit, I heard Zeke laughing sloppily and loudly. He looked drunk, which for a werewolf meant he must’ve been drinking nonstop since we’d arrived. *Fuck*.

“Zeke is proving to be an embarrassment to the Samara pack,” someone said. I turned to see Marissa, her eyes narrowed as she stared at Zeke across the courtyard. She turned to me, her jaw clenched. “Can’t you do something, before he gets even more embarrassing?”

My stomach twitched when I saw Lucian approaching Zeke.

“It might be too late for that,” I said under my breath. Knox had almost started a pack war, and if Zeke said or did the wrong thing right now, he could start one too.

“You need to stop him,” Marissa hissed. I nodded, giving her my drink before starting to walk over.

Before I’d made it six feet, Xavier blocked my way. His expression severe, he muttered, “I got this.”

Just as Lucian reached for Zeke’s shoulder, Xavier swooped in. He took Zeke firmly by the elbow, whisking him away from Lucian. The supposed prince looked miffed, but that was the least of my worries right now.

I shouldn’t have underestimated him, though.

The moment I made a move to follow Zeke and Xavier into the ballroom, Lucian intercepted me. With a smile plastered on his face, he said, “Oh, Ava. I’ve been looking forward to talking with you all night.”

I eyed him carefully. “Why?”

“Well,” Lucian said with a simper, “I suspect because you are someone who appreciates beauty.”

“What gave you that impression?” I asked.

“Why, because you are so beautiful yourself!”

I snorted. “Lucian, please. You know that’s a terrible pickup line.”

Lucian’s eyes flashed with interest. I wasn’t surprised—of course he’d be into a challenge. But either way, I was pretty sure he had ulterior motives for interacting with me right now.

“I’m not saying that to trick you, Ava,” Lucian said. “I’m only being honest.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So you think I’m beautiful. Why?”

Lucian paused. He took me in, head to toe, his gaze greedy. It was nothing new, this look—I’d been appraised like this since I was thirteen.

When our gazes locked again, Lucian said, “In a room filled with people, you radiate, Ava. You stand out. I can sense that we are kindred spirits, that you are someone who understands that beauty isn’t just about how something looks—it’s how it makes you feel.”

What a load of horseshit.

I tilted my head to the side, smiling a little so as not to appear threatening. “What kind of game are you playing, Lucian?”

He chuckled, a deep rumbly sound, and took me gently by the elbow. “Come walk with me.”

Lucian was up to something, and I had to admit, I was curious. What could he possibly want from me?

I let him lead me away, and I made sure to catch Xavier’s eye as we walked past him. Perhaps that would make Xavier just a tiny bit jealous, no matter what he claimed.

As for Lucian, I could handle being alone with him.

I knew when I was being played, being a master of it myself.

“Oh, dear,” Lucian said as we walked by a mirror in the hallway. “My apologies for not complimenting your dress earlier. Your taste is exquisite.”

He said that while staring at my breasts. So yeah, I could believe that he did like this dress.

“Lucian,” I said after he linked his arm with mine, “are you flirting with me?”

He smiled as we kept walking, a lazy stroll by now. “Would that be so bad?”

I chuckled in a way that bordered on condescending, but I knew he’d see it as me being flattered. “Seems like you’ve gotten over Cali and Seluna pretty quickly.”

He waved that off. “Ah, that was just a demonic infatuation.”

Right. Didn’t we all experience those, from time to time?

I kept my thoughts to myself as we entered a room with a fountain and warm lighting. The sound of the water was soothing, and there was pure white marble everywhere.

“This is beautiful,” I said, looking around.

Lucian’s tone was teasing. “But do you find *me* beautiful?”

“You surprise me, Lucian,” I said, toying with him. “Are you so insecure you need to ask?”

He smiled, looking at the running water. “It’s nothing like that—I simply like compliments. I am fully aware that everyone finds me attractive.”

Lucian’s words were very on brand, so I didn’t comment.

He turned to face me, his voice dropping. “Have you ever kissed a prince, Ava?”

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. I’d never believe that this vain man had an ounce of royalty in his blood. Swallowing down the giggle, I said, “I have not.” I paused. “Yet.”

Lucian was playing with me, so I was doing my best to keep up. It was working, because he took a step closer. I had to admit, his eyes were dazzling. In a purely physical way, he was attractive.

He trailed a finger along my cheek, his voice husky. “The Vanguard pack has a lot to offer the Samara pack, Ava. I assume you know that.”

He started to lean toward me, but I moved an inch back, meeting his gaze again. Was he trying to use me for some pack-related thing? Because it sounded like it.

“You said you’ve never kissed a prince,” he murmured, noticing my reticence. “Would you like to try it now?”

I’d never buy into the prince thing, but Lucian was hot, and sex was sex. I was single (ish) with a mate bond that I couldn’t do anything about, and I hadn’t been with anyone in so long. I couldn’t be sure yet what Lucian’s game was, but just like I knew he would try to use me, I could perhaps use him to get to Xavier.

A test, to see if Xavier was really as over me as he claimed.

“Okay,” I whispered, leaning forward.

Lucian’s eyes glowed with triumph.

But just as our lips were about to touch, there was a loud, frantic banging on the door.

# Episode 3393

**Xavier**

There was some commotion and banging going on somewhere in the palace, but I wasn’t paying attention. I’d seen the way Lucian was talking to Ava as he led her out, and the look she’d given me.

Maybe the princeling would prove to be a good enough plaything to make Ava forget all about me. The thought was ridiculous, though—I knew I was fooling myself. Ava and Lucian would never be a good idea, no matter the circumstances.

If he was plotting to win over the Samara pack, Lucian probably intended to use Ava somehow. The princeling was after power in all its forms, and the last thing the Redwood pack needed was more of his bullshit. We didn’t want him to get to the Samara pack. Or Ava.

Lucian had better stay the fuck away from Ava.

There was a bitter taste in my mouth, and I shook my head at myself. I hated it when the bond made me feel this kind of shit. Technically, Ava and I were still mated, so jealousy was like an instinct that I couldn’t ignore. But I should’ve been able to do it—I shouldn’t have fucking felt anything at the sight of Lucian holding Ava’s hand.

I had Cali.

I *loved* Cali.

Perhaps this had less to do with Ava and more to do with Lucian. Of all the men that she could’ve hooked up with, why did she have to go after him? Ava knew how the Redwood pack felt about Lucian, how *I* felt about Lucian. Was she doing this purely to rub it in my face?

Let her rub all she wanted—she’d only regret getting involved with a vain dipshit like Lucian. Then again, Ava was too cunning herself to fall for Lucian’s schemes. Maybe she’d already figured out what Lucian was planning for the Samaras, and she was just playing along to see how she could use the situation to her advantage.

Of course, I could only make assumptions here. Mated or not, I could never read Ava or predict what she’d do next. She was a thorn in my side that way.

“… more whiskey!” I tuned back in to Zeke’s never-ending rambling when he pushed me on the shoulder. He was pointing at a passing waiter, clearly ready to make a beeline for him.

Un-fucking-believable.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked Zeke, pulling him back. “Haven’t you had enough to drink tonight?”

Zeke sputtered. “I—I just want another drink. Isn’t this a party?”

I huffed. “It’s supposed to be a party, but so far, I haven’t been able to enjoy much of it.”

Zeke patted my shoulder, as if consoling me. “More whiskey will solve that.” He finished his sentence by nodding to himself and looking around. When he couldn’t spot the waiter, he turned to the bar, and his eyes widened as if he’d just spotted an oasis.

“There you are,” he said under his breath, ready to step forward.

I grabbed and pulled him backward for the second time. “Didn’t I just fucking tell you that you’ve had enough to drink tonight?”

Zeke actually *whined*. “But, Xavier—”

“Ava told me that you’ve been fucking up,” I said in a low tone, gripping him by the back of the neck to keep him in place. “That you’re losing the respect of the entire Samara pack and you’re threatening to leave. Didn’t we talk about this?”

Zeke opened his mouth to reply, looking forlorn.

*BANG!*

The commotion and banging sounds from the main entrance got even louder, drowning out the sound of the music.

Zeke flinched, his eyes widening in horror. “Oh my god! Are we being attacked? Did Lucian piss off another pack?” He whined. *Again*. “Xavier, I can’t do another battle! Why won’t everybody just fucking chill for a minute? This is ridiculous!”

I just stared at Zeke, trying to wrap my head around what the fuck was happening. Slowly, I said, “I’m not sure what kind of battle you’re talking about. What happened between the Redwoods and the Samaras was nothing more than a scuffle.”

“A scuffle?” Zeke pointed at his chest. “I was afraid for my life the entire time! I can’t deal with a war!”

At this point, I was pretty sure there was nothing I could do to turn Zeke into true Alpha material. The guy just didn’t have it in him.

“The best way to avoid a pack war is to stop acting like a clown,” I told him seriously. “There’s nothing wrong with having a few drinks, but keep your shit together. I can’t imagine how much whiskey you must have drunk to get this wasted.”

Zeke paused before hanging his head. With a sigh, she said, “Sorry. I know you’re right, Xavier. I’ll try to do better.”

I stared at him. “For everybody’s sake, you have to.”

Zeke’s face scrunched up. “You know I never wanted to be Alpha, so—”

I gripped his shoulder tighter, cutting him off. “Quiet down,” I hissed, looking around to make sure nobody had heard. “We don’t want Lucian knowing that.”

Zeke sighed, shaking his head as he flailed his hands. “I don’t know what you want from me! I don’t even have Alpha blood—what do you expect?”

“I expect you to stop making an ass of yourself,” I declared. “At least until we find a permanent Alpha, someone with Alpha blood.”

Zeke huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “We already have someone, someone who would make a far better Alpha than me.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Ava—”

“Ava has Alpha blood, and she’d make a better Alpha than *anyone* in the Samara pack,” Zeke said stubbornly.

“Right,” I said wryly. “Though just about anyone would be a better Alpha than you.”

Zeke pointed at me. “Thank you! That’s what I keep saying!”

Under any other circumstances, I would’ve punched this guy, or simply walked away. But somehow, I’d trapped myself in this situation. I fucking hated everything.

“You know that Ava doesn’t want to be Alpha,” I said sharply. “And you were the one who pointed out that the Samaras have never had a female Alpha because they’re too old-school.”

“Misogynistic is what they are,” Zeke grumbled. “We do not live in the fifties! Women are allowed to be leaders, and men are allowed to—”

“Drink their way to oblivion without any responsibilities?” I asked, eyebrows arched.

Zeke pointed at me again. “Exactly! See, you get me!”

I wondered if this was what Greyson felt like when he had to deal with everybody’s dumb bullshit day in and out without ripping them to shreds. It was horrible.

“Even if the Samaras accepted a female Alpha, in order to be an effective Alpha you have to be willing to fight and die for your pack,” I said, with all the patience I had left. “Ava has made it clear she doesn’t want that responsibility. You agreed to be Alpha out of respect for your friend Hector, but you’re doing a very shitty job of honoring him.”

Zeke looked struck all of a sudden. No, he looked *crestfallen*. He’d better not start fucking crying. Everybody knew I was allergic to man tears.

“I know I’ve let Hector down…” Zeke’s voice cracked. “I’ve let the entire Samara pack down. I…” Zeke sniffled. “I really miss my best friend.”

Aw, shit.

“I understand the way grief works,” I said stiffly. That wasn’t a lie—I did understand grief. I’d been torn apart by it myself. I hated thinking about it. “But right now,” I continued, “you need to remind yourself of what’s at stake. The Samaras have been through a very rough time, and you’re going to have to help them through it. You don’t have to fight a pack war to be their Alpha—just sober up and show a little courage.”

Zeke sniffled. Again. He gave me a sad smile. “That’s what Hector would say.”

Zeke was a moron, but having a dead friend was terrible. Gabe or Jay had better not fucking die before I did, because I’d be furious. I was already mad at the thought.

“Go get something to eat,” I said, pointing at the food table. “That’ll help you sober up.”

Zeke wiped his face with the underside of his shirt and nodded, dragging his feet as he stumbled away. I scowled at his retreating form, feeling pretty annoyed. This party was making me fucking depressed.

I looked around for Jay and Gabe—just to make sure the assholes were still alive and well—but I realized that there were now many more people around. The pounding and commotion from earlier must’ve been caused by a wave of new arrivals.

If all these werewolves got as wasted as Zeke, there really *could* be a pack war.

A thump caught my attention, and I looked up.

A large man I didn’t recognize had hopped up onto a nearby table. He took a huge gulp of whiskey, straight from the bottle. Locking eyes with me, he challenged, “Pack versus pack?”

# Episode 3394

Who the hell was that guy thumping on the table like a stubborn, oversized rabbit? A huge crowd rushed toward him, and I was pushed to the outer edge of the ballroom.

*I don’t like this! Why are there so many people?*

I was starting to feel a teensy bit overwhelmed and claustrophobic when I felt someone grip my elbow. I immediately recognized the touch, the scent, and then I saw him. Greyson, looking at me with searching eyes, and I was so relieved to have him with me.

“Are you okay?” he asked gently, putting a protective arm around me.

“It was just so many people, suddenly,” I muttered. “I know—I’m being ridiculous.”

“Never.” He shook his head, pulling me close.

I locked my arms around his torso and hung there like a koala, because I’d accepted that that was part of my personality. Greyson kissed my cheek, my nose, and when I looked up and pursed my lips, he chuckled and gave me a peck on the lips.

“Better?” he whispered in my ear.

I nodded, because this was actually very nice. I felt like rubbing my entire face against Greyson’s chest. However, that would probably ruin his white shirt with makeup, so I refrained and decided to be normal. For now.

“Who’s the guy on the table calling for some kind of pack competition?”

Greyson studied the man. “I don’t recognize him.”

A that point, a huge, muscled guy popped out of nowhere—how the hell hadn’t I noticed him before?—and leaned over to speak to Greyson.

“That’s Duke,” Mr. Big Guy said. “He’s the Alpha of the Aspen pack, out of Utah.”

*I’ve never even heard of the Aspen pack, and who is this muscley guy?* I mind linked Greyson, frowning.

*That’s Armin*, Greyson replied. *The new Andre.*

I blinked at the big guy. *I can’t believe Lucian found someone even bigger than Andre. Jesus.*

“I’m not familiar with the Aspen pack,” Greyson told Armin calmly. “But based on their Alpha, I’m not very impressed.”

Duke was currently gurgling whiskey and letting it drip down his chin. Armin frowned at Greyson’s words, but he didn’t contradict them.

“… so many games to choose from!” Duke bellowed from the table, still thumping. “Drinking, log throwing, wrestling—”

“What about hide and seek?” someone called from the crowd.

Duke pointed at them. “I love that!”

And then there were more suggestions from the crowd.

“Beer pong!”

“Tree climbing!”

“Food fight!”

The crowd was getting very into this, and I couldn’t believe my ears.

“All these suggestions sound horrible,” I declared.

Greyson snorted. “You took the words right out of my mouth. I can’t help but wonder how a guy like that got invited to one of Lucian’s royal parties.”

Lucian, who’d apparently been lurking by Mr. Big Guy Armin, stepped forward. With an air of formality, he said, “Why, *I* invited Duke.”

I blinked. “Okay. But why?”

Lucian offered a haughty wave of the hand. “Because our families are old friends.” He turned to Duke, offering a nod just as Duke grinned widely and held up the bottle of whiskey in tribute to Lucian. Honestly, *ew*.

“This is actually pretty funny, Lucian,” I said, realization dawning. “You claim to be a prince, and your friend’s name is Duke. Do you have an old girlfriend called Duchess and a BFF called Earl?”

Greyson laughed at my joke—I really was hilarious—but Lucian frowned. The man would fail to see excellence if it hit him over the head with a sledgehammer.

“Duke is simply his name. He’s not royalty like Aysel and me.” He said the words with such disdain that I had to keep myself from rolling my eyes.

*Of course*, I thought. *Lucian thinks so highly of himself that nobody could ever compare.*

“Lu!” Duke called out.

Greyson and I exchanged a look.

“He calls you *Lu*?” Greyson asked.

Lucian scowled. “A childish nickname.”

“Would you prefer another nickname, then? ‘Cece,’ perhaps? May we call you Cece?” Greyson asked casually.

Lucian looked so appalled, I barked out a laugh and covered it with my hand.

“You may *not*,” he declared. “I am Prince Lucian, Alpha of—”

“Lu!” Duke yelled again. “You gonna wrestle me?”

“Excuse me,” Lucian said to Greyson with a long-suffering sigh. He turned to Duke and called, “I will have to decline, old friend. I’m too busy hosting the party, but I’d be happy to offer up my gymnasium.”

Duke pouted like an oversized toddler. *Wow.* “Lu, you’re no fun!”

“And now he’s mad,” Lucian said under his breath, huffing. He eyed me and Greyson. “Would you like to meet him? I bet that would cheer him up.”

“Absolutely not,” Greyson said, just as I said, “The amount of NOPE I feel has reached the heavens.”

But Lucian was already tugging at my hand and saying, “I beg of you, Caliana, dear gracious angel. This is of the utmost importance to me!”

Greyson didn’t let go of me as Lucian pulled me toward Duke. He took my other hand quickly, obviously ready to drag me away.

*It’s fine*, I mind linked before he could intervene. *Duke’s just another asshole we’re going to have to socialize with. Pack politics, right?*

Greyson raised an eyebrow. *Look at you, acting all diplomatic.*

I snorted. *I learned from the best.*

“Lu!” Duke hopped down from the table and dragged Lucian into a hug as we approached. When they broke it off, the man immediately turned to me and set his fiery eyes on my face. “Who’s this?”

Greyson wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me closer. “My mate.”

Greyson’s possessiveness was like a neon sign—red and blinking and honestly pretty hot. But it didn’t seem to discourage Duke in the slightest. He just kept staring at me while Lucian introduced us.

“This is Greyson, Alpha of the Redwood pack, and his mate Caliana.”

Duke grinned toothily. “She’s got the perfect name. It means hot.”

Xavier’s voice cut in. It was sharp. “Caliana means beautiful.”

I looked over to see him sauntering to my side, and all eyes in the group turned to him. I couldn’t blame them—Xavier was very imposing.

Duke shrugged. “Hot and beautiful both work for me.”

Xavier put an arm around my shoulders, scowling at Duke. “I don’t care what works for you.”

I swallowed audibly, feeling like I was being pulled in two directions—Xavier with his arm around my shoulders pulling one way, and Greyson with his arm around my waist pulling the other. The connection made me feel alight. To be touched by both of them at the same time was intense, one mate bond coexisting with the other.

*Well, this is, uh… A LOT?*

My entire face was hot.

“I saw you earlier,” Duke said, pointing at Xavier. “Who are you?”

“This is Caliana’s other mate,” Lucian informed Duke.

If my face had been hot before, now I was just dying inside.

*Oh my GOD, WHY is Lucian of all people explaining this? And why did he have to bring up the two mate thing? That is our personal business!*

But Duke didn’t even flinch. “I’m glad to meet other open-minded people.”

And now I was confused. “Open-minded?”

*I’m cursed, you asshat*, I thought. *My mind’s got nothing to do with it!*

With an air of pompous knowledge, Lucian said, “She’s a *due destini* mate.”

I glared at Lucian.

*Seriously, dude? Are you going to tell this guy EVERYTHING you know about us? Do you want me to share my horoscope as well? JEEZ!*

“A *due destini* mate?” Duke’s gaze was intrigued. Great. The last thing I needed was another guy with a fake royal name to get all curious about me. “I thought they didn’t exist in real life.”

“On the contrary, the phenomenon is very real,” Greyson said in a calm tone. “And also very personal.”

“Meaning it’s none of anyone’s goddamn business,” Xavier snapped.

Lucian chuckled awkwardly when Duke frowned. “Excuse Xavier—he’s a little bit grumpy!” Lucian said. “But otherwise, he’s a fine werewolf.”

Xavier scowled. “I’m not grumpy.”

“He prefers to be characterized as trigger-happy,” Greyson offered. “Nobody knows when he’s going to snap and choose violence. It’s a fun little game, trying to guess.”

Xavier looked pleased, but I gasped. *Greyson!* I mind linked*. Don’t talk that way about your brother! Even if he* is *a hothead!*

*Love, it’s good for them to think that Xavier is kind of a loose cannon*, Greyson explained. *I’m trying to create a bit of apprehension, here.*

I blinked at Greyson, feeling both alarmed and kind of impressed. Meanwhile, Duke opened his mouth to speak again, but then his gaze flickered behind me.

“There she is!” Duke called, then reached into the crowd to pull an attractive woman toward him.

They kissed a little too passionately, with Duke groping her ass *and* breasts right in front of us. I looked away immediately.

*Okay, this is uncomfortable!*

“Everyone, this is my Luna, Paige,” Duke said proudly.

The woman dabbed at her bright lipstick and let her gaze rake over Greyson and Xavier.

I did *not* like that look.

Duke smirked. “Why don’t we have a little fun?”

# Episode 3395

**Marta**

I was kissing Okorie.

I was kissing Okorie, and I couldn’t *believe* I’d initiated it. But there was no denying the electricity I felt, or the way he was responding. Okorie had to feel it too. He was holding me tight, his palms two pressure points at the back of my neck and the small of my back, his lips parting for me the moment I traced the seam with my tongue.

I couldn’t believe this was happening, or the way it felt like lightning, or the fact that I could no longer breathe. I broke off the kiss, and both of us were gasping for air. Okorie’s gaze was wild, running all over my face.

His voice sounded wrecked. “Marta, I—”

I stopped him with another kiss. It was almost like I needed to make sure that I hadn’t imagined it all the first time—like I needed to solidify that what I’d felt was real. And it was. Electric and very real, and so very, *very* different from how I felt when Lilac and I kissed.

The emotion was sharper, somehow, raw and biting. It was brand new and strange, but pleasurable in its own way. My head spun when Okorie groaned into my mouth, wrapped both arms around my waist, and pulled me upward, impossibly closer.

I was literally swept off my feet, and I…

I still couldn’t believe this was happening.

I couldn’t believe I’d initiated it, and I wasn’t stopping it, and I kept going and shaking and clinging to Okorie like I couldn’t get enough. It felt like he wasn’t close enough, like I wanted more of him right here and now—to touch him and feel him and wrap myself around him until this restless buzzing inside me stopped.

It was too much all over, an array of sensation hitting me all at once. Had I fallen under some kind of spell? It had to be a spell. Or at least it felt like one, because when Okorie broke the kiss, my head was still spinning.

He was the one focused point.

We were both breathing hard, staring into each other’s eyes.

“That was unexpected,” he rasped.

My stomach dropped when I realized that I had no idea whether he’d said that in a negative way. But then he smiled, and my heart soared.

“Unexpected, but welcome,” he murmured, stroking my neck with the back of his hand.

I shivered at the contact. My lips were tingling. My body was tingling all over, and I couldn’t lie to myself.

“For me, too,” I admitted.

I couldn’t help but think of when we’d first met, how we’d argued and I’d thought he was so infuriating. How I’d actually slapped him. But maybe *this* had been there the whole time.

“I hope you won’t regret this,” he whispered, his palm cradling my cheek. “Because I—I’ve wanted to that for a long time, Marta.”

I fought to even out my breathing, to process. It was hard to do so when his eyes burned into mine.

He took my silence and ran with it. “I know you’re going through a tough time, though,” he said. “And I’d understand if you changed your mind.”

I realized he was referring to Lilac.

*Lilac.*

And yet, I couldn’t look away from Okorie.

“I’m confused about a lot of things,” I admitted. “But I’m the one who kissed you, remember? I wouldn’t have done that if I didn’t want to.”

I wondered if seeing Lilac kissing Perrie had just unlocked something inside me, giving me the go-ahead to do exactly what I wanted to do. I felt so guilty about this. I felt horrible, but also so good, and so…

Confused.

“Okay,” Okorie breathed, looking relieved. “I know you pretty well at this point, and I don’t think you’d do anything you didn’t want. But perhaps you should think a little, ask yourself if this is what you really want.”

I paused, staring at him. His expression was soft and open. I’d called him rude and mean so many times before, but right now, I saw none of that.

Swallowing roughly, I said, “You can be very thoughtful, huh?”

He chuckled, shaking his head. He leaned forward, kissing my cheek. In my ear, he whispered, “Depends on the person.”

It felt like my face had just caught fire.

“I’ll go grab a drink.” He took a step back, and I almost reached out to grab him—I wouldn’t have minded another kiss at all—but… But I knew he was right.

I watched his retreating back and could finally focus on what had brought this kiss on in the first place. I’d just seen Lilac kissing his newfound mate, Perrie. How could that *not* have affected my judgment?

When I finally caught my breath, I turned, almost dreading what I’d see next. But when I looked around, I realized that Lilac… Where had Lilac gone?

*Oh god, did he see me kissing Okorie?*

Had he freaked out and stormed out of the ballroom, brokenhearted? Angry? The idea of hurting Lilac made me ache, even if his kiss with Perrie had broken my heart first. I’d told him we’d broken up, and he had a right to kiss whomever he wanted, but he *had* promised to fight the mate bond. Was he somehow fighting it by freaking *kissing* her? I highly doubted that.

And where was Perrie, actually?

I felt even worse when I whipped around and couldn’t spot her. Had the two of them snuck off somewhere? Together?

Had Lilac’s promise been nothing but empty words?

I felt sick to my stomach.

Fighting tears, I started toward the door. I needed some air, to clear my head, to think about the fact that Lilac had done what he’d done, but I’d also kissed Okorie, and that meant…

“Marta!”

Violet’s voice startled me, and I nearly collided with her. I recalled all the times Violet had told me to just speak with Lilac. I had to follow her advice.

“Have you seen your brother?” I asked shakily.

Violet’s usually sweet expression had shifted to something I didn’t see often in her: *anger*.

“Why?” she snapped. “So you can kiss Okorie in front of him and shove another stake in his heart?”

Her words were a slap in the face.

“That was never my intention. I—” I choked, feeling so frustrated I wanted to shout. “Did you see Lilac? He was—”

“I don’t care!” Violet said harshly. “What I saw was you and Okorie going at it in front of everyone! It was like you were trying to eat each other’s faces!”

I wasn’t going to let her paint me as the villain when her brother had done the exact same thing. And I wasn’t going to deny what I’d felt. Right now, with my lips still burning from his kiss, I couldn’t deny Okorie.

“So what?” I snapped back.

Violet got in my face, hurt seeping through her anger. “You’re my friend, and you lied to me, Marta. This whole time, you pretended you weren’t interested in Okorie. You said you didn’t like him. But it was all a lie!”

“I hadn’t realized I—”

“You know what?” she interrupted, raising her hand in my face. “Lilac probably realized that you wanted Okorie. That has to be why you two have problems.”

I gasped, my mouth dropping open in shock. “Are you even listening to yourself? The only problem in our relationship was that Lilac found his *mate*!”

Violet’s eyes narrowed, and I felt hot tears welling up. I didn’t want to make another scene—couldn’t deal with her accusations piling on top of all the other emotions that were causing a ruckus inside me. I moved past Violet before she could speak, rushing to get away from the ballroom and into the open air, away from everyone.

Still fighting to swallow down tears, I walked down one of the million hallways, unsure of which way to go until I finally felt a draft. Heading in that direction, I spotted a terrace.

But when I looked out, I saw that it was occupied.

Lilac and Perrie were leaning against a railing, kissing passionately.

My heart burst, and the tears began to fall.

I could no longer push them down.

I stumbled away, far, far away from the two of them. They were mates, but Lilac was the first boy I’d ever loved. A boy whose life had been tied to mine as I’d brought him back to the land of the living. And now he was out there, kissing someone else.

*Still* kissing.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and spun around, smothering a startled shout when I saw Dani. Dani and Tabitha, both of them staring at me, wide-eyed.

“Marta, hey, what happened?” Dani asked, looking concerned.

Tabitha gave me a tissue. “What’s wrong?”

I just couldn’t stop crying.

“I—I’ve had enough,” I choked out. “Whenever you both leave, I’m going with you.”

# Episode 3396

**Greyson**

I wasn’t sure I wanted anything to do with Duke and his Luna. Something about them spelled trouble. Though I couldn’t quite define what kind of trouble it would be. The vibes just weren’t good, and their energy was off. Also, they were acting like assholes.

There.

That settled why I didn’t like them.

“What kind of fun do you have in mind, baby?” Paige purred, resting her head on Duke’s shoulder. Again, pretty bad vibes. Plus, why was she smiling like that? It looked teasing, but in a bad way. Like she was playing a part in some sort of badly acted slasher movie. Or a subpar porno.

*I don’t like their vibe*, I mind linked to Cali.

*Xavier just said the same thing*, she replied.

“How about a race?” Duke said with a grin.

“That’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard,” Xavier said. “Last I checked, everybody here was an adult, not a kid in junior high.”

Duke didn’t seem very happy about the fact that Xavier had basically insulted him, but I had warned everybody earlier that Xavier was unhinged. And grumpy. It was a fine line to walk, being allies with people you didn’t like. But in the same way that we tolerated Lucian’s bullshit, Lucian and his friend would just have to tolerate Xavier’s.

All in all, I most enjoyed being around my brother when he was acting like his usual self to people I didn’t like.

“I’ll have to agree with my brother,” I said, not bothering to hide my smile. “What do you think, Cali?”

She blinked. “Uh, I’m wearing heels and a nice dress. Who races in this kind of outfit?”

Lucian laughed. “Why, a werewolf, of course!” He patted Duke on the shoulder. “This is a marvelous idea, old friend! We should invite some others—Ava!” Lucian called, waving her over. “Want to join the fun?”

Both Cali and Xavier scowled at that. Before I realized it, Lucian had managed to round up more people—namely Mace, Aysel, and Elle.

“You don’t have to do this, love,” I muttered to Cali. “We can refuse.”

Cali crossed her arms over her chest, looking around at the excited, chattering werewolves. “But don’t you think it would be good for the pack if we played along? Isn’t this like a sort of bonding experience?”

“I suppose it is,” I admitted. “But if it’s going to make you uncomfortable, you shouldn’t do it. You’ve been through a lot recently. You deserve to just relax.”

She let out a *humph*, setting her jaw stubbornly. “It’s not like I’m afraid of a little competition.”

“I know, love, but—”

“We’re doing this,” she declared, grabbing the lapels of my jacket and dragging me down so she could kiss my cheek. I had to laugh at her fierceness.

But then her eyes widened in alarm. “Wait, this isn’t some kind of weird werewolf race, is it?”

I smiled. “I don’t think so. Werewolves do have regular races. They usually involve less formal clothing, but still.”

Cali nodded determinedly and grabbed my hand. “We’re doing this.”

Once we got outside, though, I started to doubt that this race would be all that normal. Paige had pulled a small bag from her purse and was pouring the contents into a bowl.

Xavier scowled, eyeing the inside. “Nuts and bolts? What is this?”

Duke picked up a screw and a nut. “The males should all pick a screw, the females a nut. And when you find a screw that fits one of the nuts, you become partners. Any questions?”

I had a million. The most pressing question, of course, was why the fuck we were doing this at all. I’d assumed the pairings would be set up organically, and I could partner up with Cali. Or at least Xavier and I could be together, somehow.

I wasn’t a superfan of my brother, but in comparison to Lucian and his group of friends, Xavier seemed like a rare werewolf specimen of wisdom and excellence.

“Ah, behold!” Lucian said excitedly when Armin arrived with jugs of Big Mac’s moonshine. I recognized the label, and I wasn’t exactly happy about it. That stuff was strong, and Cali drank wine when she was feeling at her wildest.

“What’s that about?” Mace asked, gesturing at the jugs.

Cali stared at Duke with a frown as he replied to Mace. “After each leg, the runner has to do a shot of moonshine!”

Cali grimaced, locking her arm around mine. “I hate moonshine,” she grumbled. “Plus, I’m not a werewolf—I’ll get hammered after two sprints.”

*You can fake drink the shot*, I mind linked. *Nobody’s going to be paying much attention.*

“Dear Caliana, do not fret,” Lucian said. He’d clearly overheard, because he was a gossip. “Your partner can take your shot for you—if everybody here agrees,” he added, looking around.

The werewolves shrugged. Apart from Aysel, who said, “Never took you for a lightweight, Caliana.”

I saw Ava smirking at Aysel’s words. Before I could say anything, though, Cali declared, “High alcohol tolerance is not the flex you think it is.”

Everybody seemed confused, but Cali looked very happy with herself, as if she’d just delivered a major burn. I kissed the top of her head. She was so adorable it was sometimes hard to deal with without squishing her.

“*Anyhow*, after that little recess, let’s get started,” Lucian said, picking up a screw.

Duke gestured for me to get one as well. Soon enough, each male was holding a screw. The females went next, each taking a nut. I was really fucking hoping that Cali’s matched mine. Even if it was only for a dumb race, I didn’t like the idea of Cali partnering up with anyone but me.

Xavier was another acceptable option, but it wasn’t like I’d enjoy it. Mace would also be okay, since he wasn’t a creep.

“I hope it matches,” Cali whispered when I tried her nut. And it did.

She smiled widely, looking relieved. I grinned back—I should’ve had more faith in fate.

“I guess we’re meant to be,” I whispered, taking her hand.

She chuckled, all coy and cute.

Meanwhile, in the background, Xavier was majorly displeased. Tough luck. At least he’d matched up with Elle, which was fine by me. The last thing we needed right now was for Elle to get matched up with Lucian or his annoying friend.

The rest of the couples were set up next: Mace with Aysel, Lucian with Ava—magically leaving Duke with his Luna, Paige. The men took off their suit jackets, and the women took off their heels so they could run on the grass. Elle seemed particularly excited about that.

I noted that there were a bunch of massive, probably fortified space heaters surrounding the area. The atmosphere was nice and warm enough that I didn’t have to worry about Cali catching a cold. As far as surreal outdoor winter races went, this was acceptable.

“Let’s get this party started!” Duke pulled a giggling Paige into his arms for another enthusiastic kiss before looking around. “Are you guys ready to play?”

Xavier frowned at the lawn, where Armin had set up boundaries.

I turned to Duke. “It would be good if we knew more of the rules before starting.”

“Right!” Duke enthused. “For the first race, we’ll do a simple relay. The first team to cross the finish line is deemed the winner.”

“Seems simple enough,” I muttered to Cali as everybody else kept talking.

She nodded, pointing at the distance. “What’s that thing, though? Is it going to be part of the race?”

There was a large covered object set a few feet away. “I don’t think so. I wonder what’s under there…”

Cali’s eyes widened with intrigue. “Me too.”

Our attention was pulled away when a group of Vanguard wolves started pushing and pulling the cannon into position.

Duke grinned. “That’s what I call a starting pistol. Lucian never was one to do things in a small way!”

“Lucian’s every move is an over-the-top statement, we know,” I said with a sigh.

Cali snickered behind her palm, just as Armin came around and handed everyone an empty shot glass.

“What’s this for?” Cali asked. “The moonshine?”

“Yes!” Duke said. “The first contestant has to carry the shot glass across the far line to their partner and then do a shot before handing it to their partner, who has to do the same.”

Cali looked up at me immediately. “Please go first.”

“Of course,” I said. Leaning down, I mumbled in her ear, “Remember, you can do this.”

Cali nodded, determined all over again. I headed to the opposite line, falling into step beside my scowling brother.

“Keep an eye on Elle,” I said quietly to him. “Remember when she drank all that vodka?”

Xavier glared. “I know.”

I rolled my eyes at him, then we lined up next to the others. After everybody took their positions, there was silence.

And then Armin fired the cannon.

*BANG!*

My ears were ringing as I broke into a sprint, my eyes fixed on Cali. I could feel someone coming up close behind me, but I didn’t look, avoiding the distraction. Sure, this was a ridiculous game I had to play while wearing fancy clothes, but I still wanted to win.

“Greyson, Greyson, Greyson!” Cali was cheering my name when I crossed the line. I poured a shot, downed it, and felt the burn down my throat. Damn. I couldn’t *believe* my mother was marrying the woman responsible for this stuff.

“Go go go!” I said, handing Cali the empty shot glass. “You can do it, Cali!” I clapped for her, urging her on as she took off. “Remember not to drink the shot!”

I watched her go, smiling. But suddenly, someone blocked my view. Paige.

Wiping the moonshine from her lips, she put a hand on my arm and purred, “I can’t wait to see how you perform in other arenas.”

# Episode 3397

All my fears about the competition were true. I was never going to win a track event, but racing against werewolves was basically impossible.

*And unfair!*

I felt a rush of air as Elle blew by me, and that wasn’t fair either. Elle used to be a wolf—of *course* she was freaking familiar with running barefoot in the woods. Meanwhile, I was carrying my dress so I didn’t stumble on it, grass was sticking to my feet, and I was breathing hard already.

“Isn’t this fun?” I heard Lucian yelling from somewhere behind me.

*Fun?* I screamed inside my head. *Fun is going shopping at the mall with Lola, NOT running around! This is like gym class torture!*

*Cali!* Xavier’s mind link pulled me back to the present. *You’re doing great!* *Just keep moving; don’t give up!*

*Thanks for the encouragement as your partner kicks my ass!* I shot back, smiling all the same.

At least I could see the finish line, and I hadn’t died yet.

*Yes! Just a* tiny *bit farther, and—*

My big toe got tangled up in a patch of grass, and I tripped.

*Shit!*

“Well, well, well.” Ava’s voice came from above me. I was sprawled facedown at her feet, like a sack of potatoes, just shy of the finish line. When I looked up, she was smirking. Evilly. “Nice landing.”

I wiped the grass from my face and mouth. Choosing not to dignify Ava’s bullshit with a response, I jumped back up and stepped over the line.

*At* *least Ava didn’t get paired up with Xavier. Now THAT would have really pissed me off.*

The taste of grass was strong in my mouth. I was thirsty, and I was panting, so I decided it would be a great idea to grab the moonshine and pour some into my glass.

“Cali!” Greyson called, running toward me. “You don’t have to do that; I’ll take the shot for you!”

Too late. I needed to wash away the grass, so I downed the moonshine.

*Oh, no. Oh no no no no NO!*

This was a bad decision. Very bad. Oh my god, it felt like I’d just swallowed acid.

“Cali, love,” Greyson breathed, looking worried as he grabbed the glass from my numb hands. “I was supposed to drink it for you—why did you do that?”

I fought to explain that I was an idiot, but I couldn’t speak. My vocal cords were burning up, so I just coughed and pointed at my throat. I mind linked, *This is awful! How can your mom love Big Mac?*

Greyson cringed, offering an awkward smile. “I’ll admit, it takes a lot of getting used to. Both the moonshine and Big Mac.”

“Don’t—don’t make me laugh,” I spluttered, grasping at my throat.

Greyson looked around and grabbed a water from one of the attendants, giving it to me to drink. Right. Instead of drinking moonshine, I could have simply used water to wash out the taste of grass.

*Cali! You MORON!*

Greyson cradled me in his arms like the idiot baby I was. The water didn’t help to erase the taste of moonshine from my mouth, and I was trying not to puke.

Overall, a magnificent time.

“And the winner of the first relay is…” Armin paused for dramatic effect. “Mace and Aysel!”

I blinked, turning to see Mace and Aysel high-fiving. Aysel looked so normal at that moment. I couldn’t believe the princess had ever done anything like this before in her life.

“Everyone except Mace and Aysel has to do a shot,” Duke said loudly.

I groaned, lightly banging my head against Greyson’s chest. He chuckled, stroking my back. “Don’t worry, I’ll handle it.”

He poured two shots, one for me and one for him, and everyone raised their glasses, cheering all together with a deafening, “Bottoms up!”

*Werewolves are so loud*, I thought. *I need earmuffs!*

A single relay had turned me into a tired, seventy-five-year-old lady, and I didn’t even care. The burning nausea was passing, thankfully. I was left catching my breath while the burn in my throat diminished.

“What’s next?” I asked Greyson hoarsely. “Dancing with flesh-eating squirrels? Chasing maniacal moths in the middle of the night? Banging our heads against a tree until we bleed?”

Greyson pressed his lips together, obviously hiding a smile. “How’s your throat? Do you want to go back inside?”

I paused, looking around. Ava arched an eyebrow at me, and suddenly the amount of spite I felt burned harder than all the moonshine in the world.

“I’m just fine,” I told Greyson. “Seems like the fun is just beginning.”

I was totally being sarcastic, by the way.

“All the couples stand together. The next trial will be a three-legged race!” Armin announced. He was a very big man with some very big hands. I noticed that when he tied Greyson’s and my legs together.

I looked up at my mate, taking a deep, calming breath. “This is the most surreal moment of my entire life.”

Greyson looked deeply amused. *Deeply*. He was lucky he was so beautiful that I couldn’t get mad at him.

“I’m sorry, but I think we both know I’m going to slow you down,” I said with a huff.

Greyson shot me a smile, wrapping an arm around my waist. “I don’t look at it that way. You’ll just inspire me to run faster. You always inspire me to try my best.”

I blushed. “Really?”

“Yes,” he said. “I can drink for you, and I’ll carry you across the finish line if I have to.”

“But I hope it won’t come to that,” I said. “I’ll do my best as well and try to hold my own.”

That was what I said on the outside, but on the inside, I knew it was all a bunch of nonsense. Greyson was so much bigger, stronger, and faster than I was. That was a fact, and me trying hard wouldn’t change it. To his credit, and because he was a sweetheart who deserved all kinds of sexual favors, Greyson didn’t tell me any of that.

He just leaned down and kissed my cheek, murmuring, “We got this.”

At least with him glued to my side—kind of literally—I felt steadier. I should’ve needed to catch my breath before the race started, but I realized that I was already breathing normally. The moonshine was just making me feel weird.

*Goddammit, Big Mac!*

And then—

*BANG!*

The cannon blast startled me, but before I knew what the hell was happening, I was running. I wasn’t keeping up with Greyson at all, but then…

*Wait, how the hell am I keeping up with Greyson?*

And then I realized that I wasn’t running at all.

My legs were going through the motions, but my left leg wasn’t touching the ground at all, and the right was tied to Greyson’s. Greyson had wrapped an arm around me and was literally carrying me while he ran.

“Oh my god, Greyson!” I squealed as we whooshed by. “I don’t think my right leg has ever moved so fast!”

I laughed as Greyson lost his balance a bit, stumbling only to recover quickly. He was laughing too, yet his grip on me didn’t slip an inch. I felt so elated that the weirdness of this race was worth it, just for this moment.

*Hang on just a little longer!* he mind linked.

*Hang on?* I laughed some more. *I’m not hanging on at all—you’re holding me so tight I couldn’t fall if I wanted to!*

Greyson shot me a grin before he glanced over his shoulder. I realized, vaguely, that people were coming up on either side of us. But Greyson looked ahead, running harder and charging forward until we crossed the finish line.

We crossed the finish line… first.

*FIRST!*

“Did we—” My eyes were wide as I looked around. “Did we actually *win*?”

Smirking, Greyson pulled the rope off our legs and picked me up. “We didn’t just win, love—we crushed it.”

I laughed, wrapping my arms around his neck, leaning down to kiss him as he did a spin. Winning with him was actually *lots* of fun.

“Greyson cheated,” Xavier grumbled behind us.

Greyson waved off his brother. “Don’t be a sore loser, Xavier.”

Poor Xavier. He really hated not being first. I knew he didn’t like the fact that I’d been paired with Greyson, either, but I couldn’t find it in me to feel bad right now.

Anyway, another reason why I was glad we’d won was that now I got to watch everyone else do the shots. With some satisfaction, I realized that not even the tough-as-nails werewolves were having a good time downing Big Mac’s concoction, if all the grimacing was any indication.

*Hah!*

“That was a fine time, dear friends,” Lucian declared. “But now we have to take the party to the next level. Let’s go to the pool!”

My smile faded. My memories of Lucian’s pool weren’t great. But Greyson was walking with me, still holding my hand. Shooting me a coy look, he said, “I wouldn’t mind swimming with you, love.”

*Well, if he puts it that way…*

We followed Lucian and the others into the palace and to the pool. It was a different pool than the first one I’d seen—how many did Lucian have? How many did a single estate *need*? Good god.

“Let’s have fun!” Aysel called, climbing up onto a diving board. She reached the top in seconds, then reached for the hem of her dress. She pulled it over her head and stood there, buck naked. And then she shouted, “Everybody strip!”

# Episode 3398

**Ava**

I wasn’t the least bit surprised to hear Aysel’s nudity decree. I was fine with it—nudity was kind of a given when you were a werewolf. But when I glanced over at Cali, I was pleased to see that she looked nervous and uncomfortable as hell.

Good.

“For those of you who would prefer more coverage, please feel free to visit the closet next to the stereo system. It is filled with a variety of suits in different sizes. Everyone is welcome to get one if they would like—nudity is always optional here at the palace!” Lucian added, like he’d just watched a training video titled *Human Resources for your Werewolf Pack*.

I saw Cali visibly relax in response to Lucian’s announcement and gave a snort of derision. Too bad.

I looked over at Xavier, then let my eyes scan his body. I’d seen him without clothes more times than I could possibly count, and vice versa. He happened to glance over as I was looking at him, and our eyes locked. Without looking away, I reached for my zipper, pulled it down, and let my dress fall. Then I turned to the closet Lucian had indicated and chose a tiny red bikini that accentuated more than it actually covered.

There was no harm in teasing Xavier a little bit. We had our history, and I just wanted to have a little fun with him. The moonshine seemed to have gotten to me, and I felt a little naughty as I slipped on the scarlet scrap of a bathing suit.

But, looking around, it wasn’t just me who the moonshine had gotten to—everyone seemed pretty loose.

“Should we have a race across the pool?” someone shouted. “Or a relay?”

“How about a diving competition?” Duke shouted. Then he hopped onto the diving board, got a running start, and did a massive belly flop into the water, landing with a deafening crack.

His entrance sent a wall of water in every direction, including one that crashed down on Cali, who was just getting into the pool. I grinned as she sputtered, wiping water out of her eyes.

I’d been hoping that would drive her away—or at least into the bathroom for a bit—but she smiled and climbed out of the pool. She got on the diving board and did a cannonball of her own. She didn’t make much of a splash, but everyone cheered, and it showed that she wasn’t going to let anyone here get the better of her.

Whatever. I rolled my eyes and looked away. I hadn’t come to this party to watch Cali’s sad little attempts to entertain. So I walked to the deep end of the pool and did a shallow dive, then swam to the far end of the pool where there was a tile bench surrounded by jet sprays.

I settled back, letting a jet blast a sore spot in my back, and I had just closed my eyes when the water rippled around me and I heard a voice.

“Hi there!”

I opened my eyes to see that Duke and Paige had just swum over. They joined me on the bench, one on either side of me.

“I hope you don’t mind if we join you,” Paige said with a toothy smile.

I actually *did* mind, but before I could tell them so, Duke spoke.

“So, Ava, you’re a mysterious girl. What’s your story? Aren’t you from the Samara pack?”

I narrowed my eyes, wondering what he was *really* asking, and how much he already knew. I assumed that Lucian must have said something to him about my pack.

“I heard there was some sort of problem with the Samara pack,” Paige said perkily. “Is that true?”

I shrugged, trying to look like I *wasn’t* fighting off the impulse to push her underwater. “Whatever you’ve heard has probably been blown out of proportion. All packs have their problems, but the Samaras are strong, and they’re getting stronger every day.”

Paige nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right about most packs having problems. But with Duke as Alpha, our pack rarely has any problems. And especially not with other packs.” She giggled. “Duke can be so intimidating when he wants to be.”

I glanced over at Duke, who smiled at me. “That’s great,” I said blandly.

“So what about you and Lucian?” Duke asked, inching a little closer to me. “What’s the deal there?”

“What?” I asked, flabbergasted. “What are you talking about? What *about* me and Lucian?”

Paige smiled, her eyes wide, though not quite innocent. “We just noticed something going on between you too.”

“I don’t know what you—”

“We know Lucian,” Duke informed me, “and he seemed to be really interested in you, Ava.”

“And I can see why, too,” Paige said. “Duke was just saying that he thinks you’re one of the most beautiful women here.” She smiled. “I think so, too.”

Good for them, with their kinky shit. No shade, but was I supposed to care what Duke and Paige—or anybody else, for that matter—thought about me? About how they’d rank me compared to everyone else here? And what the hell was their interest in Lucian and me? Lucian was only showing interest in me because he wanted something. That was how Lucian was, and I didn’t mind that about him. It made him easier to understand. And deal with.

“All right, well, I’m going to get going,” I said, pushing reluctantly away from the tile bench. That jet could have really done me some good if the creeper twins had just left me alone.

“Too bad,” Duke said. “We’ll see you around.”

Paige moved closer to Duke and put an arm around his shoulders. She smiled at me, and the expression promised a lot more than she was saying. “It would be nice to get to know you better, Ava.”

“All right, cool,” I said, then I dove to the bottom of the pool. I’d put this particular swimsuit on for Xavier’s sake, but I was regretting it now, and I hoped a few feet of water would shield me from their eyes. I couldn’t shake the feeling that they were mentally undressing me as I swam away.

I had no idea what those two were into, but whatever it was, I didn’t want any part of it. Good for them for being open about their wants, but to each their own, and they weren’t my crowd.

When I felt like I’d swum far enough from prying eyes, I broke the surface and found myself face-to-face with Lucian, who looked as surprised to see me as I was to see him. But the surprise was quickly replaced with a smile.

“Hello there, my little mermaid,” he said fondly.

He looked so genuinely glad to see me, I started to wonder if it was possible that Duke and Paige had been right about Lucian really liking me. Jury was out whether I liked him. If we hadn’t been interrupted by the arrival of other guests earlier, I was pretty sure we would have kissed.

I shook my wet hair down my back. “I’m no mermaid,” I warned him, raising an eyebrow. “I’m a Samara werewolf.”

Lucian laughed and shook his head briskly, sending crystalline water droplets flying off his hair. He raised his arms, flexing like a strong man, and I was struck dumb for a moment. Lucian was hot as hell, but he was also in incredible shape. The kind of Marvel movie star shape that was easier for werewolves to achieve but still didn’t come without some level of effort. But Lucian never seemed to do anything except talk about himself and look smug. Was that a workout I didn’t know about?

Over his shoulder, I could see the other party guests splashing in the water and laughing as they called out good-natured jibes at each other.

Lucian looked over his shoulder, following the path of my eyeline. He turned back to me with a smile. “They’re having a good time.”

“Seems like it,” I said shortly.

He smiled at me. “You should too, Ava. Loosen up. Enjoy yourself, like the others are. Like you did when we were racing.”

“I can be plenty loose,” I said, suddenly defensive.

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? Prove it.”

The air between us was hot and charged with electricity. Before I could think twice about it, I put my arms around his neck and leaned in, pressing my body to his. Lucian looked deeply into my eyes, then brushed his lips against mine. I slid my hands around the back of his neck and pulled him closer, deepening the kiss.

He responded immediately.

Lucian dug his nails into my hips, a deep groan emanating from his throat as he kissed me. My entire body went hot—the sound only made me think of one thing. Xavier.

For one horrible, blissful moment, I kissed Lucian as if he were Xavier. As if it were Xavier biting my bottom lip. As if it were Xavier locking my hips against his. As if it were Xavier teasing his fingertips underneath the hem of my swimsuit.

“I know you’re doing this because you want something from me, not because you really feel anything,” I whispered, pulling away from the kiss.

Lucian scanned my lips. He shrugged as he moved in to kiss me again. “Why can’t it be both?”

# Episode 3399

**Xavier**

I stepped on top of Lucian’s diving board and looked around at the raucous party happening all around me. This party wasn’t exactly what I’d signed up for when I’d hurried over to the Vanguard estate, but a sudden change of plan was par for the course when it came to this crazy pack. And the whole race-turned-pool party thing was absurd. But—again—when was anything at the Vanguard palace *not* absurd?

The pool itself was beautiful, tiled in a green-blue that reminded me of the Caribbean ocean, with a row of indigo tiles just below the pool’s edge. Looking down into the water just below me, I saw Cali breaking through the surface. She took a deep breath as water streamed down from her face and hair. She opened her eyes and looked around. I’d never known that water was my thing, but seeing her emerge from the water like a freaking mermaid was definitely a turn-on.

Then something else caught my attention as I turned to see Ava—and she was *kissing Lucian.* For a long moment, I stared at them, completely shocked by what I was seeing. Ava and Lucian? What the hell? The two of them together was *not* a pairing I would’ve ever imagined. What in the world would those two even have to talk about? They were tucked into an alcove of the pool, and as I watched, the kiss deepened and intensified—and my annoyance intensified right along with it.

What the hell was Lucian’s deal? Why was he going after all my mates—former and current? Was he doing it intentionally? It was hard to put anything past that guy, but knowing what I knew about Lucian, I had a sneaking suspicion that he did everything with a specific—self-serving—goal in mind. I knew Lucian wanted the Samaras to join the Vanguards, and Ava could just be his way in.

Which was rational, to a point, and Ava looked like a consenting partner in that kiss—but I wasn’t feeling particularly rational. Seeing Lucian kissing Ava—especially after I’d just talked to Ava specifically about Lucian’s agenda—just pissed me right the hell off.

And what was her deal? Why was she kissing Lucian when she knew who the guy was? Was she just being stupid about this?

Almost as though she’d been able to hear my thoughts, the kiss broke off and Ava sought out my eyes. I stared at her, and even though I didn’t want to engage, I couldn’t stop myself.

*What the hell are you doing?* I asked her.

She didn’t answer my mind linked question, but she didn’t break eye contact either. She leaned her head back, exposing more of her neck to give Lucian’s tongue better access, all while holding my gaze.

Dammit. I shook my head and looked quickly away. I had no interest in watching their make-out session progress any further. I took a deep breath and dove off the board into the water.

The rush of cold water felt good—almost as though my skin was thirsty for it. I hadn’t gone swimming in ages, and I didn’t realize how much I’d missed it until I was submerged. Granted, Lucian’s fancy chlorinated pool—*one* of his pools—wasn’t exactly like swimming in a crystal clear lake hidden in the forest, but it wasn’t bad, either.

I popped out of the water and looked around, realizing that I’d come up close to where Cali was swimming. She was heading toward the edge of the pool where Greyson was crouched, holding a bottle of water out to her.

“Thank you,” she said with a smile, accepting the water. She drank thirstily and handed the bottle back, not looking at me as I swam quietly up behind her. Without warning, I put my arms around her waist.

“What are you—” she started as I dragged her away from the edge and out into the middle of the pool. She twisted in my arms, and when she saw it was me, she rolled her eyes and gave me a playful swat. “Xavier! You startled me! What are you doing?”

“I’m holding my mate, what do you think I’m doing?” I asked with a smile. “That’s allowed, isn’t it?”

I swam to the far corner of the pool, angling us in such a way that I couldn’t see Ava or Lucian. I glanced up to see my brother still standing at the edge of the pool, holding the water bottle. He looked annoyed, but he didn’t say anything to Cali or me. He just turned and walked over to speak to Mace.

“Are you having fun?” I asked, leaning down to whisper into Cali’s ear.

She grinned and wrapped her arms around my bare waist, pressing close. “You know, I never thought I would say I was having fun at a Vanguard party, but I really am.” She giggled. “But maybe that’s the moonshine talking.”

I laughed along with her. I felt lighter than I had in a long time. It had been a tough few months—what with Seluna, and the ashes disappearing, and everything we’d gone through trying to find them again. It had been a lot, and the pressure of it all had felt constantly heavy. I’d woken up every day with the knowledge that Cali was in danger, and we weren’t getting any closer to making her safe.

But now that the ashes were safely in the demon realm, I just felt better. Cali looked like she felt better, too, and I was so glad to see her smiling and laughing and having a good time. It felt right.

I pressed a kiss to her neck. “You deserve to have a good time,” I whispered.

Keeping afloat with just her arms, she wrapped her legs around my waist. “You deserve it, too, you know.”

I pushed a dark lock of wet hair away from her face, hooking it behind her ear. I looked into her eyes, and for a moment, everything around us seemed to wash away. Ava, Lucian, Greyson, all the other pack members splashing and laughing and screaming at the top of their lungs— all that disappeared, and it was just Cali and me. Skin to skin in the water. *This* was what I’d been wanting—ever since the entire mess with Seluna had started, and then segued into the trouble with Adéluce—this peace was what I’d been wanting. Finally, Cali and I were here. Together.

My brother was nearby—close enough to see—but I didn’t care. I leaned in and pressed a kiss to Cali’s lips. I could feel her being cautious—probably thinking of Greyson—but I didn’t let that bother me. Not now. I just wanted to feel her lips on mine.

It was a quick kiss, but afterward I held her close. I loved the feel of her skin against mine. There was nothing better in the world. Nothing that made me feel as safe, and as peaceful, and as whole. Nothing like Cali.

We both flinched when a splash of water caught us both in the face.

“Hey!” Duke called, grinning. “Don’t get too frisky, you two. The night is just beginning.”

I glared at the guy. Everything about him—the way he phrased everything with barely-hidden meaning, his smug smile, his complete self-certainty—pissed me off. He was so fucking full of himself. It was in a different way than Lucian, but I could see why the two of them were friends.

“We were having a private conversation,” I snapped at the guy.

“Well, I could see that it was private, but a conversation?” He laughed loudly. “I don’t know about that.”

I pulled Cali against me, holding her closer. “Do you need something?” I asked, looking between Duke and his mate, Paige, who had just swum over.

“Oh, we’re just trying to get to know everyone,” she said with a smile. She looked friendly, but there was something pointed and hungry about the way she looked at us, and it reminded me to keep her at bay. “Friends of Lucian’s are always friends of ours.”

“We’re not friends of Lucian’s,” I said curtly.

Duke and Paige laughed at this, which hadn’t been my goal.

Paige looked me over, then Cali. Her gaze was unmistakably hungry, and she didn’t even try to hide it. “I’ll admit, I’m curious about the two of you.”

“Oh yeah?” I said, trying to lace some menace into my voice.

It didn’t work. Paige nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah. Is it true, what Lucian said about you two being part of a *due destini*?”

“Yes?” Cali said, looking uncomfortable.

Paige’s eyes went wide. “Fascinating.”

She swam toward Cali, almost like a shark approaching its prey. Treading water, she put her arms around both Cali and me, then gestured over her shoulder at Duke.

“Would you two be interested in joining us later for a private party?” Paige asked.

# Episode 3400

I looked down at Paige’s hand, which was now resting on my shoulder. And then at her other hand, which was on Xavier’s arm. I looked back at Duke, who was lounging on one of those ridiculous pool noodles, smiling at me. When he caught my eye, he raised his eyebrows and licked his lips ever so slightly

I shuddered.

Xavier opened his mouth—probably to tell them to go to hell—but I spoke before he could.

“A private party?” I looked around in an exaggerated way—I was pretty sure I was still feeling the buzz of that moonshine shot. “Isn’t this a private party already? I didn’t think this looked much like a public pool.”

Paige’s lips quirked up into a smile. “Yes, of course. But the party I’m talking about would be even more… *intimate*. And Greyson can come too,” she added.

I stared at her, trying to figure out what the hell she was talking about. A more *intimate* party? And why had she said intimate in that weird way? I glanced at Duke, who was still grinning at me, a suggestive look in his eyes, and finally the penny dropped.

Oh shit. Paige and Duke were asking me to sleep with them. And with Xavier. *And* with Greyson? My head started to spin. What the actual hell was going on? I felt like the world was shifting around me. How had I gone from traipsing around Crater Lake and fighting for my life to being asked to be part of a threesome? Or a foursome. Or—I guess, with Greyson—a fivesome?

“Um,” I said in a voice an octave higher than normal, “I think we’re okay.” I cleared my throat nervously. “Aren’t we, Xavier?”

Xavier’s expression was blank, and for a moment I felt my heart flutter with panic. But then he reached over and pushed Paige’s hand off my shoulder, then shook her other hand off his own arm. “Yeah, we’re good,” he said flatly.

“But thanks for the offer?” I said awkwardly. Was that right? Was that what I was supposed to say in a situation like this? It just felt like I was supposed to say *something.*

I mean, there was no way in hell I was ever going to a sex party with people I didn’t know and/or BOTH of my mates! There were so many problematic parts of that equation, it was hard to know which one was the worst.

Besides, I’d only just met these weirdos, and now they were asking me to have an *orgy* with them? No way.

Paige and Duke looked disappointed, but Xavier just turned his back on them and—his arm around me—began to swim away from them. Xavier didn’t say anything, but I could feel the eyes of the Aspen Alpha and Luna following us as we departed.

I was still running through the conversation we’d just had in my head, trying to make sense of it and—failing that—wondering if I’d missed anything.

I glanced up at Xavier. *They were asking us to sleep with them, right? Like, all of us. Right?*

*Yes*, he said flatly. He looked down at me, slightly alarmed. *You don’t want to do that, right?*

*NO!* I cried, shuddering at the thought. *No! Of course I don’t.*

Xavier nodded. *That’s what I thought. I wanted to leave because if that Duke joker kept looking at you the way he was, I was going to punch his teeth out.*

I nodded and, grateful he’d provided us with an exit, swam toward the edge of the pool, trying to put as much distance as possible between us and the orgy-makers.

At the deck, Xavier grasped my waist and lifted me effortlessly from the water. Then he climbed out next to me, and I watched water run down the ridges of his chest and abdomen. He was still looking stormy from our encounter with Duke and Paige, but he was also still looking yummy.

He shook water out of his hair and ran a hand through it, pushing it into place. “Why don’t we go grab some towels? Then we can go look for Jay and Lola, and maybe some food.”

I hadn’t realized how hungry I was until my stomach rumbled at Xavier’s suggestion. Now that I thought about it, that moonshine was basically all I’d had in a while, so I could probably use something to soak it up.

I nodded. “That sounds great.”

I grabbed a towel from a small table stacked with fluffy white towels the size of small blankets and handed one to Xavier. Wrapping one around myself, I walked over to where Greyson and Mace were sitting on a pair of pool chairs.

Greyson looked up as I drew near, smiling at my approach. “Hey, you.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, sitting on the arm of Greyson’s chair and using the towel to squeeze water out of my hair.

Mace raised his eyebrows. “Greyson’s been filling me in on everything that happened to you all over at Crater Lake.”

“Ugh.” I rolled my eyes. “Don’t remind me.”

Mace smiled. “I’m glad to see you’re doing okay, Cali.”

This comment surprised me a little, and I smiled at Mace, who always came across as kind of tough. But I’d long suspected him of being a secret softy. “Thank you. I’m fine now.”  
 “We were also talking about how Lucian seemed to have bounced back quite easily,” Greyson added.

I frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

Mace chuckled, though the sound was devoid of humor. “The guy was engaged to a freaking *demon*. He almost made her his Luna, and she almost destroyed his entire pack. And now look at him.” Mace tipped his chin toward Lucian, who was still swimming, laughing at a joke someone had just told. “Living without a care in the world.”

At Mace’s mention of Seluna, Greyson looked quickly up at me.

*You okay, love?*

*Yeah. I’m okay*. And I was. I was pretty sure that knowing Seluna was gone—*really* gone, for good this time—made thinking about her and even hearing about her a lot easier. There had been a time when I wasn’t sure we’d ever get to this place of relative peace, but here we were. And I was thankful for what everyone in the Redwood pack had done to help with that. And everything my mates had done to keep me safe.

I squeezed Greyson’s shoulder and got to my feet. “I’m going to grab some food.”

“I’ll come with you,” Xavier said. He’d just walked over, and for a moment there was a brief stare-down between the two brothers.

I suddenly thought back to the moment I’d kissed Xavier in the pool in front of everyone—including Greyson. I felt bad about exacerbating their animosity, and I took a step back.

“Excuse me,” I said quietly. I headed down the hallway out of the solarium, but I heard someone following me. I listened for a moment, then identified Xavier’s distinctive tread.

One thing was for sure: I needed to stop drinking moonshine. Never again. I couldn’t be kissing Xavier right in front of Greyson—and vice versa. I took a deep breath as the familiar wave of guilt swept over me. It was wild how the *due destini* felt like it was back in full swing now that Seluna’s ashes and the handprint were handled. I knew—rationally—that the tension of the *due destini* had never actually left, but it had been easy to almost forget about it while dealing with a different life-and-death situation. But now, it was back with a vengeance. It almost felt like the curse was taunting me, trying to get me to mess up. As though my life couldn’t stay drama-free for more than five minutes at a time.

“Hey, Cali!” Xavier jogged to draw level with me, then caught my arm in his hand. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just hungry.”

Xavier nodded, and though he didn’t look like he fully believed me, he led me toward the ballroom and the huge buffet.

But we’d just walked through the door when we were intercepted by Jay and Ravi.

“Xavier, Cali,” Ravi called. “We need you to settle this. Bubble baths?”

Xavier looked puzzled. “What about them?”

Jay rolled his eye. “For or against, man. Come on!”

I shook my head and headed toward the buffet. The bubble bath debate was going to have to rage on without my contribution. But as I grabbed a plate from the end of the table, I wasn’t even thinking about the food. I scanned the crowd until I saw who I was looking for.

“Big Mac,” I said as I hurried over, the empty plate still in my hand.

Big Mac looked over the rim of the dark cocktail she was drinking. “Yeah?” she asked, turning away from her conversation with Mrs. Smith. “What is it?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I have to talk to you,” I said urgently. I grabbed the witch’s arm and pulled her slightly away. “Just for one second,” I called back to Mrs. Smith.

When we were far enough away, I turned on Big Mac, who didn’t look pleased with me.

“Yeah?” she demanded. “What do you need now?”

I took a deep breath. “I need you to tell me if the *due destini* killing curse is still in effect.”

# Episode 3401

**Greyson**

I looked over to where Lucian was standing chest-deep in the water, talking to Duke and Paige. Those two were all over each other, to the point where I was surprised that they were able to carry on a conversation. Aysel and Ava were standing with them, but they seemed undisturbed by the Aspen Alpha and Luna’s outrageous behavior. They were certainly… something. And that felt like it was being a bit generous.

I glanced over at Mace. “What do you think they’re talking about over there?”

Mace looked over and gave a wry chuckle. “Well, given how the Aspen Alpha and his Luna have been coming on to literally *everyone* all night, I’m sure they’re talking about how to work out a timeshare in Tulum.”

I snorted with laughter and quickly turned it into a cough. The thing was, Mace wasn’t wrong. I’d been watching Duke and Paige approach everyone at the party. Sometimes one at a time, sometimes in groups. It had been wild to witness. Even putting that aside for a minute, I’d been pretty baffled at how the night had progressed in general. When I’d averted my gaze from Xavier kissing Cali, I’d caught sight of Lucian and Ava making out in the opposite corner of the pool, which was an even weirder escalation of an already weird-ass party.

As for Xavier—I hadn’t liked seeing Xavier kissing Cali, of course, but that part, at least, made sense. Xavier liked to think he was this complex riddle of a person, but really, my brother was pretty easy to figure out. I suspected he was only a mystery to himself. And it certainly didn’t feel like a coincidence to me that while Ava—Xavier’s former mate—was kissing someone else, Xavier had gone to kiss Cali. The math just seemed to add up.

But, then again, I supposed I could be wrong. I’d only known Xavier his entire life.

Mace took a sip of his beer and looked around the pool, his expression annoyed. “I’m really glad you and the rest of the Redwoods decided to come tonight, Greyson. I’ll be honest with you, I wasn’t even sure about coming myself. But after the year the Blue Bloods have had, we needed something to look forward to. And it seems like the pack is having a good time letting their hair down.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. Lucian might not have been my favorite person in the world—he was, in fact, toward the top of my list of my *least* favorite people—but the Redwood pack had been excited to come to this party too. Well, all except for Torin, but even he’d come around. And I was in no position to tell them not to enjoy themselves. Not after all the shit we’d all been through this past year.

I leaned back in the deck chair. It was strange, really, because I’d never *wanted* to be Alpha. It just wasn’t something I’d ever thought I would like or even be good at. I liked the solitary life and the absence of real responsibility—no ties to anyone or anywhere. But now that I was the Redwood Alpha, I didn’t know what I would be if I wasn’t. It had become part of my identity in a way that felt real and permanent. I felt lucky to be in the position I was in. And though I wasn’t sure how to feel about that, I supposed it just felt… *right*?

Mace took another pull of his beer and cleared his throat.

I looked over at him. It seemed like he wanted to say something, but he just looked down. “What’s up?” I asked.

He cleared this throat again, nervously. “I’m actually glad we’ve got a second to talk, Greyson, because there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh,” I said, taken aback. “What is it?” I didn’t want it to, but my mind immediately went to dark places at Mace’s words. “Have you seen drones again? Have you run into anything weird since I’ve been gone—”

“No, no,” Mace said, waving away my questions. “No, nothing like that. Nothing serious, for once.”

“Oh, okay. Then what is it?”

Mace cleared his throat for a third time. “I was wondering if you’d heard from Maren lately. I was thinking about everything that went down with that dude Aiden. I was just wondering how she’s been doing since.”

“Oh, right,” I said, reminded that Mace had been there—and helped out a ton—when we’d chased the guy down and driven him away from Maren. “No, I haven’t heard from her,” I admitted.

It would probably be a good idea to reach out to her, just to check in. I’d noticed she was gone when we got back, but I just hadn’t had a moment to breathe until recently.

“Why do you want to know?” I asked Mace curiously.

“Oh, you know,” Mace said, shrugging. “I just wanted to check in and make sure she was all right after everything that went down. The kid, too.”

“Yeah—Fenrir. I think about him, too. I’ll get in touch soon, let her know you were asking.”

Mace gave me an awkward smile. “This is kind of awkward, isn’t it?”

I stared at him. “What’s awkward?” I asked, baffled. “What are you talking about?”

Mace took another long drink of his beer, then a deep breath. “I know Maren is your ex…”

“Yeah,” I said when he didn’t go on. “So what? What does that have to do with anything?”

Mace shifted in his chair, looking like he’d have preferred to be anywhere else. “Well, you know, sometimes werewolves can get a bit territorial, even when they really shouldn’t.”

“What?” I said, still struggling to follow his line of thought. I had no idea where he was going with this.

Mace looked up at me, then blurted, “I know you’re in this *due destini* business with Cali, but are you still interested in Maren?”

I blinked in shock. “Am I still *interested* in Maren?” I repeated. “Like, interested how? Just as a person and interested in her welfare, or, like, do I want to be *with* her?”

Mace shrugged. “You know what I mean. Is there anything still between you?”

I stared at him. “I have a mate, Mace. You’ve met her. Remember Cali? Dark hair. About this high,” I said, indicating Cali’s height with my hand.

“Yeah, I know, but I was just wondering if you still…” Mace trailed off, and he looked so uncomfortable that his meaning finally became clear.

“*Oh!*” I said with sudden understanding. Mace was interested in Maren—romantically.

I took this information in. I wasn’t sure how it made me feel. It was true, I had no claim to Maren at all, but we did have a history. And…

My mind wandered back to the hallucination spell I’d been under in New Orleans that had made me believe I was married to Maren, and that I was Fenrir’s real father. I knew it was just a spell, but it had been rooted in some kind of truth. Or alternate reality or whatever. Maren had been there, and I still didn’t know what it all meant.

“Greyson?”

Mace was still waiting for an answer, so I looked over at him. “Listen, man, all respect in the world, but are you really up for that kind of thing?”

“What to you mean?” Mace asked.

I didn’t know how to ask what I wanted to ask. “You know, to get back into something. With anyone.”

I didn’t mention Pip’s name, but I didn’t have to. It hadn’t been very long since Letifer had created the revenants that had infected and ultimately killed her. It had damn near destroyed Mace. I wasn’t sure he’d ever be the same. That wasn’t something you could go through and just forget about. There was no “watching your mate die a terrible death and putting it in the rearview mirror” option.

Mace looked down at his feet, clearly thinking about Pip as well. “I guess I’m not totally sure,” he said quietly. He looked up at me. “But there’s just something about Maren. I mean, not only is she an incredibly beautiful woman, but I think we have some kind of connection.”

I gave him a smile, though it felt pretty forced on my end. Mace had been right. This *was* awkward. I felt uncomfortable as hell, and I had no idea what to say next.

But I was spared the necessity of saying anything when we heard a loud *POP* behind us.

I looked around, my heart pounding, only to see dozens of fireworks shooting into the air. The various pack members had stopped swimming and were holding onto the sides of the pool, laughing and pointing and looking up at the show happening in the sky above us.

“Greyson!” Mace shouted over the ear-splitting noise. “So you don’t mind if I ask Maren out?”

# Episode 3402

I jumped as a loud bang erupted overhead. Then several more bangs and flashing light. I looked up to see fireworks exploding above me.

“What the hell?” I murmured, looking around. “That has to be a fire hazard, right? We’re, like, *inside*.”

The ballroom had super high ceilings, but still. *So much could go wrong, here! Lucian* just *had to have an entire wing of the palace repaired.*

Also, it wasn’t midnight yet… Was it?

I looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it was only nine o’clock. So what the hell were we celebrating right now?

That question was answered when a Vanguard pack member threw up his hands.

“East Coast midnight, baby!” he bellowed.

A couple of other pack members joined in, whooping and hollering and blowing air horns.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Multiple midnights? How many does anyone need?” she muttered. “You only need to celebrate New Year’s once. If that.” Her gaze fell back to me. “Are you sure you want to have this conversation here, Caliana? Now? It’s not the most comfortable setting for that kind of question, and besides”—Big Mac gave me a searching look—“you look like you’ve been drinking.”

“I guess I have,” I admitted. “Some of your moonshine, for the record. What’s up with that, by the way? How did Lucian get it? Did you sell it to him?”

The witch shrugged casually. “What can I say? I’m an entrepreneur. Anyway.” She looked me square in the eye. “I’ll ask again. Do you really want to have this conversation right now? Do you really want to know? I mean”—she gestured around—“this really isn’t the best place to answer life-altering questions about the *due destini* curse, is it?”

“Why not?” I asked, emboldened by the night—and probably the moonshine.

Big Mac sighed deeply. “Well, for starters, if you’re not completely drunk, you’re close. Secondly, you’re fixating on this, which is never good. And lastly—and most importantly—I’m off duty. Look around. I’m at a party, for crying out loud.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, feeling suddenly bad about pestering her for an answer. Big Mac was right—she rarely did anything just for herself, and I was being selfish, bugging her like this.

She took a sip of her drink and studied me closely. “I *can* tell you, Caliana, but there’s a reason why I haven’t.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “It was at your own request, remember?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I remember.”

And I did remember, but when I’d asked Big Mac not to tell me, I’d been miserable. I’d been so distraught about Seluna and everything that had happened with her—especially the way she’d drawn on the *due destini* and the choice between my mates to hurt me. She’d weaponized the *due destini* against me, and I hadn’t wanted to think about it at all.

“But things are different now,” I assured the witch. “Now I *want* to know.”

Big Mac gave me a searching stare, her expression deeply skeptical. “Why don’t you just give yourself a breather, Caliana? You’ve been through a lot lately, and it’s possible you’re not as clear-headed as you think you are. If you can come to me tomorrow—fully sober—and say that you still want to know, then I will tell you.”

I looked at the witch, feeling torn. On the one hand, now that I had it in my head, I really did want to know. Maybe I *was* fixating. On the other hand, while I wasn’t in the same position I’d been in when I’d made her promise not to tell me, Big Mac was probably right. I wasn’t in the best headspace to receive this information. And even though all the stuff with Seluna was over, it *had* only ended hours ago. I possibly hadn’t given myself the processing time I really needed.

I nodded. “Okay. Do you think you’d need to do the aura reading again?”

“No. I know the answer,” Big Mac said bluntly.

“Okay,” I managed to say. I was feeling a bit choked up, but that was probably fair.

Big Mac looked at me for a moment longer, then gave me a pat on the shoulder, which surprised the hell out of me.

“Hang in there,” she said with a rare smile. “And have a good time. It’s a party, remember?”

She turned and headed back to Mrs. Smith.

I took a deep breath and looked around. The fireworks had stopped while we’d been talking, and the party was still in full swing. People were drinking and eating, swimming and dancing. I caught sight of Lola, Torin, and Jacs nearby. They were dancing, and on closer inspection, I could see Mikah and Gabriel vibing with them. Rishika and Artemis were there, too.

I headed toward the group, looking around, but I didn’t see Xavier. I had no idea where he’d ended up.

“Cali!” Torin cheered when he saw me walking over. “Look, everyone! It’s Cali! CALI!”

The group cheered when they saw me, which made me smile. Gabriel took my hand as I drew near and spun me. I was laughing, but I almost lost my balance, and Mikah caught me just in time.

“Come on, Cali,” he said with a grin. “You have to stay on your toes with this crowd.”

“*Toes!*” Torin shrieked. “Because she’s *dancing*!”

I raised my eyebrows, but Jacs shook her head. “Don’t harsh his vibe, Cali.”

“You know what? I won’t,” I said, and let my judgment go. It *was* a party, just like Big Mac had said, and I let the beat of the music work its magic on me.

“Cali,” Lola said, dancing toward me. “Do you know where the bathroom is? I have no idea where to go in this freaky place.”

“Um…” I glanced around the room. “I *think* I know,” I said uncertainly. “Let’s try to find it.”

We danced ourselves away from our crowd, and I led Lola toward a hallway I thought looked vaguely familiar.

“There it is!” I announced happily, opening a door and finding a multi-stall bathroom on the other side.

“Oh, thank god. I thought I was going to burst,” Lola said gratefully, and she disappeared into a stall.

“I wonder if this is the same bathroom where I got lost at that other Vanguard party.” I looked around, and when I found a door on the far side of the room, I opened it. It led to another hallway. “Yep. This is the one. I left through this door by accident and almost walked into an orgy. Which was a bit of a party foul for me.”

“WHAT?” Lola demanded from inside her stall. “An *orgy*? What kind of party was it?”

“I *know*. But Lucian is just the kind of guy who has… many different kinds of parties.”

The toilet flushed, and Lola unlocked the door. She walked to the counter to wash her hands. “Maybe I’d try it.”

I leaned my hip against the counter. “Try what?”

Lola glanced up at me, then—to my surprise—she blushed. “An orgy.”

“Are you *kidding* me?” I demanded. “Where is this coming from, Ms. Spillane?”

Lola laughed. “I don’t know! I just think it could be really fun!”

I snorted with laughter. “Yeah, well, hit up the Aspen pack Alpha and Luna. They were trying to hook up with me, Xavier, *and* Greyson.”

Lola shook her head. “Yeah, right. I’m not into anyone but Jay. I know that. But if the Emmett situation taught me anything, it’s that I like to *look* at other people.” She shrugged. “I just think it might be kind of fun.”

“Then more power to you, sister,” I said, grinning. “Me, I feel like I can’t even think about *kissing* my mates. Not with the pressure of New Year’s Eve, your bet with Jacqueline, and all this *due destini* curse crap making itself known again.” I sighed and looked at myself in the mirror. The lighting in the bathroom was flattering, but I still looked tired and pale.

“Don’t worry about the bet,” Lola said. “It was stupid. Ignore us, and just do what you want.”

I looked over at Lola with a smile. “Thank you.”

She smiled back and wrapped her arms around me. “Just try to have a good time tonight, Cali. You deserve it.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. I’ll try.”

“Let’s get back out there,” Lola said, pulling away and grinning. “I’ve got some more dancing to do.”

I laughed, and we headed back into the hallway. We were almost back to the ballroom when Lucian suddenly materialized in front of me, making me stop in my tracks.

“Lucian!”

He gave me a lazy smile. “Caliana. I’m so glad I could catch you.” His eyes were trained on me, not even acknowledging Lola. “Can we go somewhere to talk privately?”

# Episode 3403

**Xavier**

I ran a frustrated hand through my hair, though I felt like I wanted to tear it out at the root. I wasn’t sure how much more of the bubble bath versus shower debate I could handle from Jay and Ravi. I absolutely did not give a fuck.

“I’m just saying, you get yourself in a bath, and you can really relax after a long day,” Jay was saying.

“Listen up,” I snapped, looking between their flushed faces. It was clear that they’d both consumed far more alcohol than was good for them. “I’m going to make this really simple. You’re both idiots, and if I hear the word *bath* one more time, I’m going rip your fucking heads off. How about that?”

Jay and Ravi stared at me in shocked silence for a long moment.

“You have to admit, though,” Jay said, “there’s nothing like a really good bubble bath.”

I rolled my eyes as the two of them laughed. I was trying find my anger, but now that Jay had mentioned it, I could think of a few really good baths I’d had with Cali.

“Come on,” Jay goaded me. “You know you agree.”

“I guess I can admit that there’s something to them,” I conceded.

Jay pointed a finger in Ravi’s face and shouted, “*See!* I told you so, sucker!”

“But I’ve enjoyed my fair share of showers, too,” I added.

Ravi laughed. “So the debate still stands, then.”

“No way.” I shook my head. “Not for me, boys. You have at it. I’m going to go look for Cali.”

“Your loss,” Jay shouted after me. “You’re going to miss out on seeing Ravi reduced to a sobbing mess when he realizes how much he loves a bath!”

I rolled my eyes and looked around, scanning the place for Cali. But I didn’t see her. Instead, I saw Duke and Paige standing near a couple from the Blue Blood pack. They had cornered the couple and were leaning against each other, blocking their victims’ exit. I had a suspicion about what Paige and Duke were talking to the couple about. Duke was practically drooling, and Paige had moved closer to rest her hand on the woman’s hip.

I ducked into a doorway as Duke looked around, scanning the room. I wasn’t afraid of Duke, but the guy was looking at this new woman the same way he’d been looking at Cali, and it made my blood boil. Cali wasn’t there to restrain me, so I needed a take a moment to make sure I didn’t accidentally smash that smug, suggestive look off the Aspen Alpha’s face.

“Why are you hiding in a doorway?”  
 I spun around to see Ava stepping toward me. She must have just climbed out of the pool, because her tiny red bikini was still soaked, and she had water pooling at her feet. She had a towel, but instead of it being wrapped around her body, she was using it to dry her long, dark hair.

“I’m not hiding,” I said quickly, forcing myself to stop looking her up and down. “Why the fuck would I be hiding?”

She gave me a searching gaze. “You seem upset. You okay, X?”

“I’m fine,” I said shortly. “But I was wondering why you ignored my warning about that asshole Lucian. We *just* talked about it.”

Ava’s mouth turned up in a surprised smile. “Are you jealous, Xavier?”

I knew she was baiting me, but I refused to rise to it. I wasn’t going to play her bullshit games. “I’m not jealous; I’m disappointed. I thought you were smarter than that, Ava.”

“Smarter than what?” she asked, looking amused by my obvious frustration.

“Lucian’s trying to destroy the Samara pack,” I reminded her. “And he’ll probably take you down along the way.”

Ava stared at me for a moment, then she laughed. “You know, I’m the one who should be disappointed here, X.”

“What does that mean?” I ground out.

She shook her head. “Despite how long you’ve known me, you always seem to underestimate me.”

“What?” I snapped.

Ava stopped drying her hair and looked around, taking in the partiers all around us. She opened the door right behind her back and nodded inside. “I don’t want to talk out in the open like this.”

I hesitated for a moment. I wasn’t all that crazy about following Ava to a secondary location. Ava was wrong about one thing—I didn’t underestimate her. I knew her too well for that. I knew her well enough to be cautious.

Some of what I was thinking must have shown on my face, because Ava rolled her eyes and gestured inside the room. “You can relax, Xavier. I just don’t want anyone to overhear. This isn’t something that needs to become gossip.”

Annoyed, I blew out a breath and stepped into the room.

“What?” I demanded when Ava had closed the door behind us.

She looked at me for a moment. “I’m well aware that Lucian has his eyes on the Samara pack. It makes sense, of course. It’s hardly a secret that we’re vulnerable right now. One look at Zeke gives it away. Being Alpha is killing him. And I know it’s in Lucian’s interest to acquire us. It would increase his influence around here.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So what are you doing with him? What’s your game?”

In an instant, her gaze hardened into ice. “My game is to survive. It always has been.”

I shook my head with a derisive laugh. “And joining the Vanguard pack would be a way to survive? Really, Ava?”

“What other options do I have, Xavier,” she bit out, all traces of teasing gone. She looked hard and defensive as she stared up at me. “Lucian and the Vanguard pack can protect what’s left of the Samara pack. Keep us from becoming vulnerable—*more* vulnerable than we already are. The way I see it, it’s either join with a strong pack and survive, watch as we’re decimated by a rival pack, or get sucked into a pack war.”

I looked at my former mate with a grim curiosity. I had to hand it to Ava—when she’d said that her goal was to survive, she hadn’t been joking. She was like a dictator being threatened with a coup. She knew every political move to make before anyone else did. She always looked out for herself, and she was damn good at it.

But the image of her kissing Lucian in the pool still felt just… wrong.

“You know, Lucian’s interest in Cali almost destroyed all of us,” I reminded her. “Lucian runs hot and cold, and if you’re not careful, he’ll destroy the Samara pack without a second thought. And then he’ll take you down right along with it. He plays dirty, Ava.”

“And what choice to I have?” Ava snapped. She stepped closer to me, looking right into my eyes. “Because I think we’ve gone through the options. First, we went with my idiot cousin Knox, who tried to eat our hearts out. Then we went on to his equally unfit—though slightly less psychotic—replacement, Zeke. And when he bails—which he will—there will be nobody left. That’s it. We’re out of options. So I’m all ears, Xavier. I’m waiting to hear your solution to our problem.”

I gave a dark chuckle. “Well, I can tell you that making out with Lucian isn’t the way out of this.”

“Then what is?” she countered. “It’s easy to criticize my choices when you don’t have a stake in them, but go ahead. I’m still waiting to hear your brilliant plan for my pack.”

“The Samara pack’s problems shouldn’t be my responsibility,” I ground out, feeling furious. “If not for the need for pack unity, I would’ve let your asses die out a long time ago.”

She leaned closer still, her body nearly up against mine.

“I wonder…” she started.

“Wonder what?” I snapped when she didn’t go on.

She smiled, teasing again, though there were cracks around that smile. “I wonder about our mate bond.”

“Our mate bond?” I exploded. “What are you even talking—”

“Without the bond, would you let me sink with the Samara ship, with Lucian as our captain? I wonder if you’d be able to let me go.”

“*Ava*,” I snarled.

“But the bond is still there,” she went on. She gave me a long look. “I’m still waiting, Xavier. And until you come up with a better idea for my pack, I’m going to just enjoy Lucian. Because why not?”

She stepped toward the door, but I moved in front of her, blocking her path. “Don’t.”

Ava paused. She was so close to me. Close enough that I could feel the warmth of her skin radiating toward me. I could feel the puff of breath when she asked, “Why?”

She tipped her head as she looked at me, leaning even closer.

“Are *you* going to become the Samara Alpha?” she whispered.

# Episode 3404

**Greyson**

I headed for the ballroom, not really paying attention to where I was going. I kept going over the conversation I’d just had with Mace, and the very unexpected direction it had taken. When he’d asked me, I hadn’t known what to say. But I felt like I had to tell him that I wouldn’t mind if he asked Maren out. What was I *supposed* to say?

If I’d been honest, I would have told him that I *absolutely* minded. Not that I had anything against Mace. He was a good guy and a decent Alpha. He deserved happiness after losing Pip. And Maren and Fenrir deserved to have a responsible guy in their lives—if that was what Maren wanted. It was just that…

Maren and I had a history together. She was my first love, and, for a while, she’d been *it* for me. Besides that, there had been a time when I’d been convinced that Fenrir was my son. And even now that I knew he wasn’t, I still felt connected to him in some way. It was complicated, and I wondered—if things worked out with Maren and Mace—if it would be weird for me to see them all together. The three of them, like a family.

I knew it shouldn’t be weird. I was in love with Cali. She was my everything. And the fact that I felt troubled by Mace’s question and the possibility of them together made me feel unnerved and angry.

Maybe I just needed more moonshine.

I stopped in the doorway to the ballroom and looked around. The party was in full swing. After the short fireworks display, it seemed like everyone had had the same thought: to get a drink. Which meant the line at the bar was long, winding through the ballroom while the bartenders worked frantically to fill orders.

I was just about to join the line when I happened to glance over and see Elle, being cornered by Duke and Paige.

Shit. That couldn’t be good. What was up with those two, anyway? Why couldn’t they just take the hint and back the hell off from the Redwood pack?

I walked over, watching the faces of the three as they spoke. Elle was listening closely to Duke and Paige as they explained whatever they were into. She looked confused but also a little intrigued. And that worried me. It must have surprised Duke and Paige as well, because they shared a look as I watched them, looking startled but deviously pleased.

I walked closer, wondering how the hell I was going to get Elle out of this situation. As I walked closer, I could hear Paige speaking.

“So, does that mean you’re a virgin?” she asked.

Elle tilted her head, looking confused by the question. I stepped in front of her, saving her from answering.

“That’s enough of that,” I said. I gave Paige and Duke a cold, menacing look. “Why don’t you two go hunt down some prey who are a better match for you?”

Duke laughed, and Paige shrugged, almost sheepishly, like I’d caught a couple of teenagers sneaking out of the house.

“Maybe you’re right,” Duke said. He glanced over at Paige. “We really don’t have time for that tonight, sweetie,” he said, nodding toward Elle.

Paige nodded, and the two of them walked away, disappearing into the crowd like sex-hungry sharks.

I turned to Elle. “Are you okay?”

Elle looked surprised. “Yes. Are *you* okay?”  
 I sighed. “I’m just wondering if you knew that Duke and Paige were trying to… sleep with you.”

“Do you mean they wanted to have sex with me?” Elle asked, her frankness surprising the hell out of me.

“Um, yes. That is what I mean. I just didn’t know you… I guess I’m a little surprised you understood what they were talking about.”

“Well, I don’t understand *all* the things humans do, but sex is something I understand,” she said with a shrug. “I was a wolf, and that’s how baby wolves are made.”

“Right,” I said with a chuckle. “That’s true.”

“What I don’t understand is why humans are so weird talking about it,” Elle went on. “Why did Paige keep saying different words other than the word she meant?”

I laughed. “I don’t know. And I guess you have a point.”

Elle smiled at me. “You don’t have to worry. I get it, I just like to tease humans. I know a lot more than you think.”

I gave Elle an assessing look. “It seems that you do,” I said with a smirk. Elle was constantly reminding me that she really shouldn’t be underestimated. “I’m going to go get a drink.”

She nodded. “I’m going to get food. That’s where I was heading before those two Aspen wolves caught me and dragged me over here.”  
 “Okay. Keep your eyes open,” I said with a chuckle.

Elle headed toward the buffet, but I didn’t walk to the bar. Instead, I walked over to my mom. She was standing with Big Mac, and the two of them were laughing about something. I liked to see it. I was glad my mom had found someone she loved—and who loved her—even if that someone could be as prickly as a cactus.

“Greyson,” my mom said, looking over as I approached. “There you are. Are you having a good time?”

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s quite a party.”

“I know,” my mom said. “I’m getting some ideas for the wedding.”

“Oh, speaking of the wedding, when are our dance classes?” I asked.

She smiled and took my hand. “We could start now.”

“What?” I asked with a laugh.

“Just you wait.” My mom leaned over to give Big Mac a peck on the cheek, then led me toward the dance floor.

The upbeat song ended, and a slower ballad poured out of Lucian’s high-quality speakers.

My mom placed my hand on her waist and nodded. “Here we go.”

I grinned, feeling a little silly, but I started to guide her across the ballroom’s honey-colored wood floors.

“I don’t know if you need lessons, Greyson,” she said with a smile. “You’re a good dancer already. A natural.”

I laughed. “Thank you, but I wonder if you’re a bit biased.”

“Not at all!” she protested.

“Well, I still think I’ll take the lessons with you. I’m looking forward to the wedding,” I told her.

“Are you?” she asked, sounding pleased.

I nodded. “It’ll be a nice change from everything else that’s been going on. And it’ll be nice to have something to celebrate.”

Her eyes twinkled up at me. “Lucian is so good at throwing parties, Greyson. Maybe we should think about having the wedding here.”  
 I knew she was joking, but I still frowned at the suggestion. “No way. The palace is a fine place to celebrate with other packs, but your wedding will be a chance to celebrate something that’s about family and the Redwood pack.”

My mom smiled. “I know. I couldn’t agree more, Greyson.”

Big Mac appeared at my side, as suddenly as if she’d blipped there. I looked over at her in surprise. “Do you want to cut in?”

“Yes, but—no.” She shook her head, looking annoyed. “No. I was looking for you.”

“Why?” I asked, immediately on alert. “What’s up?”

“Where’s Caliana?”

I looked around. “I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I think she’s with my brother.”

But even as I answered the question, I realized I hadn’t actually seen Cali in a while. Which was never a good sign at the Vanguard palace.

“Well, Xavier’s over there,” Big Mac said, pointing across the ballroom. “Let’s go ask him.”

Xavier had just walked in, and he looked pissed.

“Where is she?” I asked as soon as I reached him.

Xavier frowned. “Who?”

“Where’s Cali?” I asked, more urgently now.

Xavier’s frown deepened. “I thought she was with you.” He looked around. “What’s going on?”

“Shit,” I swore under my breath. “Come on.”

Xavier followed me as I threaded my way through the crowd, toward where Rishika and Artemis were dancing.

“Have either of you seen Cali?” I asked.

Artemis stopped dancing. “I saw her and Lola head off together. Maybe to the bathroom? Lola was complaining about having to go.”

“What’s going on?” Xavier demanded. “Why are you looking for her? What’s this all about?”

“I don’t—” I started, but Big Mac interrupted.

“We need to find her,” she said, and there was a sharp edge to her voice that caught my attention right away.

I turned to look her square in the face. “Big Mac. Tell me right now—what’s going on? Why are you looking for Cali?”

Big Mac’s nostrils flared. “It’s the beacon spell.”

“What about it?” Xavier demanded.

She shifted her gaze to him. “It’s about to wear off, and I don’t know what’s going to happen to Cali when it does.”

# Episode 3405

I wasn’t exactly keen on being cornered into a conversation with Lucian, and I tried to protest. “Actually, I was thinking of getting something to eat, or maybe a drink or something.”

At the same time, Lola said, “Cali was just about to help me with something back in there.” We exchanged a look.

But Lucian didn’t seem put off by our differing excuses—in fact, he didn’t seem to be listening at all as he shook his head and reached out to place his hand on my shoulder.

As he started steering me away from the ballroom, I shot Lola an eye roll and shook my head. I might as well get this conversation over with—Lucian tended to get his way in the end.

“It’s too noisy in there,” he said dismissively. “Too loud to have a conversation. Though I’m gratified to see that the party is a roaring success. Not that I doubted it would be. I’m a gifted host.”

He put his hand on the small of my back and guided me through a hallway, then he opened a door and ushered me into what turned out to be a library. It was a different library than the one I’d been in before, with lower ceilings and thick, green carpeting on the floor, silencing our footsteps. How many libraries did this damn place have, anyway?

I turned to look at Lucian, my heart beating fast. Now that we were alone together, I felt edgy, worried that Lucian was going to try to kiss me again—like he had so many times before when he’d thought I was Seluna, or when he’d wanted to draw her out.

Well, I was over that, and I wasn’t going to stand for it. Not after everything I’d been through *because* of Seluna. If he tried to kiss me again, I was ready. I was prepared to blast this guy into next week if he came near me.

But Lucian didn’t walk toward me, and he didn’t look remotely interested in romance. He strode toward a far wall and stepped in front of a large mirror. He looked carefully at his reflection, adjusted his hair in its artful disarray, then turned to look at me. “Caliana, I wanted to speak to you because I’ve been wanting to apologize.”

I stared at him, surprised by this turn of events. “*What?*”

What the hell was he apologizing for? There were plenty of options, but I wondered what *he* thought he’d done wrong.

“I meant to do it sooner, of course,” he said, “but the party distracted me. But then, when I saw you in the pool, I remembered.”

“Remembered what?” I asked, still feeling a step behind.

“I saw the handprint on your beautiful skin, of course,” he said, his expression concerned. “Does it still pain you?”

He stepped toward me, his hand outstretched to touch me, but I took a step back.

“No, don’t,” I said. Then I shook my head. “We returned the ashes.”

Lucian stopped in his tracks. “Did you?” he asked, looking both surprised and pleased.

I nodded. “Yeah. And the handprint doesn’t hurt. I hope it fades away with time. It might leave a scar, at worst.”

Lucian frowned. “I’m sorry about all of that.”

“Sorry for what?” I asked curiously.

He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry for using you on Seluna’s behalf. I really hope you can forgive me for it.”

I looked at him carefully. Upon inspection, I wondered if he might be a little drunk. Maybe he’d had too much moonshine as well.

In any case, I nodded. “Thank you for your apology. I hope we can both put all that behind us, now.”

I wanted to rub my eyes, but I managed not to. I was just so freaking tired of talking about Seluna every single time I was with Lucian.

“Anyway,” I said, starting toward the door, “I guess we should get back to the party.”

I’d just reached for the doorknob when my shoulder began to throb. I stopped short, hit suddenly by a wave of light-headedness that made me sway on my feet. I reached out, my hand missing the wall completely.

A pair of hands caught me, and Lucian appeared next to me, looking worried. “Caliana, are you all right?”

I looked at up at him, staring into his eyes, trying to clear my head. I didn’t know how to answer him, and I didn’t know why I was feeling so strange.

Before I could say a word, the door burst open and Xavier, Greyson, and Big Mac all came hurtling into the room.

Xavier pulled me from Lucian’s arms, and Greyson stepped between me and the Vanguard Alpha.

“What the hell is going on here?” Greyson demanded.

“I was *helping* her,” Lucian protested.

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “I’ll bet you were.”

“Stop,” I said, shaking my head, trying to clear it. “Why are you here?”

Big Mac raised her eyebrows. “We were wondering the same thing about *you*, Caliana.”

Greyson and Xavier were glowering at Lucian, and the last thing I wanted was for this to turn into a fight.

“Lucian didn’t do anything. Stop, Greyson, Xavier. We were just talking, and I lost my balance.”

Big Mac looked at me closely. “Why?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “We were talking about the handprint, and I felt something happen with it right before I got dizzy. But maybe it was just the moonshine.” I gave Big Mac a weak smile. “It’s strong stuff.”

But Big Mac didn’t smile back. “I don’t think so. My moonshine can peel the wood off a fence, but it wouldn’t affect a demon print. It’s more likely that what you felt was the beacon spell starting to wear off.” She looked grim. “I did warn you that it might affect you, but I don’t think it’ll be too terrible.”

I paused at that. “Can you define your idea of terrible?”

Big Mac looked thoughtful. “Let’s just say that if you hadn’t found and gotten rid of those ashes, you might have gotten a real wallop, but since that’s not the case, you’re going to get off easier.”

“Meaning what?” I pressed.

She shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. You might get a little dizzy. Feel a little discomfort. That kind of thing. I just wanted to give you a heads-up so you could mentally prepare for it.”

The way she was talking about it didn’t sound too bad, and I pulled myself from Xavier’s grip. “Okay, then. I’m fine. I got a little dizzy. No problem. It’s not a big deal.”

I didn’t want to spend the whole night talking about my afflictions and the myriad of curses hanging over me.

I took a deep breath and tried to smile. “This is a party. I want to have fun tonight. We made it through the worst of this,” I said, gesturing to my back, “and whatever the residual effects are, I’m sure I can handle it.”

I looked at Greyson’s and Xavier’s stony expressions. It didn’t look like they totally believed me, but I knew they would support me. I was secretly pleased that they’d cared enough about me to come searching for me, but it really hadn’t been necessary.

“I’m fine,” I said again, as much for my sake as anyone else’s.

The library was quiet around us, the only sound the tick of the ornate carriage clock on the mantle. The thing looked like it had been made for some French royal’s court. It was gold, with little gilt birds flying around it.

Finally, Lucian cleared his throat. “It might be time for me to return to the ballroom. And perhaps you should all join me. People are bound to be disappointed if I don’t make myself visible throughout the course of the night.”

“Or maybe it’s the other way around,” Xavier muttered under his breath. He looked over at me. *Are you sure you’re okay? He didn’t—*

*No, nothing, I swear*, I assured him*. I’m fine. I promise.*

*So what are you doing in here?* Xavier asked.

*Lucian said he wanted to talk. He apologized.*

Xavier’s eyes widened with surprise. *Are you serious? He apologized? Lucian?*

*Yeah. I know.*

Xavier shook his head in disbelief. *I didn’t even think he was capable of an apology.*

*Me neither*, I admitted. *It’s been a night of surprises.*

*You can say that again.*

“All right, we’ll go too,” Greyson said.

As everyone headed out of the library and back into the hallway, Big Mac held me back. “Keep me updated, will you?” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Updated about what?”

She pressed her lips into a thin line. “I don’t expect there to be any problems, but just to be safe…”

I nodded. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Big Mac must not have been the only one who was worried for my safety, because as we walked out of the library, I noticed that Greyson and Xavier were now flanking me, one on either side.

We were almost back at the ballroom when Lucian stopped abruptly in the doorway.

“What’s up?” Greyson asked.

“I forgot about the time!” Lucian exclaimed. “I’m almost late for the surprise!”

# **Episode** 3406

I gave Lucian a wary look as he headed back into the ballroom. I couldn’t imagine what new surprise awaited us. Knowing Lucian, I was pretty sure no one at the party would be able to guess what it was. I mean, he’d surprised us with the naked circus performers at the last party, and he already unveiled a cannon tonight. What else could he possibly have planned for a New Year’s party?

“What do you think it is?” I asked.

Greyson looked as suspicious as I felt. “I don’t know. But my guess is that it’s something huge. You know Lucian. He wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Lucian had called for the music to stop, and the DJ cut it. Every eye in the place turned to him.

“I want everyone to go to the east courtyard immediately! It’s almost time to celebrate the New Year in the Central Time Zone!”

“Oh my god,” Xavier muttered, rolling his eyes.

But no one else seemed to share his irritation. Lucian’s announcement was met with murmurs and cheers and a lot of curious questions about what he had planned.

Though, when I caught sight of Aysel, she was rolling her eyes too. Which meant that—whatever Lucian had planned for the Central Time Zone’s midnight celebration—Aysel was clearly not impressed. But she and the other Vanguard pack members standing with her dutifully filed out of the ballroom, and the rest of the party followed. It was clear that no one actually knew where the east courtyard was, and everyone had been waiting for a Vanguard to lead the way.

“Maybe we should have just stayed home,” Xavier said. “I mean, why wasn’t that an option for us? The last time we were here, Lucian was about to marry a demon and we were all turned into statues. I think it would have been understandable if we’d turned down his invite.”

“Whatever this thing is, we need to be ready for anything,” Greyson said. He looked over at me. “Stay close to me, just in case.”

I nodded, putting up no argument. I was glad to stay close to him. I’d been having a good time, but I didn’t really like surprises at the Vanguard estate.

We followed the crowd, walking down a hall until we reached a high arched doorway. I looked around, trying to remember if I’d ever been to this courtyard. It was always hard to navigate the Vanguard palace, and now that Lucian had redecorated, I felt like a boat, lost at sea.

As we reached the east courtyard, I could see that everyone was gathering around a shimmering reflecting pool. In the center was a large object of some kind, but I couldn’t tell what it was, because it was covered by a blood-red velvet drape.

“What the hell is that?” Lola wondered aloud.

“Maybe we should try to sneak a peek?” Gabriel suggested with a grin.

“A car? Is Lucian going to give away a car, like *The Price is Right*?” Ravi asked, sounding excited.

“Oh man, I would love a Prius,” Jay said. “Just something with sensible gas milage.”

“Oh god, Jay, don’t talk like that in front of everyone else. You know how it turns me on,” Lola said, rolling her eyes.

Everyone laughed at that.

“One of those cakes that a girl in a bikini jumps out of?” Ravi suggested. “That’d be cool.”

“I think it’s a lifetime supply of caviar,” Mikah posited. “Not because I think it’s likely. Just because that would be cool.”

“The perfect food for the vampire on the go,” Gabriel teased.

“God, I hope it’s not another statue,” I muttered. “Especially not one that comes to life.”

I hoped I’d never see anything like that ever again.

The thought made me nervous enough that I took a step toward Greyson, closing the small space left between us. Then Xavier looped his arm around my shoulders, and I had to admit that between the two of them, I did feel pretty safe.

Rishika and Artemis were moving toward us, but as I watched, Artemis stopped. She leaned over and whispered something to Rishika, and the two of them moved a little farther away. It was odd, and I wondered what it was about, but before I could wonder for too long, Lucian called for everyone’s attention. He did it by blowing hard into some kind of weird, curved animal horn. The sound made most of the werewolves flinch and instinctively cover their ears.

He cleared his throat. “Thank you for joining me out here, and tonight at this party. I am so glad we could all meet together to celebrate the turning of the year. Now, for my next surprise, I want you all to know that I commissioned the finest sculptor in all of Oregon to create a work that will rival those crafted by the masters in Ancient Rome and Greece. This figure will stand the test of time and be the envy of all the world!”

Greyson snorted, and Xavier laughed, not even bothering to try to turn it into a cough.

“This ought to be good,” he muttered.

Lucian didn’t hear him, of course, and he turned to Armin. He nodded, and Armin gestured to a small knot of pack members nearby. In an instant, the velvet drape was pulled off.

I realized I was holding my breath in anticipation as the drape fell away.

“I am honored to announce the first-time unveiling of *Lucian: Prince of the Werewolves*!”

There was a collective gasp from the assembled crowd as we looked at the giant marble sculpture before us. There, standing tall, was a giant—larger-than-life—sculpture of Lucian. He was wearing a crown, he was holding a scepter, and he was very, *very* naked.

“Dammit. I wanted a Prius,” Jay said quietly.

I stared at the sculpture, open-mouthed with shock. I was *floored*, but I was also aware that it was crazy to be so surprised by this. This was exactly the kind of thing Lucian would do. Like, *of course* he would commission a giant sculpture of himself. It really wasn’t all that weird—not for him.

But did he have to be so… *naked* about it?

I glanced to either side of me and noticed that Greyson and Xavier were having a very, very hard time keeping from laughing out loud. Greyson’s face was flushed, and Xavier looked like he was going to burst at any moment.

“*Stop*,” I hissed. “Don’t do anything to upset Lucian. You know how touchy he is.”

Torin stepped closer to the reflecting pool, and the statue. “Is that…?” he trailed off.

We all looked where Torin was pointing, and my breath caught in my throat. I thought I’d been shocked before, but it was *nothing* compared to what I felt now. Not only was he completely naked, but Lucian’s sculpture showed him *fully erect*. What the actual *hell*? Even for Lucian, that seemed like a bit much. Definitely more than I wanted to see.

“Maybe it’s just the angle we’re looking at it from,” I murmured, hoping I was right. But when I moved a little to my left, the erection became even more pronounced. I closed my eyes.

There were mixed reactions from the crowd—some applauded, but there was definitely some hastily covered laughter.

Lucian must have heard enough of that, because he looked around quickly. “What’s wrong?” he demanded.

Armin—braver than me—stepped toward Lucian and leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

Lucian’s face paled in an instant. Then he turned red as a beet. “It’s all wrong! It’s anatomically incorrect!”

Well, it was a relief to at least hear him admit it.

“IT SHOULD BE *BIGGER*!” Lucian raged.

Again, some people cheered this, but a few more people started to laugh. Some were even openly giggling.

“You need to find me that worthless sculptor!” Lucian shouted at the hapless Armin. “I want to see him *now*!”

I stared at him in shock. I couldn’t believe it. Lucian had *wanted* the sculpture to show him aroused like that? For what purpose?

Xavier and Greyson had lost whatever control they’d been trying to achieve, and they were laughing hysterically. Jay had joined them as well, and the three of them were doubled over.

“The thing about working with that artist is that it’s impossible to get him *up* in the morning,” Jay shrieked, breaking into more laughter.

Greyson and Xavier lost their shit.

“Cali?”

I looked over at Rishika, who had appeared next to me. “Hi.”

“Will you come talk to Artemis?” she said.

I frowned. “Of course. Why didn’t she come over herself? What’s going on?”

I followed Rishika through the crowd.

“Artemis is still really upset about telling Adéluce about Xavier’s location.”

“Really? Still?” I asked.

Rishika nodded. “I’m hoping you can talk some sense into her.”

Before I could ask what kind of sense I could talk into Artemis, we reached her.

“Don’t bother, Cali,” she said hotly. “I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to tell Xavier everything.”

# Episode 3407

**Xavier**

I could barely breathe. I was choking with laughter, and I wasn’t even bothering to hide it anymore. I wasn’t even a little bit surprised that Lucian had commissioned this absurd, larger-than-life sculpture of himself—though, apparently, according to him, not *everything* was larger than life. Nor was I surprised that the princeling had gathered all the party guests to present the thing, like he was unveiling something of great historical significance. All of this was completely in line with Lucian’s typical modus operandi. That was all just Lucian being Lucian.

What *was* hard to believe was that the guy hadn’t checked the sculpture himself before he’d—uh—exposed himself. Apparently, he had wanted to be surprised, too.

Next to me, Gabe was giggling like a lunatic. Mikah had puffed out his cheeks, trying not to howl with laughter. Lola was hanging off Jay, nearly crying.

“I’m going to pee,” she wheezed. “I swear I’m going to pee.”

“I can’t look away,” Gabe gasped out. “I want to, but I can’t tear my eyes away. Someone, please, help me.”

“Armin!” Lucian was screaming, his face red with fury. “ARMIN! You hunt that sculptor down! You get him here, and you get him to fix this, do you hear me? This is *not* accurate! And if anyone doesn’t believe me, I will *prove* how anatomically incorrect this sculpture is right here and now! I will *prove* it!”

He was wild, tearing off his clothes, but Aysel stepped toward him, stopping him before he stripped completed naked, and pulled him aside. She bent her head toward his and started speaking, apparently trying to talk some sense into him. Good luck to her there.

“Good lord,” I muttered, glancing over at Jay. “What did he call this thing?”

“I believe it was *Lucian: Prince of the Werewolves*,” Jay said drily. He was still holding a nearly hysterical Lola upright.

I shook my head. “Unbelievable. He can call the damn thing whatever he wants—he’s never going to be the prince he wants to be. Not to any werewolf with half a brain or an ounce of pride, anyway.”

Cali—who’d been speaking to Artemis—appeared next to me. “Xavier? Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure.” I took a last look at the sculpture, laughed, and followed Cali away from the crowd. “What’s up?” I asked.

She didn’t answer, just led me back toward the palace and inside. Artemis was standing just inside with Rishika, and they both looked anxious.

The muscles in my back tensed. “What’s going on?” I asked urgently, looking around at the women. “Did a Vanguard try something? Because if they did—”

“No, Xavier, that’s not it,” Cali interrupted. “Artemis has something she wants to tell you. And I really hope you’re going to be understanding about it.”

I stared at Cali, then at Artemis, totally confused. I couldn’t imagine what the hell this was supposed to be about.

Artemis took a deep breath. “It’s okay, Cali,” she said. “I can take it from here.”

Cali nodded, but I saw that her expression was worried, and I braced myself for whatever Artemis was going to say, and whatever fucking calamity lay ahead.

“Okay,” Artemis started. “I wanted to tell you something…”

“Yeah?” I prompted when she didn’t go on. I was getting edgier.

“You know how Adéluce was somehow able to find you at Crater Lake?”

I nodded.

“She found you because I told her you were back in Oregon,” Artemis said, all in a rush. “I told her to save Rishika’s life.”

I stared at her, letting the information settle in. I was shocked—of course—but in a way, it made perfect sense. I’d been wondering how Adéluce had found us so quickly.

“Xavier,” Artemis said, nearly in tears. “Say something.” She shook her head. “Or don’t. I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness. I feel like I let the whole pack down.”

“Xavier?” Cali said quietly.

Her voice was enough to shake me from my thoughts, and I put my arm around Artemis, pulling her into a side hug.

“Hey,” I said softly. “You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

“What are you talking about?” Artemis wailed. “I gave you up, Xavier!”

I half-smiled. “Do you think I wouldn’t have given you up if Cali’s life had depended on it?”

That almost surprised a smile out of her.

“I get it,” I assured her. “I really do. You did what you had to do. And nobody can question the choice you made, because nobody but you was facing the loss of the person they loved. They weren’t there, so they don’t get to judge. Plus, Adéluce knew where the ashes were. It was only a matter of time before she went to check on them. You probably only gave her a minor head start. Things would have ended the same way regardless.”

Artemis threw her arms around me, surprising the hell out of me.

“Thank you,” she whispered. When she pulled back, she was wiping tears from her face, which I guessed meant I must have said and done the right thing. For once.

Rishika looked as relieved as Artemis, and she threw her arms around her girlfriend.

“Okay,” I said, clapping my hands together. “I don’t know about you ladies, but I’ve seen enough of the marbled princeling. How about we head back to the ballroom, get some drinks, and have some fun?”

“Yeah!” Cali said, grinning, but before we could make a move, another voice came from behind us.

“Make way!” someone commanded.

I pulled Cali backward as a team of Vanguard pack members hurried by, pushing what looked like the cannon from earlier past us, heading toward the courtyard.

We all stared at it, baffled.

“I know Lucian is upset about his wiener not being big enough, but is he upset enough that he’s going to *blow up* the sculpture?” I wondered. “Because that might be kind of hilarious to watch… Hey, hang on a second,” I said, stopping one of the Vanguards as he passed by. “What’s going on?”

“We’re moving the cannon to the east lawn,” the guy said impatiently. “Now make room.”

I stepped back, feeling disappointed. “It would have been great to see a giant-sized Lucian blown to pieces. It really would’ve been a nice way to ring in the new year,” I said sadly.

Cali didn’t laugh. “I don’t know, Xavier. I don’t think this is funny. I think Lucian is really upset.”

“So what if he is?” I asked. “What do I care if Lucian’s panties get in a twist?”

“Think about it,” Cali said. “How does Lucian usually act when he’s upset?”

“Like a crazy person,” I conceded. “Right. We’d better go find out what’s going on.”

So we followed the cannon into the courtyard.

“Be careful with that,” Lucian was commanding. “Watch where you’re going!” He started after the pack members pushing the cannon.

I slipped my arm around Cali’s shoulder and watched the chaos unfold. Then I caught sight of Ava, who was watching me with a tight look on her face. Caught, she glanced away from me and followed after Lucian.

What the hell was she doing now? Hadn’t I made it clear to her that she needed to stay the hell away from the princeling? What did she think she was playing at?

“Hang on a second,” I muttered to Cali. “I’ll be right back.”

I moved away from Cali and strode toward Ava, intercepting her before she could reach Lucian.

“Xavier, what are you—”

I didn’t wait for her to finish, just took her by the arm and steered her away. “A better question would be what are *you* doing?” I asked tightly.

She glared at me. “Have you changed your mind, then?” she snapped. “Are you going to become the Samara Alpha?”

I rolled my eyes. “I already told you to forget about that.”

She yanked her arm from my grasp. “Then leave me the fuck alone, Xavier,” she bit out. “I don’t need you to police me if you’re not going to help me. I can manage quite well on my own.”

“Why won’t you listen to me?” I asked, beyond frustrated. “You know I’m right about that guy. Lucian’s trouble.”

“Xavier—”

“Are you being irrational just to get back at me because I broke up with you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I’m being *smart*, Xavier. You’re the one who’s being irrational. Now leave me the hell alone.”

She started toward Lucian, and I turned to watch as she walked away. But her steps faltered when there was a sudden shout. The cannon jerked, and the long barrel swung around.

“NO!” Lucian screamed. “Stop it!”

The Vanguard wolves lunged, desperately trying to stop the barrel of the cannon as it swung around, but they were too slow, and the barrel was too fast. The cannon struck the statue, snapping off Lucian’s marble penis with an echoing crack.

# Episode 3408

You could have heard a pin drop as we all stared in horror at the newly castrated statue.

Then, Xavier’s snort of laughter broke the silence and triggered a few other suppressed laughs. I spun and glared at him, my expression a clear demand for him to *shut up!* We were only here to placate Lucian and try to improve our relationship with the Vanguard pack. Laughing at a literal—and broken—representation of Lucian’s manhood was *not* going to help us accomplish either of those things.

Xavier quieted down, but I could still see his body shaking with suppressed laughter. I rolled my eyes. *Some help you are.*

Armin stepped forward with a scowl. “Wheel the statue out immediately,” he barked at the workers. They hurried to follow his instructions like their lives depended on it. Which, now that I thought about it, they possibly did.

Armin turned to Lucian, whose fists were clenched. His jaw was so tense I thought he might crack a molar, and a vein was visibly pulsing on his neck.

*He actually looks kind of scary, like he’s ready to punch something. Or someone.*

And unfortunately for Armin, he seemed to be at the top of Lucian’s list.

“Be careful, you ingrates!” Lucian snarled at the workers as they wheeled out the statue. “That was supposed to be a masterpiece, and thanks to your idiocy, it’s been defaced!”

“Or de-dicked,” I heard Xavier whisper to Jay.

I rounded on them. “*Shut up.*”

While Lucian kept micromanaging the attendants, Armin turned back to the waiting crowd and cleared his throat. “Still another two hours until midnight.” He forced a very painful-looking smile. “Let’s have some music, shall we?”

He gave a signal, and the music started up again, muffling the sounds of Lucian chewing out the attendants.

I winced as I watched the interaction. Clearly, Lucian’s anger was misplaced. He was looking for someone to take out his frustration on, though I couldn’t tell if he was frustrated about the artist not… correctly rendering his physique… or the fact that the cannon had broken his marble dick off.

*Maybe both.* For all the pomp and circumstance that Lucian maintained, I’d come to realize he was deeply sensitive, especially when it came to his image and authority. This snafu with the statue probably hit both pressure points.

I turned to Xavier, who’d been joined by Greyson. They were both caught in a fit of silent laughter, tears slipping down their cheeks.

I punched each of them in the shoulder, even though they probably barely felt it. “Great job, you two. What would we have done if you’d offended Lucian? We’re trying to make things better with him!”

“Oh, come on,” Xavier said, still breathless with laughter. “It was hilarious! Like something out of a movie. I can’t believe this is real life.” He dissolved into another fit of laughter.

I raised a brow at Greyson. “Do you seriously think this is *that* funny?”

“Um, yeah? Did you not see his dick fly off?”

“You two are lucky he’s too busy ripping into those attendants to hear what you’re saying.”

Greyson shrugged. “We could have handled him.”

“You’re both ridiculous!” I snapped. “I can’t believe you’re so immature! I’m going to get a drink.”

I stormed off, leaving my mates to amuse themselves. If Lucian caught them laughing at him, I wasn’t going to save them.

I grabbed a flute of champagne from a passing waiter and wandered out of the courtyard and into the garden area, which was empty. *Thank goodness.*

The beginning of a headache was pressing in on my skull. Hopefully I just needed some fresh air. It’d been a while since I’d been crammed in with this many people, or since I’d had this much to drink.

The fact that I was feeling less than stellar hit me harder than I would’ve expected. I’d come here hoping for the release of a party—everything else aside, nobody threw a party like Lucian—but instead of enjoying myself and letting go of all the stress of the past few weeks, I was out here alone. Then again, when was the last time I’d had a chance to be alone without worrying about the ashes, or running to catch a ghost or a witch or a demon?

I blew out a breath. I was feeling all right, but I was a little tired. It was getting late, and I kind of felt like I’d been running nonstop since we’d left for New Orleans.

*I should make a New Year’s resolution to take more vacations.*

I wasn’t sure I was going to make it the two hours to midnight without falling asleep on a garden bench somewhere. I looked down at my champagne flute. *Maybe alcohol isn’t the best thing to be drinking if I’m having a hard time staying awake.*

“Well, hello there,” a voice said from the shadows.

I squeaked and spun around, almost dropping my champagne flute. Then, as Aysel stepped into the moonlight, my surprise turned to irritation.

I scowled at her. “Why do you have to sneak around like that?”

“It’s not sneaking around when it’s *my* house.”

I sighed and set my half-full champagne flute down on a small stone bench. Aysel stepped forward, picked it up, and downed the rest of the glass. “Thanks.”

“Sure, no problem.” I shrugged, rolling my eyes. Because I’d definitely set it down on the bench for her to guzzle down, not so I could come back to it later. “I’d better get back to the party.”

I only made it a few steps before Aysel put a hand on my shoulder. Her hand lingered there, on the remnant of Seluna’s handprint. “What an odd thing, to have such a connection to something so powerful.”

I jerked out her grasp. “Believe me, it’s no picnic. Hopefully it’ll be gone soon. Sorry to disappoint you.”

She frowned and shook her head. “Cali, this might be hard to believe, but I never wanted you to get hurt. And I definitely never wanted you to die.”

She was right—it *was* hard to believe. But there was something in her tone… a sincerity that I’d never heard from her before. And was that a little hurt? Had I hurt her feelings by assuming she wanted the mark to stick around?

The concept of being able to hurt Aysel’s feelings was so foreign, I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d somehow crossed over into the Twilight Zone.

“Sorry.” I sighed. “I have a small headache, probably from the moonshine. I think it’s making me crabby.”

“I have just the thing to distract you from that.” She started back toward the house, and when I made no move to follow her, she turned back with an inviting smile. “Come on, Caliana. Let me show you. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

*Yep, I’m definitely in the Twilight Zone.*

But it couldn’t hurt, right? This was a party. I should try to socialize. Besides, if I played nice with Aysel, maybe that could give me brownie points with the Vanguard pack, which was the reason why we’d come here in the first place.

I hurried to catch up with her.

“Where’s Ravi?” Aysel asked as she led me through the palace. “I haven’t seen him since you all arrived.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “He’s yummy.”

I frowned. I couldn’t picture sweet Ravi with man-eating Aysel. “He’s not available,” I lied.

Ravi was definitely playing the field, but I didn’t want Aysel to get her claws in him. The best relationship we could ever have with the Vanguard pack was one built on mutual respect and distance. Aysel screwing around with a Redwood pack member wasn’t going to accomplish either of those things.

She winked at me. “Everyone’s available when the opportunity’s right.”

I tried to mentally wipe her words out of my head. We reached the second floor, and Aysel turned into what looked like a giant closet-slash-dressing room. She rifled through the clothes, then pulled something off the rack and started stripping.

I spun around and slammed my eyes shut. “What are you *doing*?”

“All this time with werewolves and you’re still squeamish around nudity?” Aysel laughed. “I’m surprised. I thought for sure we would have broken you of that by now.”

“Nudity is fine when you’re shifting, but this is a party!”

“That’s an even better reason to be naked. How many New Year’s Eve parties have you been to with werewolves, anyway?”

“This is my first,” I admitted.

“Then let me show you what it’s really about.” She shoved something into my arms, and I peeled my eyes open to see that I was holding a lacy lingerie set.

“What’s this?” I asked blankly.

“Put this on. No questions. It’s your size.”

After all the times Aysel had played dress-up with me, it made sense that she knew my measurements. Still, did diplomacy really have to go this far?

I sighed as I slipped out of my clothes and put on the lingerie.

I felt more than a little silly in the silk slip and see-through robe, but it was a vast improvement on the corset-slash-garter situation Aysel had changed into.

“Come on. The fun is just down the hall.” She gave me a wicked grin.

I was starting to feel like I’d made a terrible mistake. Still, I followed her. Never let it be said that I wasn’t committed to improving inter-pack relations.

*If Aysel wants to play some weird sexy sleepover games, I can play along.*

Aysel stopped in front of a door, waggled her eyebrows at me, then opened it. The lights were off inside, but there were enough candles blazing to cast the room into a soft, moody light. I stepped inside, my eyes adjusting, and let out a gasp.

*Oh my god. She’s brought me to an orgy!*

# Episode 3409

**Marta**

As I waited for Tabitha and Dani to return, I stuck to the corner of the room that was serving as my sanctuary. I sipped from a glass of some kind of clear, strong alcohol that someone had thrust into my hands a minute before some kind of strange fiasco involving a cannon had erupted outside.

From what I could make out, it sounded like high drama, but unlike everyone else at this godforsaken party, I didn’t really feel like going to investigate. No, I was planning to stay here in my corner, brooding like that Dark Fae, Adair, until Dani and Tabitha came to tell me it was time to leave.

Hopefully, that time would come sooner rather than later.

I wasn’t going to hold my breath, though. The sisters had disappeared with the crowd earlier and hadn’t come back yet. For all I knew, they’d been absorbed by whatever new spectacle the Vanguard palace had to offer.

I sighed loudly. Which was okay, because nobody was around to hear me. It was exactly what I’d said I wanted, so why did I feel so sad and pissed off about it?

Movement caught my attention at the far end of the room, where Marissa—that woman from the Samara pack—was heading off deeper into the palace. I sank even further into my corner, clutching my half-empty drink to my chest.

*Please don’t notice me. Please don’t notice me. I’m not here.*

If one Samara was nearby, it wasn’t unreasonable to think the others might not be far away. And if I had to come face-to-face with Perrie again, there was a chance that I’d literally vomit with rage. I still couldn’t get the image of Perrie and Lilac kissing out of my head. It was playing on a loop, endlessly torturing me, reminding me why Lilac and I had no future. Why I was shitty and selfish and cruel to not be happy for him.

He’d found his mate, and clearly they were already connecting. This was supposed to be a good thing for him, right? He was finding the one person in the world who was destined for him. He was so lucky.

And me? I was brooding and drinking. And acting like Lilac and Perrie kissing had anything to do with me. They were mates! They literally had a bond designed to bring them together. Why *wouldn’t* they be kissing?

If I cared about Lilac more, I’d find it in myself to be happy for him instead of pouting about it.

All these thoughts of kissing made me think of Okorie. Of the kiss we’d shared. But that hadn’t been a mate thing—that had been pure, one hundred percent attraction.

And I didn’t have the first idea what to do about it. My messy feelings about Lilac aside, my mind and heart had never felt so jumbled.

Marissa disappeared into another room, and I glanced around. *Should I find a new hiding spot? Maybe one less out in the open?*

It’d make it harder for Dani and Tabitha to find me, but who was I kidding? They were probably having the time of their lives. They weren’t coming back for me anytime soon.

I stood up, then froze when I spotted Charlie heading my way. *Crap! Is Violet close by?*

I scurred down a random hallway in the opposite direction. The last thing I needed was another lecture from Violet. I didn’t care where I was going as long as it was far away from Lilac, his sister, his mate, and anyone else remotely involved in this mess.

I raced down the hallway and tried the first door I came across. It was locked.

*Maybe I should just go back the way I came and find another hallway. This place is huge—I’m bound to find another hiding place sooner or later.*

But when I turned around, Charlie’s voice echoed down the hallway.

“Come on!” He laughed. “It’s New Year’s Eve, and we’re in this ridiculously gigantic mansion. No one will care if we sneak off for a few minutes.”

*Well, this is awesome. Either I keep trying random doors, or I ruin Charlie and Violet’s “alone time.”*

Violet’s laughing voice sounded from the same direction, and it got closer with each syllable. “I told my brother I was just getting a drink.”

*Crap, crap, crap!*

I darted to the next door and twisted the doorknob. The door opened, and I slipped inside, closing it behind me, my chest heaving. Hopefully Charlie and Violet hadn’t seen me escape in here. There was a chance that Violet was too mad at me to care what I was doing, but I could also imagine her chasing me down for round two.

*Hard pass.*

I pressed my ear to the door to listen. Violet’s and Charlie’s voices drew closer, but soon they softened, signaling that they’d kept going down the hallway.

I slumped against the door with a sigh. *I can’t believe it’s New Year’s Eve and I’m hiding in here, avoiding all the people I care about.*

Tears burned my eyes, and I sniffled. What good was escaping from Bert and building a life for myself when I was just burning bridges left and right? This wasn’t what I’d signed up for. I’d never in a million years wanted this to happen, to be alone again. And now it was even worse, because I was surrounded by people. I wasn’t trapped against my will. If I was lonely now, it was my own fault.

My chest hitched with a sob.

“Hello?” purred a sultry female voice. “Are you okay?”

I spun around and, with a jolt of horror, realized the room wasn’t actually empty. All along, my little emotional breakdown had had an audience.

A woman was lounging against the headboard of the massive four-poster bed in the sexiest, skimpiest red lingerie I’d ever seen. Somehow, those lacy scarlet scraps covered only the barest of essentials, but the design of the lingerie somehow made it more provocative than if she’d been outright naked. I tugged at the collar of my shirt to make sure I was still covered.

The woman stood up and walked over, looking sleek and spry and sensual. Then, because I apparently hadn’t hit rock bottom just yet, the door to the adjoining bathroom opened and an alarmingly chiseled man stepped into the bedroom.

After picking my jaw up off the floor, I realized I’d seen this man at the party earlier. I hadn’t met him, but I thought he might be from one of the visiting packs. I blinked at his bare chest and tried not to drool. He was only wearing slacks, though they did little to hide the shape of his powerful thighs.

*What the heck did I just walk into?*

Or more accurately, what had I just interrupted?

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry!” I blurted out, backing up toward the door. I blindly reached backward to grope for the doorknob. “I didn’t mean to interrupt… whatever this is.”

I’d gone from brooding alone about how lonely I was to running into couples everywhere I turned. Now these people would forever think of me as the girl who’d crashed their sexy time.

*Could this night get any worse?*

In a smooth motion, the woman grabbed a silk robe from the back of a chair and wrapped it around herself. “You were crying. Are you all right?” She turned back to the man. “Duke, can you get a tissue, please?”

The woman’s question was literally the last reaction I’d expected, and the tenderness in her voice brought a fresh round of tears to my eyes.

“N-No,” I said in an awkward laugh-sob-hiccup. Embarrassment heated my cheeks. Actually, this *could* get worse. Because now I was the girl who’d interrupted their sexy time and was now ugly crying all over the mood. Who knew?

“What’s the trouble?” the woman asked.

Tears slipped down my cheeks. “My boyfriend—” I winced with another sob, then corrected myself. “My *ex-boyfriend* found his mate.”

Understanding dawned on the woman’s face. “Oh, honey. I’m so sorry. That’s heartbreaking. Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head, still crying. “N-No. I’ll be fine.” I wiped my eyes. “Sorry for barging in. I’ll just be go—”

A knock sounded at the door, almost thunderous in my ears because I was standing so close.

“Marta?” Okorie’s voice slipped through the door. “Are you in there?”

“Is that the ex?” the woman asked. “Do you want me to talk to him? I can tell him to go away.”

“No, he’s not.” I sniffled. “But thanks.”

“Marta, I’m coming in,” Okorie warned me, and good thing too, because I would’ve been hit in the face by the door if I hadn’t known to step aside.

Okorie’s eyes were hard as he stopped in front of me and took in my red, tearstained face. He looked from me to the woman and the man, who had just stepped out of the bathroom again, a tissue in hand.

“What’s going on here?” Okorie demanded.

“Nothing,” I said. “I was just leaving. Turns out, this isn’t the bathroom.”

“Good luck, dear,” the woman said, giving me a wink. “This one’s a cutie.”

I flushed deeper as I left the room and walked a few steps down the hallway.

*Lesson learned: it can always get worse.*

“Marta, wait.”

I turned to face Okorie. “What are you doing here?” I asked. “Why were you looking for me?”

# Episode 3410

**Artemis**

I scanned the party for my girlfriend. Somehow, during the whole statue fiasco, I’d lost track of Rishika and Cali in the crowd.

I felt so much better after talking with Xavier. There was an old saying in the Fae world, “The truth gives you wings.” I’d always thought it was a bunch of bunk. Growing up alone, and then working for the Kollector, a well-crafted lie had often been the only thing standing between me and mortal harm.

But maybe there was something to it. Because now I felt light, almost like I could fly. I was also endlessly grateful to Xavier for taking the news so well. He was so protective when it came to Cali, and kind of a surly asshole in the best of circumstances, so I’d gone in with much lower expectations. But he’d been kind and understanding when he absolutely hadn’t needed to be. I’d put his life at risk to save Rishika’s. Hell, according to Fae code, he’d be well within his rights to try to hunt me down. I’d seen lots of people killed for less than the crime I’d committed.

But he’d forgiven me, like it was just that easy.

A hand brushed against my arm, and I turned to see Elle standing behind me. “Have you seen Lucian?”

I shook my head. “Not since his meltdown over the whole statue-cannon thing. Why?”

Elle tucked a free strand of her russet hair behind her ear. “I told Greyson I would stay away from him.”

“That’s a great idea,” I said. “I know we’re here to maintain a good relationship with the Vanguard pack, but I don’t know if Lucian’s in the friendliest mood right now. Plus he’s super weird in general. You don’t need to be around that.”

She studied my face. “You don’t like him?”

*Gods, no. I hate that bastard.*

After what he’d put Cali through, I’d gut him with a silver dagger if I thought I could get away with it—and if the Redwood pack could avoid the repercussions. Given the chance, I’d watch the light go out of Lucian’s eyes, and I wouldn’t feel a bit of guilt.

“I’m not certain how useful he truly is,” I finally said. “He’s rich, obviously, and the Vanguard pack is large and has lots of resources, but he’s brought us far more trouble than assistance. Plus, after what he did to Cali, I could never trust him.”

Elle nodded, seeming to take this in. “Have you been to many parties like this?”

“I have, actually. This one reminds me a bit of the ones in the Fae world. The parties there were ostentatious, just like this one, but I was never invited, so I crashed them. They were pretty fun.”

As the Kollector’s prized bounty hunter, I hadn’t been allowed to attend events like this, but I’d found ways around that, even though it had cost me.

“You haven’t seen Rishika, by any chance?” I asked.

Elle shook her head.

“I’m going to look for her,” I said.

I left the courtyard and headed back into the palace, aiming for the ballroom. I was halfway down the hallway when a thick, muscled arm appeared to block my way. I followed the beefy arm up to a familiar face. I didn’t know him personally, but I recognized him as a member of the Vanguard pack.

He leaned down and sniffed at my neck. “You smell nice.”

I rolled my eyes, then grimaced at the scent wafting off him. “Can’t say the same about you. Did you drink a whole barrel of moonshine?”

He gave me a lopsided grin. “I know how to have fun.”

“I’m sure you do. Now get the hell out of my way.”

I brushed past him, but the bastard grabbed my arm and pulled me back so I was pressed against his chest. He leaned in, his hot breath washing over the shell of my ear. “Maybe I can change your mind.”

I smiled. “I doubt it.”

In one swift move, I twisted his wrist just shy of the breaking point. He cried out and crumpled to the ground, allowing me to step away from him.

“You bit—”

Something blurred past me and knocked Mr. Moonshine on his ass. He skidded a couple inches across the shiny marble floor.

Rishika appeared next to me, her teeth bared. “Hey. Back off from my girlfriend!”

The werewolf lifted a hand up in surrender—not the one I’d twisted, because that one was pressed protectively against his chest. “Honest mistake! I didn’t realize she was taken.”

I scoffed. “You didn’t ask.”

Rishika’s eyes narrowed. “Well, now you know. So get the hell out of here before I change my mind and let her kick your ass.”

The guy clumsily scrambled to his feet and darted off down the hallway, disappearing into the throng of dancing bodies. I turned my attention to Rishika, who had never looked sexier.

“You look like a warrior goddess,” I mused.

Her lips curved up into a smile. “Is that a good thing?”

“It’s a very good thing.” I grabbed her by the back of the neck and pulled her toward me, crashing our lips together. All of a sudden, I couldn’t get enough of her, and the image of jumping her bones, right here, right now, in the middle of this hallway, was looking better and better.

We broke away, breathless, and Rishika grinned. “Guess I should save you more often.”

I laughed. “You think we can find somewhere to be alone in this gigantic house?”

“Mm. I like that idea.” She took my hand and was starting to lead me down the hallway when Adair, of all people, stepped into our path.

He looked between the two of us, his brow creasing. “Sorry, am I interrupting?”

*Obviously, Uncle Cockblock!*

Rishika and I shared a look. I gripped her hand tighter, a clear “do not, under any circumstances, leave me alone here.”

It was probably strange, considering I was the one who had sought Adair out, but I just felt so awkward around him. He was nothing like I’d been hoping for, and he’d shot me down enough times that I was wary of even talking to my cold, distant uncle.

Rishika cleared her throat. “Of course not. Did you want to talk to Artemis?”

He turned his gaze on me as he replied. “Only if she’s free.”

My mouth went dry. *Am I free? To talk to Adair? Who is seeking me out for some reason that cannot possibly be good?*

One thing was for sure: I was definitely not in the mood to fool around with Rishika anymore.

She gave my hand a little squeeze, then gently pushed me toward Adair.

“Find me after,” she whispered, so low that only I could hear, then headed off down the hallway, leaving me to stand there like an idiot, shifting from foot to foot as I waited for Adair to speak.

One second shifted into two, then three, and after a solid ten seconds of silence, it became abundantly clear that I was going to have to coax him along.

I cleared my throat. “Is this your first werewolf New Year’s Eve?”

“No, I attended one a few decades ago. It was just as debauched as this one, though—maybe even more so. There was a pool of wine that everyone swam in naked.”

My eyes widened. “Oh wow. That’s… a lot of wine. Hopefully nobody was drinking it?”

He shrugged. “I doubt they were sober enough to care where the alcohol was coming from.”

*Cool. Gross story.*

I waited for him to segue into the reason he’d wanted to speak to me, but again, silence settled in and he didn’t say anything. This struck me as more socially awkward than cold, and I wondered how many other interactions fell flat because Adair apparently had the social skills of a brick wall.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” I prompted.

He blinked, then nodded, like it had only just occurred to him that he hadn’t said his piece. “A while back, you mentioned you were having issues with your magic. Is that still happening?”

My brows rose. I hadn’t thought he’d cared enough to pay attention to that conversation, or really any conversation we’d had. “Um, yeah. It is. Since before Christmas. It’s been… unsettling.”

He nodded. “I’ve heard of that happening before. It can be caused by many things—mental, emotional, or magical.”

“How can you know which?”

“It takes time to test.”

Was he offering… Was he saying what I thought he was saying?

“I have time,” I said. “Right now, I have nothing but time.”

He nodded again. “Perhaps I can help you try to figure it out.”

A spark of hope kindled inside me. Adair was offering to help me? What did this mean for our currently nonexistent familial relationship?

“Really?” I asked. “You’re not leaving soon?”

# Episode 3411

I blinked at the scantily dressed people scattered around the candlelit room.

*Am I having a flashback of the other orgiastic party I stumbled upon in this very palace?*

I blinked once. Twice. Pinched myself. Nope, this was no flashback. This was definitely happening in real time.

*What is* with *this pack? Who is this horny all the time?*

I didn’t want to come off as a prude, but this was too much for me. People were making out right in the open and grinding against each other, and it looked like there were dark alcoves around the room where other, more intimate things were happening.

The room I was standing in was basically the waiting room. And if this was where the lightest stuff was going down, I knew deep in my bones that I did *not* want to see anything else here.

Aysel moved further into the room. “Are you coming?”

I shook my head helplessly. “Um, sorry. This isn’t really my thing. I should go.”

She frowned. “Why?”

I blinked. She looked genuinely confused, like I’d just turned down free chocolate cake instead of anonymous sex with multiple strangers. What the hell was the pack culture like here, that turning down an orgy was inconceivable?

“If you want to have an orgy, more power to you,” I said. “I hope you have a great time. But it’s just not for me.”

Aysel raised a brow, clearly no less perplexed than before. “I hope you’re not reluctant just because you’re mated to Greyson and Xavier.”

*Just because…* I tried to keep my tone even, tried to remind myself that Aysel wasn’t trying to insult me—we just clearly had very different views on this subject. “This isn’t something I’m interested in, for me, but yeah, I also take my mate bonds seriously. And believe in fidelity and all that.”

“That’s so twentieth century.” Aysel waved me off. “Just because you’re mated to someone, or some*ones*, doesn’t mean you have to be exclusive. You can be a good and devoted mate and still find pleasure and enjoyment with others.”

“That might be true for other people, but that’s not the case with me. I don’t even know why someone who has a mate would want to sleep with anyone other than their mate.”

Aysel rolled her eyes. “Clearly you’ve had good luck with your mates. Not everyone is in the same boat. But if you were willing to try, you might understand where I’m coming from. What’s the harm?”

I shrugged. “I don’t want to do it. I respect that other people might need to look elsewhere, but I’m more than content with Xavier and Greyson.”

“Is that so? How’s the *due destini* going?”

I blew out a breath. There was no way in hell I was going to stand here and talk about my mates with Aysel while an orgy was going down like ten feet away. First of all, it wasn’t like she and I were even friends. Second, it was none of her business. And third, did I mention the orgy happening one room over?

Before I could say anything more, a sultry female voice sounded behind me. “How do you know you don’t like it if you won’t try it?”

Dread unfurled down my spine. I knew that voice…

I turned to see Paige and Duke approaching. *Great! The over-sexed Alpha couple are here to make me feel like even more of a prude.*

*Of course* I’d run into them on their way to the friendly neighborhood orgy.

“Sorry, I’ll just get out of your way,” I said. “I don’t want to kill the mood.”

“And here I was hoping you’d changed your mind,” Paige said with a frown. I turned to leave, but Paige kept her gaze on me. “Duke, I’ll join you in a sec.”

“Sure,” he said, shrugging. He offered his arm to Aysel. “Princess, shall I escort you inside?”

Aysel waggled her brows at me in an “I told you so” look, then took the offered arm.

I swallowed and peeled my gaze away from the not-couple couple entering the orgy together. While I respected that Paige was clearly secure in her relationship with Duke, and it was none of my business anyway, I didn’t understand how she could be so calm while her mate was escorting another woman into an orgy.

If Xavier or Greyson had been leading Aysel into that room, I’d have been spitting fire.

I forced a smile. “I don’t want you to miss out on anything important… in there. Why don’t you go join your mate, and you and I can talk later?”

*Preferably when I’m not wearing lingerie.*

“Oh, Duke is a very patient man. He’ll wait. Or find someone to help him pass the time. In any case, there’s no rush.”

“Oh. That’s… good.”

Paige’s expression softened. “Caliana, I want to apologize to you. I know I can come on a little strong—the champagne and all these beautiful bodies everywhere have a way of making me a little less inhibited. I wanted you to know that I never intended to make you uncomfortable, or to make you feel pressured to do anything you didn’t want to do. I understand if you’ve come to a different conclusion on your own, but for what it’s worth, Duke and I both believe that consent is the sexiest thing in the bedroom. Or any room.” She smiled. “So, I’m sorry if we made you feel otherwise.”

“Thanks. I… I appreciate it.” A wet sound followed by a loud moan echoed from the orgy room, and heat rushed into my cheeks. *All the sex going on, all the freaking noises—that’s what makes me uncomfortable.*

“I just assumed that since you’re one of Lucian’s guests, you’d enjoy a little group fun. I hate to paint with a broad brush, but Lucian tends to associate with a more sexually liberal sort. But it’s not for everyone, and that’s okay.”

My smile was turning into a grimace. “That’s right. I’m so glad we had this little chat.”

Maybe once I had my clothes back on, and I was back in a room with clothed people, and I wasn’t listening to the horrifying symphony of sex going on next door, I’d appreciate Paige’s apology a little more.

But right now, I just wanted to run away.

I moved to leave, but Paige was *still* talking.

“Though, I do have to admit, I’m a little puzzled. As a *due destini* mate, I just thought…”

I frowned and raised my eyebrows. It almost never boded well when some stranger came up to me with questions or intentions about the *due destini*, but in the context of an orgy, I couldn’t even begin to imagine where she was going with this.

“Yeah?” I prompted her to go on.

“It’s just that, since you’re already sleeping with two people…” She gestured toward the orgy room. “What’s a few more?”

This felt like another flashback. *Or maybe it’s not a flashback. Maybe I’m having a stroke. Or… I fell and hit my head and I’m in a coma where everyone tries to get me to join an orgy because “Hey, you’re already boning two guys, what’s another thirty writhing bodies!”*

“They’re my m-mates,” I stammered, still not quite able to believe I was stuck in this awkward and invasive time loop. “And—and two is more than enough. Thank you for the offer, but I’m fine. Really.”

“Are you sure about that?” Her eyes searched my face. “I only ask because I’ve been in your shoes before. Duke is amazing, and he is my mate, and I am devoted only to him—mind and soul. But as for our bodies… We’ve found great satisfaction in inviting others to our dynamic. It’s brought us closer together in so many ways. What about your two mates? Do you have a preference?”

I blinked. *What. The. Hell?*

Nobody understood the dilemma I was in. It was so much more than just having two sexual partners instead of one. “The *due destini* is a lot more complicated than people think.”

Then, because this situation wasn’t already bad enough, a fully nude Duke ambled over and put a hand on Paige’s lower back. “You coming? I think I’ve found someone you’re going to like.”

*Please, god. Make me disappear. Forever.*

Paige smiled at me. “If you ever change your mind, you’re always welcome.”

And then she *finally* followed her mate into the room. I let out a breath.

“Oh my god,” I whispered to myself. That had been so awkward on so many levels.

I had nothing *against* Paige and Duke, even if their advances had made me… uncomfortable. I just didn’t want them anywhere near me. But like, good for them! I was happy that they’d figured out what a happy and healthy marriage looked like for them. But holy hell, taking part in a werewolf orgy wasn’t something I was *ever* going to change my mind about.

*Where are Xavier and Greyson?* Hopefully they weren’t being coerced into something similar.

I finally made it to the door and opened it to step out into the hallway—and smacked right into Lola and Jay as they were stepping inside.

Lola did a double take at my lingerie, and we all blurted out in unison, “What are *you* doing here?”

# Episode 3412

“Seriously, Cali, what are you doing here?” Lola asked, her eyes wide. “And why are you wearing lingerie?” She looked past me, into the orgy chamber. “I just saw Xavier and Greyson back at the main party…”

“I was just leaving!” I blurted out, hopefully answering her unspoken question, though it annoyed me that she believed she had to ask it. Of *course* I wouldn’t join an orgy without my mates. Not that I would join an orgy *with* them, either. If tonight had taught me one thing, it was that I had a strict no orgypolicy. Also that I believed in being faithful to my mates! I couldn’t imagine a scenario in which Greyson or Xavier would be okay with me hooking up with other people. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but—

*Focus, Caliana! You’re missing the whole point here! Lola and Jay are heading into the orgy chamber!*

“Are you two lost?” I asked. “Because this room leads to a—”

“An orgy, right?” Lola smiled. “Are we in the right place? We wanted to join in on the fun.”

I blinked, remembering what Lola had told me earlier, about how she was intrigued by the idea of an orgy. But behind that door was so much more than just an idea. It was the real deal. Bodies and moans and—*gag*—*fluids* and everything.

I looked at Jay, my brows rising. “And you’re on board with this?”

He shrugged. “It could be fun. I figured it wouldn’t hurt to check it out.”

I was glad to hear that Lola and Jay were in agreement, but it didn’t make the idea of an orgy any more palatable for me. I couldn’t think of a single scenario in which I’d enter that room willingly.

Just thinking about what was going on in that room, and imagining my best friend and her mate getting cozy with Aysel, Duke, and Paige… It all kind of made me want to put even more space between myself and the orgy.

I sidestepped Lola and Jay and moved into the hallway. “Well, I’m leaving. Um… Have fun?” I cringed as soon as the words left my mouth.

*Too weird.*

Lola turned after me. “You never did explain the lingerie. Where’d you get it?”

Heat rushed into my face. “Aysel pulled me aside and wanted to play dress-up. I went along with it as a way to boost pack relations, but I didn’t know what she had in mind.” For the outfit, or the activity to accompany it. “Now I’m heading back to…” I stopped, realizing suddenly that I had no idea where Aysel had taken me, or where my clothes were. How was I going to change back if I couldn’t even find the room? There was no way I was going to walk around in this getup all night long.

Lola caught my arm. “Don’t be embarrassed. You look amazing. I don’t think anyone will complain about the wardrobe change.”

I flushed even harder. Lola was sweet, but I didn’t want to look amazing for anyone other than my mates! My parents were here, for god’s sake! I couldn’t face them dressed like this!

No, first things first, I needed to find my clothes.

I forced a smile and moved to leave. “Go get ‘em, tigers!”

I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth. I didn’t think there was a more awkward combination of words I could have come up with.

*Do better, Caliana.*

Cringing, I continued down the hall. It didn’t take long before I crossed paths with one of the million Vanguard attendants milling through the house. I tightened my see-through robe and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Excuse me!” I called to him. “Where is Aysel’s room?”

The attendant gave me a blank look. “Which one? The princess has several.”

I sighed. *Of course she does.*

“I’m looking for the one with all of these.” I gestured broadly at my outfit. “She let me, um, borrow these, but I’d like to change back into my real clothes.”

If the attendant found it strange that the Vanguard princess was dressing people up in lingerie, he didn’t let on. Then again, the kinds of things the attendants in this palace saw every day would probably make my head explode. A party guest dressed like a Playboy Bunny probably didn’t even make the top ten.

“That would be the south room, miss. You said you wanted to collect your clothing?”

I flushed for what felt like the umpteenth time. At this rate, I had to look like a lobster-human hybrid. “That’s right. I… I’m done with this outfit.”

“Very well. I can take you there, if you’d like?”

“Please.”

The attendant led me up a staircase, down a hallway, and then up another staircase. I recognized absolutely nothing. You’d have thought that with all the time I’d spent here, I would have started to get acclimated to the layout of the palace, but nope. It was still as mazelike as ever.

*And did they add another story in the last ten minutes? How many stairs are in this place?*

I didn’t remember taking this many staircases to get to the “south room” from the garden. Finally, we reached a hallway that looked somewhat familiar.

“The room is two doors down, on the left,” the attendant said.

I nodded. “Thanks for showing me the way. I can take it from here.”

I didn’t need the attendant’s services any longer, and I *really* didn’t want him watching me change or anything like that. Aysel probably had servants nearby all the time and in every state of undress, but since I was apparently A Prude, it was best for me to handle the next step alone.

Plus, with all the crazy stuff going on at the palace tonight, the attendant probably had a million more important things to do than help me find my clothes.

“You’re welcome.” He bowed and then disappeared down yet another hallway.

I breathed a sigh of relief that he had no problem letting me do the rest of this alone. I entered the room he’d indicated, thrilled at the prospect of putting my regular clothes back on. I’d actually chosen my New Year’s outfit carefully, and sexing myself up with lingerie had never been part of the curated image I was going for.

And then, as I looked around the room, my heart sank. This wasn’t the room Aysel had taken me to earlier, and all the clothes in the enormous closet were somehow even more revealing than the lingerie she’d picked out for me.

I didn’t know what was more mind-boggling—that Aysel might have purposely, and thoughtfully, given me a more conservative set of lingerie to wear to the orgy, or that she had this much lingerie in the first place.

I poked my head out into the hallway in the slim hope that the attendant was still close enough to help me out, but he was nowhere to be seen. I was all alone. With enough lingerie to stock a three-story Victoria’s Secret—and no sign of my actual clothes.

*Think, Cali. The hallway looked familiar, right? The other room has to be here somewhere.*

I started off in one direction, then stopped short and turned around. I genuinely had no idea which room was the right one, so I had to be methodical about this, or I’d be opening random doors until well after midnight.

There was only one thing to do: go down the hallway and try each room until I found my clothes. I stared down the long hallway and let out a tiny, hopeless laugh.

*Just check one room after another for eternity. No big deal.*

I started with the first door on my left. It was filled with gowns, like this was where every Disney princess went to store their clothes when they weren’t doing movies. The next room had only swimwear. Lots and lots of swimwear. Enough that Aysel could probably get through a year of daily swimming without wearing the same thing twice.

*Why does she have so many swimsuits?*

My eyes snagged on a cute bikini, and I started for it before stopping myself. *Not the time, Cali.*

And exchanging sexy lingerie for a sexy swimsuit wasn’t really the upgrade I was looking for. I needed my clothes.

Plus, it was an hour or so shy of midnight, so it’d be cold out. I couldn’t possibly go home dressed like this.

The third door I tried was hard to open, and by the time I managed to wrench it open, I understood why. The room was filled with sunhats and probably hadn’t been opened since summer.

I tried to yank the door shut with a huff. This was maddening! How was I supposed to—

A muscled arm stretched out in front of me, and I spun around to see Greyson.

“Oh, it’s you.” I smiled, glad it was my mate who’d found me and not one of the frisky wolves. “What are you doing up here? I thought you were down in the ballroom, or the courtyard.”

His gaze dragged over every inch of me, and he grinned. “I was looking for my mate. Do you know where I can find her?”

# Episode 3413

**Marta**

I stared up at Okorie. He still hadn’t answered my question. *What could he want to talk about?*

I mean, the kiss I’d laid on him was probably topic number one, but maybe that wasn’t it. Maybe he had some witch council business to share, or maybe there was something else on his mind.

*I’m grasping at straws, aren’t I?*

In addition to not answering my question, he didn’t seem able to look me in the eye. That was the strangest part. Okorie usually oozed confidence, along with a hefty dose of apathy about what anyone might think of him.

The way he was acting now made me wonder if he cared more than he let on, especially when it came to me. To us.

*Oh god, this has to be about the kiss, doesn’t it? Did I push things too far?*

Self-loathing rushed in, so powerful it threatened to knock me off my feet. Was I about to lose one of the only potential friends I had? I’d already lost Lilac, and with him, Violet.

No, that wasn’t fair. I’d pissed Violet off all on my own—Lilac wasn’t to blame for the loss of that friendship. As it turned out, I was pretty damn good at burning bridges. It took hardly any effort at all. A couple of bad decisions and *boom*, I was all alone on New Year’s Eve, while all around me people were pairing off and having the night of their lives.

Now that I thought about it, it made perfect sense that I’d managed to push Okorie away too. The thought made my eyes burn and my stomach clench. I couldn’t lose him. I couldn’t afford to lose anyone else.

I stepped forward and grabbed his hands. “Okorie, I’m sorry. I acted rashly, and I was completely out of line. I didn’t mean to put you in a position that made you uncomfortable, and I don’t want things to be awkward between us.”

His eyes widened. “What? No, that’s not what happened at all.”

I blinked. “It isn’t?”

“Well, you were possibly a bit rash, but that doesn’t mean I regret it.”

No combination of words could have surprised, or confused, me more.

I stepped back, reeling from his response, but he held on tight to my hands. “Okay, I’m just going to put it out there. I like you.”

Silence set in again, but this time I was the one who was speechless. I didn’t know what to say. What was I supposed to say? I’d only ever gone out with one guy, and that had ended in pretty much the messiest way possible.

Obviously, I was terrible at this kind of thing. But I didn’t *not* like Okorie. I’d kissed him for a reason, and even before Lilac and I had broken up, there had been this *thing* between us. Something that had been simmering in the background before my lips had ever crashed into his.

And that had to mean something. But seeing as how I was zero for, like, a million, I couldn’t find the words to share any of that with Okorie. So I just stared at him and let the silence stretch between us.

He picked up on the awkwardness between us—something anyone with a pulse could’ve done. “I don’t mean to pressure you,” he said. “I get it. You’re newly single. You’ve got a lot going on. It’s complicated, right?”

All I could do was nod.

“I knew it.” He sighed. “I shouldn’t have just blurted that out. I should have eased into it.” He grimaced, and I could practically see the thought bubble over his head, and the mental lecture he was giving himself.

I frowned. *He thinks I’m feeling awkward because he confessed feelings for me?* God, that was even worse than the truth. I had to tell him he was wrong, that it wasn’t him, it was me. That I was awkward because my life was a mess and I was all alone, and was he sure he really had feelings for someone so pathetic?

I shook my head. “I wasn’t saying—”

“It’s okay,” he cut me off, releasing my hands as he started to pace the hallway in front of me. “I get it. I was your teacher, and you were my student. There’s an innate power imbalance there. That was why I kept my feelings private, though I’ve felt this way about you for some time now. I was trying to be professional. Trying to give you a safe space to learn. You spent fifty years at the mercy of a guy who wanted to use you. I wasn’t about to be the asshole who put your future and education at risk simply because I was attracted to you. I never wanted to take away any of your choices.”

My jaw dropped, and tears sprang to my eyes for an entirely new reason. “Okorie…”

But he powered through. “I was here for a job. The witch council needed me to teach you, and I did. And then I didn’t stick around after the mentorship was done because I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep my feelings bottled up.”

“Wait. Back up. Feelings about what?” I still couldn’t quite wrap my mind around the idea that my snarky teacher had had feelings for me all this time.

He looked down, then slowly dragged his gaze back up to mine. When our eyes met, I forgot how to breathe. “My feelings about you,” he said.

“But you weren’t my teacher anymore. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were with Lilac. You were building a life for yourself that didn’t include me. Again, I was trying not to be the asshole who limited your choices.”

I didn’t know what to do with this softer, deeply considerate side of Okorie.

I swallowed. “We shouldn’t talk about Lilac.”

He nodded. “Fair enough. But now you’re single, and you kissed me… And I thought, ‘If not now, when?’”

His words struck me to my core. I’d spent fifty years single. I’d been alone for most of my life, by far. So why did it feel so weird to hear this from Okorie now? Was it because I was still in love with Lilac?

I sighed. I really had made an awful mess of everything, hadn’t I? I didn’t want to hurt Okorie. I didn’t know what I wanted right now.

The image of Lilac and Perrie kissing flashed through my mind again. “I broke up with Lilac a while ago, but the feelings are still really raw.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt like the biggest asshole in the world. I was the one who’d kissed *him*. I’d started all this—and now, what? I was backing out because my feelings were too raw? I was just leading him on!

*Marta, you’re better than this!*

Okorie’s eyes widened, and he straightened. “I understand. But you know what? I started something here, and I intend to finish it. I like you, Marta.”

A tingly sensation twisted through my stomach, and I found myself saying, “I like you too.”

There had been a time when I never could have imagined saying that to him. He’d been so annoying and arrogant when we’d first met, but now I knew there was a deeper side to him.

He grinned. “Now that we’re not mentor and mentee, the barriers that kept me from telling you that don’t exist anymore. But I understand there’s more going on for you right now than how you feel about me. You need time, right? I won’t force you to give me an answer while you’re still dealing with issues from your other relationship.”

“What does that mean?”

He moved closer and gently took me by the shoulders. “That means I’ll wait for you, Marta.”

Once again, I was stunned into silence. It was so perfect, so kind, so romantic that part of me wanted to kiss him right then and there. But another part of me was screaming to wait. That was the part that curled up in pain every time that image of Perrie and Lilac flashed through my mind.

I needed to come to terms with that. To process everything that had happened at the end of my relationship with Lilac. If I got so upset seeing them together, it probably meant I wasn’t ready to explore the feelings that I had for Okorie.

I’d screwed up a lot lately. And, knowing now how careful Okorie had always been with me, I owed it to him to show him the same respect.

I nodded. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Just do me one favor, okay?”

“What’s that?” I asked nervously.

His smile set my heart on fire. “Let me down gently if you choose him, okay?”

I smiled. “Of course.”

“Thank you.” He leaned in to brush his lips against my cheek.

The door burst open, and I turned to see Lilac and Violet standing in the hallway.

# Episode 3414

**Greyson**

Cali smiled up at me. “I’m pretty sure I can help you out.”

She looked absolutely to fucking die for. I had no idea why she was wearing that silky slip and see-through nightie, but she looked so goddamn good in it that I didn’t care how it had happened. I leaned in close, breathing in her sweet scent, and pressed a kiss to the side of her neck. A visible shiver rippled down her body, and as I pulled back, I watched her pupils dilate with desire.

I slipped a finger under the edge of the robe, teasing the smooth skin of her thigh. “Where did you get this? Don’t get me wrong, I love the new look, but what happened to your clothes?”

Her shoulders slumped, and a gorgeous blush spread across her cheeks and down her neck. “It’s a long story, but I lost them in one of Aysel’s rooms and I’m having trouble figuring out where they are. This may come as a surprise to you, but she has several rooms just for storing her clothes. She could open a freaking clothing store with what she’s got up here.”

My lips twitched. “That is shocking,” I deadpanned.

“Anyway, now I’m just making my way down this hallway and trying every door. Obviously I haven’t found my clothes yet.”

There seemed to be a sea of missing details in her story, and I would have loved to hear the story of how Aysel had convinced my mate to dress up like a Playboy Bunny, but I figured she’d tell me in her own time. Right now, it seemed like her entire focus was on getting her clothes back, which I couldn’t really blame her for. I wouldn’t have wanted to run around the Vanguard palace in sexy underwear for very long, either.

“Can you help me find my clothes?” she asked. “At the rate I’m going, I won’t find them until sunrise.”

“I could… But I kind of like this look on you.” I trailed my fingertips down the small of her back, and Cali’s breath hitched. She was so responsive—she’d always been so responsive. It drove me fucking wild.

I grinned. It would’ve been the easiest thing to pull her into one of these rooms and have her all to myself. No Xavier, no Lucian, no party distractions. Just me and Cali, like it was supposed to be. We could start the New Year off right—in each other’s arms.

Squaring her shoulders, Cali pushed back against my chest. “Down, boy. I’m not wearing this all night long, and I want to get back into my own clothes sooner rather than later. So are you going to help me or not?”

I trailed my gaze down her frame, committing the image to memory. Cali was sexy in just about anything, but I’d have been lying if I said this ensemble wasn’t absolutely doing it for me. She’d never been one for lingerie, which was fine by me since she was drop-dead gorgeous no matter what she was wearing, but this was like a dream come to life.

She snapped her fingers at me. “Hey! I’m up here!”

“Sorry,” I said, flicking my gaze up to meet hers. I was genuinely trying not to be an asshole, but seeing her like this, it was almost impossible. It was like she’d gift wrapped herself just for me, and now all I could think about was opening my present. “I’ll help you.”

“Thank you. I still can’t believe I let Aysel talk me into this.” She tightened the robe belt around her waist, though it didn’t do much since the material was see-through. “This is what I get for trying to play nice to improve pack relations.”

Ah. The lingerie was starting to make more sense. Cali had always had a certain amount of modesty, especially around strangers, but Aysel never missed an opportunity to play dress-up.

“Are you glad you came?” I asked. “I know tonight’s been…” I trailed off. I couldn’t quite decide on the right word to describe the night so far. Entertaining? Exhausting? An actual farce? Being at the Vanguard palace tonight, like just about every other time we’d come here, had been a mixed bag. At least this time we weren’t walking right into a trap set by Lucian. The princeling, as oblivious as he was, had to know he was on thin ice with the Redwood pack right now, especially with Xavier, Cali, and me.

I thought back to when we’d received the invitation at the pack house. How Torin’s plans had been canceled in favor of trying to develop a better relationship with Lucian and his pack. There was no doubt in my mind that if we’d all been at the Redwood pack house tonight, enjoying a party thrown by Torin, we’d have had a much better time.

*But then again, it’s unlikely that Torin’s party would’ve included Cali in lingerie… You win some, you lose some.*

Cali mulled this over. “The party tonight has been very… entertaining. Lucian can be… Well, you know how he can be.”

I snorted. “Oh, I know all too well. ‘Entertaining’ is certainly one way to describe him.”

It was a *generous* way to describe him, for sure. Lucian was just as much of a mixed bag as his parties. For me, he was always hovering somewhere between “entertaining if exhausting, yet valuable, ally” and “insufferable fuckface.”

“Hopefully the rest of the pack is finding the party as entertaining as you are,” I added. “I accepted Lucian’s invitation for more than just political reasons—after everything we’ve been through, I really think the pack deserves a chance to cut loose. Of course, I might have underestimated just how wild Lucian’s events can be.”

She laughed. “Nobody can predict what Lucian has planned, but at least it’s not a demon wedding this time.”

My smile thinned. I was glad Cali could joke about it, but I wasn’t there yet. It definitely hadn’t been an amusing experience at the time.

“Even Torin seems to have gotten over the disappointment of not being able to throw his party,” Cali added. “That seems like as good a sign as any.”

That was a relief, and it felt good to hear this vindication of my decision as Alpha. But, for me, the most important thing was that Cali was finally getting a chance to relax and have fun.

I slipped an arm around her waist and turned to the hallway. “Where to next?”

She pointed to the next door down the hall. “How about that one?”

She approached the door and started to open it.

“Cali, wait.”

She turned to face me, her brow creasing. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to do this.” I leaned in and kissed her neck again. Her breathy moan went straight to my cock. “You don’t know what you do to me,” I breathed into her neck, dropping open-mouthed kisses lower and lower.

“I…” She let out a breathy laugh. “I thought you were going to help me.”

“I couldn’t resist.” I reached behind her and opened the door, then stepped aside so she could go through. Every place her skin or hair brushed against me as she turned around left sparks darting across my skin. I couldn’t keep my eyes off the curve of her hips as she walked into the room. The lingerie Aysel had dressed her up in covered plenty, especially by lingerie standards, but it only made me want to peel those layers away. To see what was hiding beneath that silk.

I tried to casually adjust myself. If she didn’t find her clothes soon, I might not be able to restrain myself. Especially since I knew she’d be all too eager to get lost in me, too.

Cali looked around and then gasped. “They’re here! You did it! You led me to the right room on the first try!”

*Damn. So soon?*

I leaned against the doorway with a smirk, trying like hell to keep my eyes on her face as she turned to look at me. “Well, a werewolf’s nose can be pretty useful.”

She laughed. “I’ll just be a second,” she said. Then she tugged the robe off. It didn’t change much, since it was see-through, but suddenly the entire room felt charged, almost vibrating with sensual energy. Or maybe it was just me. It felt like it had been too long since my mate and I had had some time alone together.

I hurried over to her, closing the door behind me. “Not so fast, love.”

She paused. “What’s wrong?”

I stepped back with a sly smile. “I’d like to savor this moment. Can I have one last look before you put it all away?”

She blushed again, but her dilating pupils gave away her interest as she moved closer to me. “There’s no rush… And I never said you couldn’t watch.”

# Episode 3415

I loved the look on Greyson’s face. As much as I’d teased him earlier, there was something heady about knowing the effect I was having on my mate. I had to give Aysel some credit—I felt sexy right now. Like some kind of goddess or something. Like all I’d have to do was curl my finger, and Greyson would be at my beck and call.

Not that he wasn’t like that most of the time, anyway, but this was different. In the best way possible.

When Aysel had dressed me tonight, I’d just gone along with it for the sake of placating her—and in the hope that she’d see it as an effort to build a more positive relationship between our packs—but I hadn’t felt sexy. I’d felt overexposed and self-conscious and ridiculous.

Self-consciousness had been a way of life for me, before I’d met Xavier and the rest of the Redwood pack. And even long after I’d first found out about the supernatural world, it had taken me a long time to get comfortable in my own skin. These days, I still preferred to be covered, especially in mixed company. But that was a choice born of my comfort and preferences, and not a decision made out of shame.

But right now, with Greyson, I didn’t doubt my appearance for a second. What was it about him that made all my insecurities disappear? It had taken a long time for me to get comfortable around Xavier, but being around Greyson had always been easy. I remembered when he’d seen me naked for the first time. I’d been in the hot spring with Xavier, and with anyone else I would have been mortified. With Greyson, I’d just felt… sexy. Desirable, even then.

If anything, Greyson was the one who’d been flustered to see me like that. There had always been something between us, something unspoken and simmering—our mate bond. I knew that now. Maybe, back then, it had been something in his eyes. The way he looked at me. The way it made me feel to know how much I affected him. And somehow, even knowing what this was between us, knowing that he was mine and I was his, that hungry look in his eyes never failed to make my knees weak.

I let him drink me in as I slowly, teasingly, spun in place so he could see me from every angle. As comfortable as I was around him, it was still a little surprising that I was doing this—putting on a show for him. I wasn’t usually an exhibitionist, but right now, I was loving it. My skin felt hot everywhere his gaze dragged over me. The more I moved, the more I teased, the more he seemed to be into it—his gaze dark and hungry and riveted to me—the more I wanted to please him. To keep that look on his face, that hunger in his eyes.

I slipped the thin strap of the nightie off my shoulder, and Greyson’s control snapped. With a barely suppressed growl, he pulled me close, pressing all the hard planes of his body against mine. And hard, they were. Especially the part pressing firmly into my belly.

“Do you have any idea how much you’re torturing me right now?” he rasped.

A smile tugged at my lips. “I have a pretty good idea.”

I loved that I had this effect on him. That I had this power over him. He might’ve been the Redwood Alpha, but he was also my mate.

He tightened his hold on me, and his lips dropped down to mine. I melted into his arms, and every thought and worry disappeared. It was just me and Greyson. His lips moving against mine, the taste of him in my mouth, the feel of his body pressing into me… I couldn’t get enough of him. I wanted more, *needed* more.

We finally broke apart, our chests heaving. The look in his eyes set my heart on fire—along with some other places on my body. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so alive, so wanted, so needed and *needy*.

“This is how it should be, love,” he whispered. “Don’t we deserve this? After everything, haven’t we earned this?”

God, we had. We had absolutely earned this break, this moment of peace to savor each other. Suddenly, and perhaps for the first time all night, I was glad we’d come to the palace. It was a crazy place, certainly, and yeah, there was that whole “Cali, join us for an orgy” thing that still rubbed me the wrong way whenever I thought about it, but this was also a welcome escape. I didn’t have to worry about anything right now. Not Seluna. Not the vampire-witch. Not Aysel or Duke or anyone else.

And all I wanted was to take advantage of this time we had.

Greyson’s expression softened as he tilted my head up to look at him. “What are you thinking right now?”

I wrapped my arms tighter around his neck, pressing myself against him. “I’m done thinking,” I whispered. And I captured his lips with mine and picked up right where we’d left off.

He lifted me in his arms and pressed me up against the nearest wall, which happened to be a floor-to-ceiling mirror. The cool surface contrasted with the heat of my skin as he deepened the kiss, his hands slipping over my body. My legs wrapped around him, and he rolled his hips against mine with a growl.

Heat coiled between my legs. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I still had enough awareness to remember that we weren’t in one of our rooms in the privacy of the pack house. We were in the Vanguard palace, in one of Aysel’s closets.

*What if she comes in?*

I pushed the thought away. She’d probably be happy for me. She was the one who’d suggested I let loose and join the orgy. I couldn’t imagine she’d care about anything Greyson and I did in here.

And even if Aysel did mind, I didn’t care. This felt good. And right. And kind of perfect.

That was all that mattered.

Greyson broke away from my mouth and kissed a hot line down my throat, his hips grinding against mine as he did so.

“You drive me fucking wild,” he groaned. One strong arm wrapped around my waist to hold me in place, and the other reached for the neckline of the slip and jerked. The material split right down the middle, exposing my breasts.

“Greyson!” I gasped out. “That was Aysel’s!”

“I know.” He gave me a feral grin. “She won’t miss it.”

His thumb dragged over my nipple, and I immediately forgot all about Aysel, along with pretty much everything else. I moaned, pushing my head back against the mirror. Greyson’s mouth caught mine again, and he swallowed down every single one of my gasps and moans as he teased my breasts. And through it all, our hips kept grinding together like we were a couple of horny teenagers.

I didn’t care. I couldn’t bring myself to feel an ounce of shame. Not when my desire and longing and desperation and love burned so brightly.

Greyson’s head dropped so he could take my nipples into his mouth, one at a time, and I gasped out his name in broken syllables, my hips moving against his with so much urgency I might as well have been riding him.

“Fuck, Cali. I need you.”

“Please, Greyson.”

I reached for his belt, and suddenly the air filled with the blare of trumpets. We froze, looking up at each other in confusion. The cacophony shattered the tension in the room, and we both snorted, then began to full-on laugh.

*We’re at the Vanguard palace. Why wouldn’t trumpets randomly start blaring loud enough to be heard for miles? What has Lucian got up his sleeve this time?*

“Where is that even coming from?” Greyson asked, gently setting me down on my feet.

I slipped out of the torn nightie and started pulling on my clothes. The moment, as wonderful as it had been, was over. We’d come here to strengthen our alliance with the Vanguards, and we weren’t going to do that by ditching the next item on Lucian’s itinerary.

“I don’t remember seeing any trumpets,” I said. “Did Lucian plan a concert or something?”

Another blast ripped through the air, this one somehow impossibly louder.

“I can just picture Lucian sitting on a throne like some seventeenth-century king while his trumpeters perform.” I laughed. “Maybe Armin will be the court jester?”

Greyson chuckled. “We should go see what all the fuss is about.”

“Only if you promise that we can pick this back up later.”

He pulled me in for a deep kiss. “Nothing could keep me away.”

We moved to a window in the large room. Down below, in the courtyard, Armin was standing beside a group of trumpeters.

“All Alphas must report to the garden immediately!” he shouted.

# Episode 3416

**Xavier**

If I had to give Lucian credit for one thing—and it was my preference to avoid that whenever possible—it was that he knew how to throw a party you would never forget. Literally, I would never forget what I’d seen tonight, even if I wanted to.

And I never, *ever* wanted to forget the image of Lucian’s marble dick snapping off, or really any moment related to that amazing statue. It was my new happy place. The memory of *snap!* followed by Lucian’s furious scream.

Gabe returned to where Mikah and I were hanging out in the ballroom, his hands full of shots.

“Another round!” He pressed the small glasses into each of our hands.

“These are double shots,” Mikah said.

“And?” I asked.

“Just making an observation.”

Gabe raised his glass. “To dead vampire-witches and broken dicks!”

“Here, here!” I raised my glass, and Mikah followed suit.

We knocked back the liquor in unison, and I winced as it burned its way down my throat. It was rare to come across a liquor that could knock a werewolf down, but we’d found it.

Mikah cleared his throat. “That’s really potent.”

“Rich guys always have the best stuff,” Gabe said as he wiped his mouth.

It was kind of surprising that Mikah was willing to do shots with us. I knew vampires could hold their liquor, but he’d always seemed a little more uptight. The specific brand of public intoxication that came with werewolf parties didn’t seem like Mikah’s scene, but he’d been here all night, participating at Gabe’s side.

I liked Mikah—and even more, I liked him for Gabe. They made a good, if unusual, couple. And several shots in, the vampire seemed to be loosening up a bit. Or maybe it was just the mood of the party. Either way, I couldn’t wait to see what Gabe’s mate looked like when he was shit-faced.

“This reminds me of that job we did together back in Chicago,” Gabe mused. “Do you remember?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t in the mood for a walk down memory lane. After what had happened with Adéluce, I wasn’t sure I’d ever want to think of my mercenary past again.

*Where’d Cali go?*

I glanced around the ballroom, but there was no sign of her. I hadn’t seen her since she’d stormed off when I’d laughed too hard at the cosmic joke of the century, a.k.a. Lucian’s marble castration.

I grinned at the memory. Yep. It was definitely my new happy place.

I was about to go look for Cali when a set of trumpets blared so loudly that several partygoers slapped their hands over their ears. It was fucking loud! And fucking annoying.

“What the hell was that about?” I asked.

I looked around in alarm, then realized that despite the obnoxiously loud sound, nobody in the room seemed bothered or worried. I glanced at Mikah and Gabe, who also seemed confused. Were we missing something?

Armin strode into the ballroom. “All Alphas must report to the garden immediately!”

When I made no move to follow after Armin, Gabe nudged me. “You have Alpha blood. Shouldn’t you go?”

“I could say the same to you.” I shrugged. “Besides, I’d rather drink a beer.”

Then I saw two familiar faces in the crowd—Greyson and Cali. They were heading for the courtyard.

*He must be taking her to the garden.* I traced their movements back to a staircase that descended into the ballroom. *Where are they coming from?*

Gabe grabbed a beer from a passing attendant and passed it over to me. “Here.”

I took the glass, stared down at it in consideration, then pushed it back at him. “Actually, I’m going to go with the Alphas. See what all this is about.”

Gabe looked from me to the doorway to the courtyard, where Cali and Greyson were heading. He rolled his eyes. “You’re so full of it. You couldn’t care less about Lucian’s summons. You just want to go wherever Cali’s headed. I’m not stupid.”

I rolled my eyes right back at him. “Yeah, well, you’re not smart, either.”

I followed after some of the others as they streamed out. The sheer number of people heading to the gardens was too large for all of them to have Alpha blood. They had to be curious to see what Lucian had planned next. I was wondering the same thing. I was also wondering what he’d cooked up for those who actually did have Alpha blood.

*It had better not involve demon armies, this time.*

As I approached the entrance to the garden, I realized most of the guests were being turned away.

*That’s what you get for pretending you have Alpha blood.*

I made to enter the gardens, but a couple of attendants blocked my way. “Sorry, sir, but you’re not allowed in.”

“Like hell I’m not.” I scowled. “I’m an Alpha.”

“But you’re not a pack Alpha, are you?” one of the attendants pressed.

*Well, shit*. I ground my molars together and shook my head. “*No*.”

“And you’re not the mate of an Alpha, are you?”

“*No.*”

This shitty little rule had to mean that Greyson was in there with Cali. And I was stuck out here.

A very drunk Zeke stumbled past, adding insult to injury when the guards let him pass into the garden without question.

*I have more Alpha in my pinkie than that asshat has in his whole body.*

Seeing Zeke reminded me that Ava had asked me to step in as the Samara Alpha. If I took Zeke’s place, then I’d be allowed into all the same places Greyson was. I still wasn’t convinced Ava had actually been serious about the offer, though. That was the thing with her. It was almost impossible to tell when she was being sincere and when she was up to one of her tricks.

But it didn’t matter. I was a Redwood through and through. Nothing was going to change that. And sooner or later, I’d take back the mantle of Alpha from Greyson, and everything would be as it was meant to be.

I retreated to the ballroom, where Gabe had drunk half the beer he’d offered me. He and Mikah both turned their gazes on me as I approached.

“Let me guess, they didn’t let you in?” Gabe asked.

“How’d you know?”

“About half the people in this room made the same walk of shame back in here that you just took.”

“At least I’m in good company,” I deadpanned.

“Don’t worry about it, man. I can’t go in either, and if it’s anything like the last thing, who cares? I mean, I know watching that statue get castrated was the most perfect random event to ever happen, and we’re all lucky to be alive to have seen it, but wouldn’t you rather be hanging with your buds than fawning over Lucian, anyway?”

I grabbed the remaining half of my beer from Gabe and chugged it down. Wiping my mouth, I nodded. “You’re right. I’ve had enough of Lucian’s bullshit to last a lifetime.”

Still, though, if push came to shove, I would’ve preferred to be hanging with Cali. And it grated that we’d been separated this way. And that she and Greyson hadn’t been.

Movement caught my eye across the room, where Ava was entering the ballroom from the hallway. She held my gaze for a moment before heading toward the garden. She was probably going to join Zeke for whatever Lucian was planning.

I couldn’t look at her without remembering our goodbye kiss. We were supposed to be done with each other, so I shouldn’t have cared what she did, or who she did it with. But I couldn’t help it. I did care. And after all I’d done to help her and the Samara pack, I hated the idea of Ava turning to Lucian for help. The only person Lucian ever helped was himself.

I blew out a breath and turned my attention back to Gabe and Mikah. *Screw her—if she wants to destroy the Samara pack, that’s on her.*

When I met Gabe’s eyes, he was looking at me with a raised brow.

“What?” I asked irritably.

He gestured toward Ava. “Don’t try to deny it, bro.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Mikah, back me up here. We both saw something pass between you and Ava. Did you guys check out the orgy together or something?”

I growled in response. I knew Gabe was kidding, but the joke rubbed me the wrong way, especially considering all the weird, shitty situations Ava and I had been put in here at the palace. If Gabe knew the half of it, he wouldn’t have been making jokes.

“There’s nothing between me and Ava,” I said. “Stop talking about things you don’t understand.”

“Oh, I see Adair. I had a question for him.” Mikah kissed Gabe and left the two of us alone.

Gabe turned to me, crossing his arms over his chest. “Okay, it’s just you and me now. What’s really going on?”

# Episode 3417

**Violet**

My mind stalled on the image of Okorie kissing Marta.

Again.

*Ugh! Seriously? Can they not control themselves, or at least get a freaking room?*

I couldn’t believe Marta had the nerve to be canoodling in dark hallways with Okorie at the same party Lilac was attending. The Vanguard palace was big, but it wasn’t *that* big. Sooner or later, their paths were bound to cross.

*How could she be so careless?*

A string of choice words sat on the tip of my tongue, but I held them back. I’d already yelled at her earlier, and things between us weren’t okay. What good would it do to yell at her again?

I glanced over at Lilac. He hadn’t moved. Hadn’t spoken. I wasn’t even sure if he was breathing. He was clearly shocked at the sight of Marta and Okorie. I knew the feeling.

My only comfort was that Okorie’s lips had been pressed to Marta’s cheek when we’d stumbled onto them, but it had seemed like a very intimate cheek kiss, all the same. I looked at Marta’s face, then Okorie’s. No, there was nothing platonic about their body language.

Okorie stepped back, squared his shoulders, and cleared his throat. “Hey. Enjoying the party?”

“Not anymore,” I snapped.

*It was great—right up until I saw Marta betraying my brother again.*

Marta flinched, and I couldn’t deny the satisfaction it gave me to see her ashamed.

“W-What were you doing?” Lilac asked.

“Oh, Marta and I were just—”

“No,” Lilac said to Okorie. He turned his wide-eyed gaze on Marta. “You. What were you two doing, Marta?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. She didn’t seem to know how to answer him. Not that it mattered. We all knew exactly what they’d been doing, even if Marta wasn’t brave enough to admit it.

“Marta,” Lilac pressed, “answer me.”

I tensed at my brother’s tone. I hadn’t heard him sound so angry in a long while. I put a comforting hand on his shoulder, a subtle invitation for him to calm down.

“It’s pretty obvious,” I said softly, my attention locked on Lilac. “We should just go. The party’s still going strong. We can have some fun.”

Lilac’s jaw tensed. He still hadn’t taken his eyes off Marta. “Aren’t you going to say anything?”

Okorie’s gaze turned to Marta, who was still speechless, with all of us waiting expectantly for her response.

I scoffed. “Figures. She can’t own up to what she did, can she?”

Marta’s brow furrowed, her expression clearly hurt, and a tiny bit of guilt nagged at my stomach. But it wasn’t enough to overpower the protectiveness I felt for Lilac. Seriously, how could she do this to him? Rip his heart out of his chest and then not even have the decency to admit that she’d done something wrong?

Marta had brought Lilac back from the dead. She—and his love for her—was the reason why he was alive today. They had something special, something so powerful it defied the laws of nature, and here she was, kissing someone else. It was disgusting. I’d thought I knew her better than that.

Okorie reached out and put a hand at the small of Marta’s back. “We were just leaving too.”

“I bet you were,” Lilac said.

The warlock frowned. “Excuse me?”

My brother shook my hand off him. “I bet you were going to leave with her, weren’t you?”

Marta finally broke her silence. “Lilac, stop!”

But it was too late, he was already rushing forward, his fist raised to punch Okorie.

I lunged for him. “Lilac, no!”

*What is he* thinking*? Okorie’s a powerful warlock! He’s not someone you want to mess with!*

Marta was screaming at Lilac to stop, but he didn’t. I managed to catch him around the waist and pull him back so his hand could only grip Okorie’s suit jacket.

“Get back, Lilac!” I cried, trying to yank him away from the warlock.

My brother stood firm, using his grip on Okorie’s jacket as an anchor. “You son of a—”

Okorie’s expression turned thunderous, and with a wave of his hand, Lilac and I both sailed back a few feet, tumbling together on the hallway floor. Our fall felt cushioned, somehow—not nearly as jarring as what I’d been expecting—and I realized belatedly that that was Okorie’s doing, too.

Lilac didn’t seem to have the same presence of mind. He scrambled to his feet, ready to go after the warlock who’d just proven he could overpower him with a wave of his hand. I yanked Lilac back down.

“Are you *stupid*?” I hissed. “I didn’t tell you about what I saw between Marta and Okorie just so you could be a total asshat and try to punch the guy!”

“Then why did you tell me?” He tried to yank his arm out of my grip, but I held on like his life depended on it. Which it kind of did.

“I just thought you deserved to know, since it’s obvious Marta wasn’t going to do it!”

He finally freed himself and pulled himself up, seemingly unfazed by Okorie’s display of magic. Lilac looked at Marta. “Is it true? Did you kiss him?”

Okorie put a hand on Marta’s arm. “You don’t have to answer that.”

But I knew the truth. I’d seen it with my own eyes, and I’d told Lilac when I’d seen him rushing into the ballroom.

Marta gave me a wounded look, then turned to Lilac. “Yes. Yes, I did.”

Her chest heaved, and she blinked rapidly, like she was holding back tears. She seemed genuinely upset.

*At least now she’s finally being honest about the kiss.*

Then Marta stepped forward, her eyes narrowing. “I did kiss Okorie, just like *you kissed Perrie*.”

I gasped. “Wait. WHAT?”

Marta nodded. “Oh, you were missing a few details, huh? You didn’t see the two of them. You just saw me and Okorie, and you jumped to conclusions.”

My mouth opened, then closed. I hadn’t known about any of this. At all. I hadn’t seen Lilac kiss Perrie, and he hadn’t mentioned it. I looked at my brother, whose cheeks were turning bright red.

“Okay, so we both kissed someone,” he said. “Let’s just talk about it.”

Marta shook her head. “No, Lilac. We’re broken up. Both of us can kiss whomever we want.”

“I’m sorry, *what*?” I looked from Marta to Lilac. “What the hell is going on?”

Okorie looked at me and Lilac, frowning. “I think it’s best if Marta and I left you to… talk.”

They headed off down the hallway together without another word, and I immediately rounded on Lilac.

“Um, what the hell? You didn’t tell me you and Marta officially *broke up*, or that you kissed Perrie! Is there anything else you’ve been hiding from me?”

He frowned and pushed past me to head down the hallway in the other direction.

My jaw dropped.

*What an asshole!*

“HEY! I’M TALKING TO YOU!” I chased after him, never mind that we were in the middle of the Vanguard palace, a place where we probably shouldn’t have been making scenes of our personal affairs. My brother had proven that he needed a firm talking-to, and there was no time like the present.

Lilac spun to face me. “What? What do you want to talk about? Yeah, we broke up. And now she’s kissing some other guy. Clearly she didn’t wait too long to find someone else. There, now you’re caught up.”

Normally, I’d have been sympathetic in a situation like this. But normally, Lilac didn’t act like a complete ass.

“So, what?” I snapped. “Marta broke up with you, so you went out and kissed Perrie and now you’re trying to punch Okorie? I didn’t realize you were the star of a show on the CW!”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now, Vi.” Lilac turned and tried to escape down the hallway, but I wasn’t going to give up that easily.

I chased after him, jogging to keep up. “Please tell me you didn’t kiss Perrie just to get back at Marta for the breakup?”

He rounded on me again. “Are you joking? Do you seriously think I would do something like that?”

I froze. Honestly, I didn’t know. I’d never seen my brother in love before, so I didn’t know what he was capable of when scorned. The one thing I did know was that I felt horrible. I’d had no idea about Lilac and Perrie, or the breakup, so I’d yelled at Marta and generally treated her like crap with zero justification.

When I didn’t respond, Lilac rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Just leave me alone.”

He stormed away, and this time I didn’t follow. I let out a long sigh. I couldn’t believe this was all blowing up between Lilac and me, or that I’d torpedoed my friendship with Marta so badly.

*What a mess. How am I going to fix any of this?*

# Episode 3418

I stayed close to Greyson as all the Alphas gathered in the courtyard. I didn’t know what this was all about, and I almost didn’t *want* to know. When it came to Lucian’s events, there was always a chance that the night could quickly take a sharp turn in a dark direction, and I’d had enough darkness recently to last me a lifetime.

I took a look around, expecting to see Xavier walking out to join us, since he had Alpha blood, but I didn’t see him anywhere. I craned my neck and lifted onto my tiptoes to get a better look, but all I saw were the trumpeters, Armin and Lucian, Mace, Zeke, and Duke, who was still in the process of pulling his clothes back on, as if he’d been interrupted mid-orgy. Paige was doing the same, the only other mate to an Alpha who was here. Everyone else was a bachelor, I realized.

*These are all the official pack Alphas. Oh! There’s Xavier!* I started to wave at him when I saw him standing at the entrance to the courtyard, but then he was blocked by the attendants. Xavier exchanged a few heated words with them before he turned away and left. I could tell that he was annoyed, and I knew that this was one of those moments when it really stung that he wasn’t the Redwood Alpha. I felt for him, and I made a mental note to check on him as soon as this was over.

Greyson leaned in close. “I have no idea what this is all about. I wish I was back in that closet with you.” He kissed my neck, sending a wave of pleasure racing through my body.

“Me too,” I whispered back. Though I had to admit that I was now quite curious about what Lucian was planning. There was never a dull moment when it came to the Vanguard Alpha, and I was coming to expect spectacle and craziness from him. It was just who he was. If we were ever going to form any kind of real lasting alliance with the Vanguard pack, we would all have to accept that—which I knew would be easier said than done.

I gazed out into the distance and spotted something large hidden under a covering. “What the hell is under there?”

Greyson stifled a laugh. “Maybe it’s another humiliating statue of the princeling. Could we be so lucky?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I hope for Lucian’s sake that it’s not.” I replayed the image of Lucian’s stone penis being blown off by the cannon and shook my head. “You know, maybe we should give Lucian a break. It’s almost the new year—it would be great to start fresh and make peace with all the packs, including the Vanguard pack.”

Greyson let out a low whistle. “That’s a tall order, but I’m open to it. It’s why we’re here, after all.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze. “You know, I really love your optimism. If only everyone thought like you. There’d never be another pack war.”

It seemed like Greyson doubted that that was really possible, and honestly, I couldn’t blame him. I wasn’t so sure myself that complete harmony with all the packs was feasible. Pack politics were complicated, and the Alphas were all so strong-minded that there was bound to always be some sort of disagreement between them. Not to mention that Lucian was a character and a half, and he seemed to grate against my mates’ sensibilities at every turn.

The trumpeters raised their instruments to their lips and started to blow, but were quickly cut short by Lucian, who gave them a sharp look and hissed, “Quiet! Only play when I tell you to!”

His sharp gaze lingered on them until they lowered their trumpets and bowed their heads, totally cowed.

Greyson chuckled, and I gave him a swat.

“Come on, Greyson. Try to be respectful… Even though it’s hard when he’s so damn full of himself,” I whispered.

“I make no guarantees.”

“Mace, Greyson, Duke, Zeke—thank you all for being here,” Lucian said. “I’m honored that you’ve brought your packs to celebrate the coming of the new year at the Vanguard palace. I hope you’re all having a good time!” He flashed a princely smile as his eyes dragged across us, his “subjects.”

“Hell yeah we are!” Duke called out, raising a glass of champagne.

Lucian smiled at his rowdy friend before continuing. “You are the leaders, the people responsible for the welfare of your packs. It’s a very important role, one that I hope you all take seriously.”

*This guy makes it really hard to like him. Now he’s playing sage adviser to the packs? He has a lot of nerve.*

I glanced over at the Alphas. They were all trying their best not to smirk—except for Zeke, who looked uncomfortable and a little worse for wear. He was definitely an odd choice for Alpha—especially compared to Greyson. He didn’t even seem to be the same species as my mates, who were damn near born and bred to lead a pack. I kind of felt sorry for Zeke, having to take on a role he clearly wasn’t prepared for and hadn’t even really wanted.

“Now, play!” Lucian said to the trumpeters. He nodded at Armin, who then led a group of Vanguard attendants to place a cache of bows and arrows on the ground in front of us.

I gasped. *Why are those being brought in? What the hell is this guy up to, now? I don’t remember seeing anything about a bow and arrow expo on the invitation.*

Panic was building up inside me. Now it all made sense. Lucian had gathered all the Alphas, and now he was going to turn the party into some kind of Hunger Games! There was no way I was going to allow it. I was about to pull Greyson away so that we could gather the others and get the hell out of Dodge when there was another trumpet blast.

Another group of attendants appeared and placed a cauldron of fire before us.

“What the hell?” I shouted. Luckily, the crackle of fire in the cauldron drowned out the sound of my voice.

Greyson shrugged, his hand tightening around mine. I was really starting to freak out. Was Lucian planning on roasting the losers of whatever wicked game he’d dreamed up? I looked around. Alphas, alcohol, arrows, and fire. This couldn’t be good.Everyone had been drinking and doing who knew what else—it didn’t seem like the best time to play with pointy objects around a raging fire.

“Attention, attention!” Lucian called out as murmurs of confusion rose up from the group. Lucian pointed to the covered object in the distance. “When the Mountain clock strikes midnight, you four Alphas will join me in revealing the next phase.” Lucian gave what could only be described as a wolfish smile.

I squeezed Greyson’s hand tightly. “Phase? What phase? What is he planning?”

Greyson didn’t answer, his attention riveted to the object in the distance.

“Gentlemen, choose your bows!” Armin instructed.

I was growing more anxious by the minute as I saw an attendant hand Lucian a large, ornate bow. *Fit for a prince*, I thought bitterly. I’d been hoping for a fun, lighthearted night, but leave it to Lucian to push the envelope way past what was acceptable.

Greyson stepped forward to select a bow. “I haven’t used one of these in a while,” he said as he hefted the bow in his hand. “If I’d known we were going to be playing with bows and arrows, I would’ve asked Artemis to give me a few pointers.”

I was confused. “Why aren’t you freaking out? Is this some kind of werewolf thing that I don’t get?”

Greyson shrugged. “I have no idea. I suspect it’s just a Lucian thing.”

*Is this some new obsession of Lucian’s? One that’s going to put every Alpha here in danger? Is he planning to pit Alpha against Alpha? Just when I was starting to think that we could really bury the hatchet with Lucian, he decides to pull this!*

I dug deep and touched on my magic, hoping I’d be able to conjure a shield to help protect Greyson, if it came down to it.

Armin picked up five arrows, ignited their tips in the cauldron, and handed one to each Alpha. I winced at the heat as Greyson nocked the flaming arrow in his bow.

*You don’t have to do this, Greyson*, I mind linked. *You can shift, and we can run out of here.*

Before Greyson could respond, Lucian’s voice rang out strong and clear.

“Take aim!” Lucian leveled his own bow at the covered object in the distance.

I let out a sigh of relief. *Okay, at least they’re not shooting at each other!*

Armin began the countdown. “And on three, two, one, fire!”

The arrows flew through the air, leaving trails of fire behind them until they hit the object, setting the cover on fire. Flames lit up the sky as the cover burned away to reveal a massive likeness of Seluna.

# Episode 3419

**Xavier**

Everyone stood crowded onto the balcony that overlooked the fiery scene below. Everyone was busy talking as they waited to see what Lucian had in store. I’d been escorted to the spot by a stern group of attendants who kept reminding me that I wasn’t authorized to go out into the courtyard. The only reason I hadn’t made too much of a stink about it was because they’d helped me avoid having to talk to Gabe about Ava. However, seeing the ridiculous display Lucian was about to put on ensured that my relief was short-lived.

Lucian was full of shit—I knew that as well as I knew my own name—but I still didn’t like having the whole “not being an official Alpha” thing rubbed in my face. I hadn’t been embarrassed about being stopped from joining the others so much as angry that I still wasn’t in a position to get the respect I deserved. There were times—few and far between—when I forgot that I wasn’t in my rightful position as Alpha any longer, and that my brother now held the role that should’ve been mine. But being turned away from a pack Alpha exclusive gathering had a way of making all the bitterness come rushing back. On the upside, at least I wasn’t involved in Lucian’s newest spectacle. I was happy to watch from a distance.

“What *is* that thing out there?” Gabe asked. “I’ve been trying to guess based on the shape, but I’ve got nothing.”

“Who the fuck knows?” I said, though I vaguely remembered seeing a group of attendants setting it up during the races. Lucian got off on being shocking and provocative, so there was no doubt in my mind that whatever was hiding under the cover would cause a stir.

“There’s no way in hell it’s another statue,” Mikah said. “Or maybe he already got his flunkies to glue his stone dick back on and he wants to do another unveiling.”

We all shared a laugh as Armin began the countdown. The Alphas took aim, their flaming arrows lighting up the night. There was a chorus of *oohs* and *aahs* as the countdown ended and the arrows arced into the sky, landing on the red velvet cover and setting it on fire.

Everyone went quiet once the cover burned away to reveal Seluna’s face.

“Who the hell is that?” Gabe asked.

“Seluna,” I said tightly. I tensed as I looked for Cali, down below. It had to be hard for her to see this. She’d been tortured and terrorized by Seluna for too long for it to have no effect on her. Without a thought, I rushed forward and pushed through the guests, my mind on Cali and nothing else.

“Where you going, man?” Gabe called after me.

I didn’t answer. I had to get to Cali to make sure she was okay. I reached the balcony railing and vaulted over it, not missing a step as I hit the ground below and made a beeline for my mate. I hadn’t taken my eyes off her since the big reveal, and I approached her where she stood frozen to the spot with a look of pure horror on her face.

*How could Greyson be involved in something so cruel? Did he know that Lucian was going to throw the demon in Cali’s face again?*

“What the hell were you thinking?” I snarled, shoving Greyson away while simultaneously wrapping a protective arm around Cali. I wanted to shield her from the still-flaming statue of Seluna in the distance.

“I had no idea! Come on, Xavier, do you really think I would’ve agreed to something like this?” Greyson’s eyes were cold and hard as he went charging after Lucian.

I turned to Cali and lifted her chin so that I could look her in the eye. “Are you okay?”

“D-Do you see it, too?” Cali asked, her voice small. “Is it really her? A statue of Seluna?”

“I see it, Cali. It’s not a hallucination. It’s just the stupid princeling’s idea of a party trick. You’re going to be okay.” I pulled Cali in for a hug, my anger at the princeling growing as I felt Cali’s heartbeat hammering against my chest.

*The fucking Vanguards don’t know when to quit. We take one step forward with them and ten steps backward, every single time. If I never see Lucian’s stupid face again, it’ll be too soon.*

Greyson squared off with Lucian. “What kind of sick game are you playing here?” He gestured to Cali. “How could you be so insensitive? Have you *forgotten* about what Cali went through at Seluna’s hands? The audacity—throwing Seluna in her face like this!”

“Oh, calm down,” Lucian said with an eyeroll. “Respectfully, you’re overreacting.”

If I hadn’t been holding Cali, I would’ve ripped Lucian’s throat out without a second thought. I’d had it with the princeling’s crap. I wrapped my arms tighter around Cali, trying to comfort her. I would let Greyson deal with Lucian for now. I needed to stay by Cali’s side and help her ride out whatever she was feeling.

Lucian flashed a diplomatic smile. “Maybe I should have given you all some kind of warning—my mistake. My apologies to Caliana, but I promise that it will all make sense in time. Just bear with me.”

“No, you need to make sense of it *now*,” Greyson snapped. “I thought you were over Seluna.”

“That’s the point—I am. And if you’re willing to exhibit a modicum of patience, you’ll not only understand this, but you’ll support it, too.”

The only way I wanted to show my support was by pummeling Lucian to dust, but I held back. Besides, I knew that me getting into a knock-down, drag-out fight with Lucian right now wouldn’t make Cali feel any better.

Everyone turned their attention back to the statue as the flames began to die away. I realized then that the statue was actually a giant clock.

*Who in the hell would want something like that to tell time with? Hasn’t the princeling heard of a grandfather clock? A wall clock? A watch? Sheesh.*

Lucian’s eyes narrowed as he gestured to Armin. “The time! It’s off by two minutes! Fix it, now!”

Armin took off toward the Seluna clock with a gaggle of attendants in tow.

Lucian stared after them for a few tense seconds before his glare gave way to a look of concern. He started toward Cali with his arms outstretched, as if he intended to pull her into a hug. “Caliana—I’m so sorry.”

I pushed Cali behind me and stepped up to Lucian, stopping him in his tracks. “Take one more step, and I’ll kill you.”

Greyson might have been keen to build some sort of alliance with the Vanguards, but I wasn’t about to let that threaten the safety and comfort of my mate. Lucian had gone too far, and there was no way I was going to let him within a breath of Cali. He’d already gotten too close for comfort with her before, and I would never let him do it again.

“I just wanted to apologize,” Lucian said. “This is all a big misunderstanding, I assure you.”

“You can apologize from there,” Greyson said as he came to stand beside me.

“Caliana, you must know that I didn’t mean—”

Cali stepped from behind me and held up a hand. “Lucian, it’s okay. I wasn’t prepared for that, but I’m okay. There’s no reason to fight over this.” She gave Greyson and me a pointed look.

I wasn’t at all convinced, but I didn’t want to upset Cali more. As usual, Cali was being the bigger person and trying to defuse the situation, no matter how uncomfortable this had to have made her.

Lucian smiled. “I’m glad, and I promise that you’ll thank me later.”

He started to reach for Cali’s hand, but I swatted him away.

Barely seeming to register the slight, Lucian turned his attention to Armin and the attendants. “Is it done?” Lucian called out as he rushed away to make sure that the clock was being fixed to his satisfaction.

“We should go,” I said to Cali. “I think we’ve had enough of the Vanguard pack’s shenanigans for the night.”

“You can say that again. Every time I try to give Lucian the benefit of the doubt, I end up regretting it,” Greyson added with a sigh.

“No, I want to stay,” Cali said. “I was a little shaken up at first, but once I recovered, I realized that I didn’t feel anything. The handprint didn’t burn like it used to, and I didn’t have any hallucinations. In a way, I’m happy this happened, because it let me know that I really might be done with all the Seluna problems.”

“That’s great,” I said. “I’m never going to forgive Lucian for his self-importance and stupidity, no matter what excuse he gives, but the important thing is that you’re okay.” I gave Cali a kiss on the lips—screw Greyson. I wanted to kiss my mate, and I was going to do it, no matter who was around.

Everyone started to head back inside, and I could see Armin and the attendants still trying to change the time as Lucian yelled at them to hurry up. Cali, Greyson, and I went to follow the others, but then Ava ran up and grabbed my arm.

“Xavier!” She was out of breath and looked alarmed. “Come with me! Hurry!”

# Episode 3420

**Ava**

I hated the way I was responding to the heat I felt rolling off Xavier’s body as I pulled him toward the spot where I’d last seen Zeke. To my relief and surprise, he wasn’t resisting. He wasn’t happy about it, that was for sure, but at least he was coming with me without putting up too much of a fight.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked as I pulled him along.

I glanced back at him. *He’s always so tall and brooding and handsome…* I bit the inside of my cheek and let him go. “It’s Zeke. Our reluctant Alpha seems to have run off somewhere, and I fear the worst.”

Zeke’s time as interim Alpha had been one let down after another, and I was at the end of my rope with him. I knew that he wasn’t exactly Alpha material—hell, Zeke knew it more than anybody—but I’d never expected that he would be this much of a fuckup.

Xavier followed behind me. “There he is. And he looks like death warmed over.”

I followed Xavier’s gaze to see Zeke making his way over to a group of unsuspecting ladies. Xavier was right—he didn’t look too good. I could smell the alcohol and sweat coming off him from a few yards away. I could only imagine what he smelled like up close.

“Looks like he’s going to hurl,” Xavier said. “And those ladies aren’t going to see it coming.”

“Shit. Help me!” I rushed forward, trying to feign calm as I closed in on him. I didn’t want to cause a scene, and I had to get to Zeke before he said anything to the group that he—and more likely I—would regret. He was in no state to be chatting with anyone.

“Ava!” Zeke slurred when he saw me. “To what do I owe this pleasure?” He smiled and let out a loud hiccup.

“Zeke! I’ve been looking all over for you.” My stomach churned at the overwhelming stench of his breath. He was pale and clammy, and his eyes were hazy and unfocused. It looked like he’d completely given up. His clothing was rumpled and stained, he had large sweat rings under his armpits, and he appeared to be seconds from falling over. He was a complete mess.

My cheeks burned with embarrassment. I was pretty sure everyone at the party knew that Zeke’s mantle as Alpha was only temporary, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t still reflect badly on the Samaras if he did anything unbefitting of an Alpha at this party. The other guests were our peers, and I didn’t want us to lose any more face in front of them. We’d already had a hard time putting the Samara pack back together—we couldn’t afford to completely lose everyone’s respect.

*I thought Xavier had talked to him and gotten his head on straight, but clearly he didn’t make as big of an impression as he should have.* I looked at Xavier out of the corner of my eye, anger bubbling up inside me. *Of course Xavier couldn’t do the one thing I asked. Too busy chasing after Cali, I bet. But what else is new? I suppose it’s my fault for thinking he could pull his head out of Cali’s ass long enough to help me.*

I held my breath and tried to extinguish my anger as I linked arms with Zeke. “I just wanted to have a quick chat with you about some Samara pack business.”

Zeke’s gaze went to Xavier. “With him?”

Xavier was just standing there watching us with his hands shoved into his pockets. He was the very picture of neutrality. He shrugged. “Seems you didn’t find our little discussion enlightening enough, Zeke.”

“Obviously not,” I snapped.

I pulled Zeke along with me, and he resisted the whole way. It was only when Xavier came and put a hand on Zeke’s back that the man finally allowed us to lead him away. We took him to a deserted corner of the courtyard, where a line of large plants blocked us from view.

We released Zeke, who was looking even worse now than when we’d initially spotted him. He looked back and forth between us, obviously nervous. “You don’t understand, Xavier. I *did* listen to your advice. I haven’t had another drop of alcohol tonight!” He held up his hand like he was making a pledge.

I looked Zeke in the eye, trying to decide if I believed him. It looked to me like he’d drunk every drop of alcohol that Lucian had to offer. How could he have gotten so drunk so quickly? The drinks were strong and all, but he’d been smashed for the better part of the night—and had gotten progressively worse over time.

Xavier loomed over him. “I didn’t realize that honoring Hector’s memory meant lying to someone who’s trying to help you,” Xavier said, motioning to me, a bored expression on his face. He looked like he would’ve preferred to be anywhere but here, and I felt exactly the same way. Too bad I had no other choice.

Zeke swallowed audibly. “No, no, that’s not what’s happening. I just had too much early on in the night, and it hasn’t worn off, and, and…”

I was starting to feel bad for him, but I was really just grateful that we’d managed to get him away from everyone else before he made a fool of himself and the entire Samara pack.

*This is pathetic. How did we get here? My brother never would’ve done anything like this. The Samara pack was a force to be reckoned with, back then. Nolan was strong and capable and never would have let anyone see him three sheets to the wind in the middle of a party attended by his allies.*

“… and they have this amazing cocktail at the bar that I’d never tried. It went down really smooth, and I barely noticed that I’d had so much…” Zeke’s words trailed off, and he suddenly went pale.

Xavier and I both groaned and jumped back as Zeke puked right at our feet. Xavier hadn’t been quick enough, and his shoes caught the brunt of it. I turned away in disgust as Zeke continued to retch, the smell hitting me like a ton of bricks.

Xavier shook his head and scowled. “Unbelievable.”

I rounded on him. “This is your fault!”

Xavier’s eyebrows shot up as he tried to wipe his shoes off on the grass. “I’m sorry, did you just say that this is *my* fault? What, was I force feeding him cocktails all night? Because I think I’d remember that.”

“No, but it’s your fault all right,” I said, doubling down, even though I knew I was just pissed at Zeke and the state of things and looking for a suitable place to lay the blame. Xavier was as good a target as any, and I was trying to pick a fight. “You were supposed to take care of this! Now look at him!” I jabbed a finger at Zeke where he stood bent over, wiping his mouth and still puking while sweat poured off his face.

“I didn’t know I was supposed to get him a Gatorade and pump his stomach!” Xavier hissed. “Besides, I think I’ve already suffered enough.” He grimaced at his shoes.

Zeke straightened up, rocking on his feet. “Whew. I feel so much better now.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Xavier replied. He turned to face me. “This is *your* pack, Ava. This is your mess, not mine! I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I have my own pack—and my own problems—to deal with. I can’t take on yours, too. The fact that I’m even still helping you out with this makes no fucking sense! The only reason I did it was because Greyson asked me to, but now I’m done. Finished!”

It felt like Xavier had just slapped me across the face. Deep down, I’d thought that Xavier had helped me because of our remaining mate bond, not because he was taking orders from the Redwood Alpha. *How could I have been stupid enough to assume that Xavier gives a damn about me? I should’ve known.*

Xavier turned and walked away, groaning in frustration as he kept sliding his shoes along the grass to clean them off. “This is such bullshit!” he hissed to himself. “Vanguard parties fucking suck!”

“So my pack means nothing to you?” I said, still reeling from his revelation. “So all that concern you showed for me, you trying to get me to stay clear of Lucian—none of that really mattered to you? You were just following your brother’s orders?”

Xavier turned to look at me, his mouth set in a straight line, and said nothing.

My frustration reaching a fever pitch, I turned my back on Xavier and looked at Zeke.

*To hell with him. To hell with Xavier. To hell with it all.*

“Zeke,” I snapped. “This is your last fucking night as Samara Alpha!”

# Episode 3421

**Greyson**

Cali and I stood and watched as Ava pulled Xavier away. Cali took a few steps forward like she was considering following them before she stopped, her face set in confusion.

I wasn’t sure how things stood between Ava and Xavier at the moment, given Ava and Lucian’s little stunt at the pool. Xavier hadn’t looked pleased about seeing his former mate and the Vanguard princeling kiss, but when was Xavier ever pleased about anything? He was almost always annoyed or ticked off about something.

*I guess I should just be glad when his annoyance isn’t aimed right at me.*

I seriously doubted that Ava was dragging him away to talk about what had happened with Lucian. It was more likely that she was pulling Xavier into another intervention of sorts for Zeke—and for good reason. From what I’d seen during Lucian’s fiery Seluna reveal, Zeke should never have been given a weapon. He’d been wobbling on his feet as he struggled to take aim at the target, and I’d said a silent prayer that he wouldn’t misfire and hit another partygoer—or one of the Alphas standing right beside him.

Zeke had appeared a little more in control earlier in the night, but that wasn’t saying much. He wasn’t handling the pressure of Alpha-dom very well, and it was only a matter of time before it came to a head. As I watched Ava tug Xavier farther away, I realized that that moment might have already come.

“Should we go help him out?” Cali asked me, still staring after Xavier and Ava. “Ava looks stressed, and I don’t want Xavier to walk into something he’s not expecting.”

I looked at my brother. “No, Xavier can handle himself. Ava’s probably dragging him off to help with something regarding Zeke. He needs to help keep a lid on the Samara problems, so let’s help him do that by staying out of it for now.”

Cali nodded. “Oh, because of the Vanguard thing—Lucian wanting to absorb the Samaras?”

I nodded. “Yes. We don’t want the Samaras to make themselves look weak in front of Lucian and give him more ammo to go after them like he’s their savior or something. The last thing we need is the Vanguard pack growing larger, or someone who was close to the Vanguards—like Ava—being a part of that. It wouldn’t be good for the Redwoods. So whatever Xavier can do to curtail that will help.”

“I agree,” Cali said thoughtfully. “I hadn’t thought about it that way before.” She relaxed a little and finally tore her gaze away from Xavier and Ava. “Do you really think it would be so bad if the Samaras joined the Vanguards?”

“Definitely. If Ava joins up with them, she could spill a lot of the Redwood pack’s secrets—the way we conduct things, the way I function as an Alpha, our pack dynamics, all of it.” I still had my eyes on Xavier, hoping that my brother would take care of things without starting up some other Samara mess. After the whole Seluna clock statue debacle, I was hoping to finish out the night with as little drama as possible.

I put my hand on the small of Cali’s back and led her inside, where we came face-to-face with Mace.

He plucked a beer off a passing attendant’s tray. “These parties seem to get weirder and weirder.”

I snorted and nodded, looking around as the festivities started to ramp up again. “Definitely.”

It was obvious that Xavier, Cali, and I were the only ones who’d been truly shaken up by the whole Seluna spectacle. Everyone else seemed happy to move on and continue the party.

“Have you given any more thought to what I asked before? We were interrupted before you could respond,” Mace said, his gaze flicking to Cali for a brief moment before coming to land on me.

*Shit. Mace’s Maren question.* I didn’t want to do this in front of Cali, not when I hadn’t had a chance to tell her about it yet. I’d been basking in the afterglow of our moment in Aysel’s closet and hadn’t wanted to throw off the mood—although Seluna’s flaming reveal had definitely done that on its own.

*I can’t be weird about this. It’s not my place to gatekeep Maren’s dating life, anyway, so I won’t.*

My only worry was for Fenrir, but I knew that Mace wasn’t anything to worry about in that regard. He was a good man and a good Alpha.

I draped an arm around Cali’s shoulders. “Of course. If you want to ask Maren out, that’s fine by me. Why wouldn’t it be?” I was doing my best to look and sound nonchalant, but on the inside, a mass of confusing feelings had gathered, and I was trying to make sense of them.

Cali looked at me with wide eyes but didn’t say anything.

Mace smiled and tipped his beer at me. “Thanks, man. I thought you’d be cool with it, but I still wanted to ask—I don’t want things to be weird between us.”

I forced a smile. “No, of course not. I appreciate you talking to me about it.”

*If only you’d waited to speak until we were alone.* It wasn’t that I was hiding anything, but my Alpha peer asking my permission to date my ex right in front of my mate was awkward, there was no way around it.

“Yeah, of course. I don’t think I’ll be asking her out anytime soon, anyway. There’s so much going on that I barely have time to even consider dating. Honestly, the fact that I’m even thinking about getting into anything new kind of surprises me, but when you meet someone like Maren, you can’t let the opportunity pass you by.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Cali asked. “That there’s no rush? You can take things slow.”

Mace smiled. “You’re right. No rush.” He clapped me on the back. “See you at midnight?”

“See you then,” I said with a tight smile. I watched Mace head back over to join some of his pack members, then I turned back to Cali, knowing that she would probably want some more information about this. I sighed and decided to just dive right in. “So, just to catch you up, Mace asked me about Maren earlier tonight. Not sure why he thought he needed to talk to me before asking her out. It has nothing to do with me.”

Cali shrugged. “He was probably just trying to be considerate. He said as much.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if Ava pulling Xavier away only minutes ago and now Mace mentioning Maren was all piling up on Cali. It had to be a little annoying to be constantly surrounded by remnants of both her mates’ pasts all the time. If I were in her position, I’d be over it, that was for sure.

“I know that, but I also know how it might look to you,” I said. “Mace thought it was necessary to get my blessing, but that doesn’t mean I have any feelings for Maren. They’re long gone.”

Even as I said it, I knew that I wasn’t telling the full truth. Confusing feelings were still swirling inside me, and I wasn’t sure what any of them meant.

Strange feelings aside, there was no doubt in my mind that Cali had my heart. Maren was someone who’d meant a lot to me a long time ago, so it was probably normal that I was conflicted, but there was no question that I was over her. There was nothing between Maren and me but history.

Cali sighed and shrugged. “I have to admit that I’m a little surprised by the entire situation, but Maren was your first love, so I get it. She’s an important person to you, and I know that Fenrir is too. He’s a young werewolf who doesn’t have a good werewolf father figure in his life, and I know it’s important to you that he has that. It makes sense that Mace would think you were a little protective of that, and think that he needed to check with you first before taking that step.”

I looked hard at Cali, unable to read her tone and trying to pick up cues from her body language.

“But not more important than you,” I said. “You know that, right?”

I wasn’t sure why I felt the overwhelming need to reassure her, and I wondered if that was a good sign or bad sign. Cali had always been so supportive of my relationship with Maren and Fenrir, and I wanted that to continue without her having to worry that there was something else lurking beneath it all.

Cali nodded, but she wasn’t making eye contact with me.

I took her hand in mine. “Cali, you’re my true future, and no number of exes coming back into the picture will ever change that.”

Cali looked at me, and then away.

I reached out and gently cupped her chin, turning her to face me. “You believe me, right?”

# Episode 3422

I leaned forward and cupped Greyson’s cheek. “Of course I believe you, Greyson! I know that Mace asking you that was probably weird and a little uncomfortable, but I need you to know that I’m not worried about Maren. Not like that.”

I thought back to the awkward moments Maren and I had shared at the pack house, not too long ago. Maren wasn’t my favorite person in the world, and I doubted I was hers, but that didn’t mean I didn’t trust that whatever had once existed between her and Greyson was long gone.

“Honestly, I’m worried about Maren for other reasons, like if Aiden comes back for Fenrir. Or, what if Fenrir makes a mistake and shifts at a mall or something? He’s still learning how to be a werewolf and how to control all his impulses, and that has to be hard for Maren to handle. Those are the types of things I think about. The last thing on my mind is whether you and Maren have any lingering romantic feelings between you.” There might have been a time when I’d thought exactly that—who wouldn’t? Maren was beautiful, and she and Greyson had been through a lot together—but that wasn’t the way I felt anymore.

“I’m glad to hear that, Cali.” Greyson leaned into my touch. “I guess I just wanted—needed—you to know that there was nothing there. Not even a little. I didn’t want Mace’s question to give you any bad thoughts, especially since you didn’t have any context. Thanks for being so mature about this.”

“It’s easy to do, because you always make sure that I know where you stand. You and Maren will always have your history together—and I guess that I’ll always have a bit of a reaction there—but that doesn’t mean that it has to impact anything in a negative way. Got it?” I smiled at him, and he smiled back.

“Got it.” He leaned forward to plant a soft kiss on my lips. “How did I find such an understanding mate, anyway?”

I laughed. “I should be saying that to you!” I wrapped my arms around his neck and gazed up into his beautiful grey eyes. “Seriously, don’t worry about it, okay? We’re all good.”

We shared another quick kiss as Ravi came walking up.

“Hey, either of you seen Marissa?” He was looking around, even as he asked.

“Who? Sounds vaguely familiar…” I said, sorting through my memories of everyone I’d met tonight, trying to recall if I’d met a Marissa.

“She’s from the Samara pack,” Greyson said.

“Yup, that’s her. We were flirting earlier, and I promised to get her a drink.” Ravi held up two champagne glasses. His gaze shifted between Greyson and me. “Actually… I wanted to talk to you alone for a minute, Greyson. If that’s cool with you, Cali?”

“Sorry, love.” Greyson gave me a peck on the cheek. “Can you give us a minute?”

“Sure,” I said, quickly excusing myself.

*I wonder what Ravi wants to talk about? Boy talk, or something else?*

It was actually good timing, since I needed to go find some water. The moonshine had pretty much worn off, and now I was beyond thirsty. I looked around for some water without any success before I went up to an attendant who was standing near one of the many drink stations. “Excuse me, where can I find something to drink?”

The attendant looked at me and blinked. “Um, everywhere? There’s a rosé fountain over there, a whiskey tasting station over that way, and about thirty waiters walking around with trays of champagne, miss. Plenty to drink.” He gave me a pleasant smile.

“No water?” I said quickly. “That’s what I meant—water.”

The attendant looked even more confused now. “Uh, water? That would be in the back.”

“Seriously? There isn’t any water out here? Just alcohol?” Lucian wasn’t making any secret of his desire to get his guests good and plastered.

The attendant nodded. “Yes, just alcohol. Water isn’t all that popular at a party like this, I’m sure you understand. Would you like for me to bring you some?”

“Yes, please.” I wasn’t sure if water was ever *popular* anywhere, it was just kind of a necessary evil.

“Right away!” The attendant hurried off.

I went and found a chair and sat down, rubbing my temples. *How does this place not have water readily available? There are going to be a lot of hangovers tomorrow if people aren’t hydrating properly. Ack, I sound like my mom.*

I closed my eyes for a moment and listened to the music and the chatter. I’d just started to relax into my seat when someone came up and spoke right into my ear. I yelped and nearly jumped up out of my seat.

“Have you been trying to make me lose the bet on purpose?” It was Jacs. She had a champagne flute in her hand and was looking at me like I was the weird one for being startled when she was the one who’d snuck up on me.

“Oh my god, you scared me!” I said, placing a hand on my chest. “What the hell?”

Jacs rolled her eyes. “*That’s* what you’re concerned about? You’re actively foiling my chances against Lola, and I’m not happy about it. You’ve been sticking to Greyson’s side all night, but my money’s on Xavier. Isn’t it your thing to, you know, give them equal attention so they don’t tear each other’s throats out over you? Xavier’s certainly been getting the short end of the stick tonight.” Jacs turned to take a look around the party. “Where *is* that broody wolf, anyway?”

“Seriously? This is what you’re worried about right now?” I asked. Jacs always overstepped, but this was a lot, even for her.

“Um… Yes, that’s what I’m worried about. Is that so surprising? I’m at a party full of goofy, sex-crazed werewolves—how else am I supposed to entertain myself? Also, I’ve got a lot of money riding on this. And I don’t like losing.” Jacs downed her champagne in one gulp and placed her empty glass on a passing attendant’s tray.

I snorted. “Then I guess you shouldn’t have made that bet.”

Jacs narrowed her eyes. “I’m just saying, if I find out that you’re actively *not* kissing Xavier at midnight because of this bet and not divine intervention from the *due destini*, you’ll be hearing from me.”

I watched as the vampire turned and sashayed back into the fray, taking another glass of champagne from one of the many drink stations as she went. I was annoyed, now. I’d briefly forgotten about the stupid bet. Lola had told me not to worry about it, but knowing that Jacs was paying such close attention to my every move definitely made me want to spite her. So much for not worrying about the bet—or what I was going to do when the clock struck midnight.I pushed that worry away, unable to go down that road at the moment.

I took a look around. I didn’t see Xavier anywhere.

*Is he still with Ava? It’s been a while now; what could they be doing?*

Maybe it was because Jacs had already gotten under my skin, but I started to have nagging thoughts about Ava. Xavier had set her straight and let her know that there was nothing between them, so I’d been feeling better about the state of their relationship lately. But now there was suddenly a voice in my head telling me that I shouldn’t hold Ava at her word when it came to her feelings for Xavier.

*I literally just caught her in the bathroom with Xavier while he was naked. She had an excuse, but why would I buy that? Sure, werewolves are always naked around each other, but that doesn’t mean she wasn’t up to something.*

I knew better than anyone the power of the mate bond, and if Greyson had been making Xavier work with Ava to keep the Samaras on track…

The attendant reappeared beside me, holding a glass of water. He’d filled it with ice and even garnished it with a fresh lemon. It looked appetizing, but I shook my head and put my hand out, rejecting it. “Actually, could I have something stronger?”

“Really?” The attendant huffed, though he quickly covered it with a polite smile. “Certainly. What would you like instead?”

I felt bad for jerking the poor guy around. It had to be rough enough working for someone like the princeling without me adding to it.

“No, I’m sorry, water is fine,” I said, quickly taking the glass.

My head was spinning. Every fear and suspicion I’d ever harbored about Ava was flooding back in, and I couldn’t stop it.

I sipped the water as the attendant scurried off, my mind stuck on the image of Ava pulling Xavier away to do who knew what. Greyson had said it was Samara pack business, but there was no way for me to know if that was really the case.

Then a dark thought crossed my mind.

*Could it be that Greyson is trying to push Xavier and Ava together on purpose?*

# Episode 3423

**Greyson**

Ravi and I made our way across the ballroom.

“You all right?” I asked Ravi once he’d taken one too many nervous sips from his glass of champagne. “It seems like you’re worried about something. Is it that Samara wolf, Marissa?” He’d mentioned Marissa in a pretty lighthearted way, but now he seemed troubled.

Ravi shook his head. “No, not exactly.” He downed the rest of his champagne, and I reached out to keep him from downing the other one.

“I’ll take this one,” I said, taking the flute from him. I put a hand on Ravi’s back and escorted him out into the hallway. “What’s up? Why are you drinking these like they’re water?”

Ravi took a shaky breath. “Nothing. I mean—not nothing, exactly. I’m fine. Mostly.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Mostly?”

“It’s just… On a night like this, I’m just having such a fun time talking with everyone.” He sighed and went to take another drink, frowning when he realized again that his glass was empty.

“Everyone, including Marissa?”

Ravi nodded. “Yeah, she’s nice and all, but it all just kept going back to… Joss.” He put his glass down on a nearby end table and cracked his knuckles. “In fact, she’s all I can think about.”

It finally clicked for me. *I should have known. It hasn’t been all that long since he lost Joss, and nights like this are probably a trigger. He wishes she were here and that he could celebrate with her.*

I gave my friend a hard pat on the back. “I’m sorry, man.”

Ravi let out a heavy sigh before he continued. “It’s not that I’m trying to focus on her, but I can’t help it. All night, I’ve just been seeing little things here and there that I think she would have enjoyed. Things we could have seen and experienced together, things she would have laughed at, or rolled her eyes at…”

My heart felt heavy as I thought about Ravi and Joss together, and what a void her absence had left in Ravi’s world. Ravi had been in love with Joss, and she was a loss that would haunt me forever, too. Her death had left a gaping hole in the pack. She’d been a strong, capable Luna who I’d chosen strategically for the sake of the Redwood pack. She’d more than proven herself and had put her life on the line time and time again for the pack, despite the knowledge that I’d never reciprocate her feelings for me.

A big part of me had been relieved when she’d found something in Ravi—love—but I’d still known what was coming. Silas. My father was the disease that had made all of us sick in one way or another. Some of us just hadn’t been able to fight him off and come out unscathed on the other side.

“She loved you, man,” I said to Ravi. “More than anything.”

Ravi nodded. “I know. That doesn’t make me miss her any less, though. If anything, that makes it worse.”

I pulled him into a hug, and when we separated, I saw that he had a few tears on his cheeks that he quickly wiped away.

“Sorry, man, for getting so emotional,” he said. “I’m just getting triggered left and right tonight. I’m trying to keep it together, but I’m clearly not doing a great job.”

I shook my head. “Don’t apologize for the way you feel, Ravi. Joss was an amazing Luna, an amazing werewolf, an amazing woman.” I glanced down at the champagne glass in my hand that was meant for Marissa. “You know you don’t have to actually move on just yet, right?”

Ravi gave a choked laugh. “Yeah, yeah, I know that.” He paused, thoughtful. “I have to admit, I’ve kind of stopped short of taking things to another level with anyone since Joss died. It kind of feels like if I really move on, then Joss will somehow be erased from my memory, and I don’t want that. I never want to forget her. If I move on, does it mean that my love for her never really mattered?”

“Don’t think like that, Ravi.” I knew how easy it was to get into self-talk that could keep you frozen and afraid of moving on. Losing Joss so unexpectedly had traumatized Ravi, so it was no surprise that he was still dealing with the fallout. “That’s not true in the least. You have to know that. She’s right here, man, in your heart.” I tapped on his chest. “And she’ll always be there.”

Ravi shrugged and looked off into the distance, his eyes still moist. I could see his jaw flexing as he tried to fight off more tears.

“You really don’t have to move on if it doesn’t feel right,” I said again. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, or anything you don’t feel like you should be doing. That’s not how it works. You move at your own place. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone, and we’re all here for you.”

Ravi smiled weakly. “Thanks, man. I think that’s exactly it. I’m not ready to move on yet, and I just have to come to terms with that. I don’t feel ready, and it doesn’t feel right. I think Joss would want me to try, but I just can’t do it.”

“That’s okay. I don’t think Joss would want you to force yourself to do anything or pursue anything that doesn’t feel right. Give yourself all the time you need to grieve.” I clapped Ravi on the shoulder and squeezed. “Everything in time.”

Ravi nodded and let out a stuttered sigh. “Thanks, Greyson.”

I looked at my friend, glad my words had resonated with him. I didn’t know how I’d become the go-to guy for advice, tonight—first Mace, and now Ravi—but as Alpha, I was happy that my peers as well as my own pack members felt comfortable coming to me with their problems. Years ago, living as a Rogue, I’d never even pictured myself as a pack Alpha—let alone a pack Alpha who people leaned on for things outside of battle and pack politics. Not all Alphas took on the role of an emotional supporter, but I knew that was the type of Alpha I wanted to be for my pack—my family.

My mind drifted to Cali and how happy I was that she was safe and sound. I felt for my friends—both Mace and Ravi. They’d both lost someone special to them and were still trying to find their way. I was lucky that Cali was safe. After everything we’d dealt with fighting Silas, Letifer, Seluna, Adéluce… We were lucky indeed.

I suddenly felt fiercely protective of Cali, and it felt good to know that she felt exactly the same way about me. Cali had shown time and time again that she would do whatever it took to keep me out of harm’s way, just like I would for her. I didn’t want Mace’s and Ravi’s stories to end up being cautionary tales—that wasn’t fair to the women that they’d lost—but I couldn’t help but feel like this was the time to stop and take a moment to be thankful for how lucky Cali and I had been in the face of multiple tragedies that could have torn us apart.

“Do you want to leave, Ravi?” I asked. “I’ll understand if you do. We don’t have to stay here. We’ve put in an appearance and participated in the party games—we’ve done what we came to do.”

I almost got angry all over again, thinking about Lucian’s Seluna spectacle.

But Ravi shook his head. “Nah, that’s not necessary. I can make it to midnight at least.” He took a quick look at his watch. “It’s only a half hour away.”

“That’s the spirit.” I grinned at him, impressed by his resilience. Ravi was nothing if not dependable. There wasn’t much that shook him up, which was why it made me happy to be there for him during one of the few moments when he wasn’t being tough as nails.

“Besides, I have to see what kind of bullshit Lucian is going to pull off next,” Ravi said.

I groaned. “Don’t remind me. I’m already doing everything in my power not to pop him one for that last stunt.”

We started to head back to the ballroom together. I couldn’t wait to find Cali. If I’d thought that our time together earlier had been good, my conversation with Ravi had shown me that it wasn’t nearly enough. I wanted more, and tonight was so special that I wanted to spend as much time with Cali as I could.

I felt a cold hand on my arm as we stepped through the massive archway that led back into the ballroom. I twisted around and came face-to-face with Jacqueline.

She flashed me a slow, fanged smile. “Not so fast, Alpha.”

# Episode 3424

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t shake the bad thought I’d just had about Greyson, and it was freaking me out. Where the hell had a thought like that come from, anyway?I’d never thought anything so horrible about Greyson ever, except maybe when we’d first met and I’d thought he’d betrayed the Redwood pack and was a killer—which was what Xavier and Colton and the others had thought of him before we’d all learned the truth.

I shook my head. *No. Greyson would never do that. He would never manipulate me or Xavier like that.*

I tried to dash the thought from my head, but it kept popping up and nagging at me, forcing me to figure out why it had come into my head in the first place.

It was no secret that my mates struggled with the *due destini* as much as I did, but to think that it would drive Greyson to push Xavier and Ava together, just to get his brother out of the picture…

*I’m awful for thinking that of Greyson! He would never do that, ever! He’s never made any secret of the fact that he wants me all to himself, but he would never do anything that would hurt me in the process!*

Not to mention that Greyson had been right by Xavier’s and my side in New Orleans, helping to protect us both. If he was trying to get Xavier out of the way so that he could have me to himself, he definitely wouldn’t have risked his life for his brother the way he had.

If anyone could be blamed for pushing Xavier and his former mate together, it was me or Ava. Ava’s motives were obvious—she was still in love with Xavier and wanted him back—but *I* was the one who’d encouraged Xavier to help the Samaras in the first place. I’d known that meant he’d be spending loads of time with Ava, and I’d still urged him to do it. Hell, I’d even tried to invite the Samaras to the pack house Christmas!

*How could I have been so stupid? I’ve literally done more to push Xavier toward Ava than Greyson has, and for what? Just so I could feel better? So the Samaras didn’t feel left out? What was my reasoning, there?*

I sat there sipping my water, trying to unpack it all. I’d even entertained Lola’s crazy advice about giving Xavier permission to sleep with Ava so that he could get whatever remained of their lingering mate bond out of his system.

*That was me! ME! I tried to get my mate to sleep with his ex! Who DOES that? What the hell was I thinking?*

In my quest to be totally understanding and accommodating, it was starting to seem like I might have missed the mark. Luckily for me, Xavier had never wavered in his devotion to me and hadn’t taken advantage of the situation.I took a quick look around the room, searching for Xavier.

*Is he still dealing with Zeke? I need to talk to him, now. Where could he be?*

I downed the rest of my water and then got up to find him. For all I knew, Xavier could be in over his head right now. Despite knowing that he would be all right, and that he was more than capable of taking care of himself, I wanted to be there for him in any way I could.

*And I need to be there now more than ever, after my Ava revelation.*

Besides, it wasn’t like Xavier was the type to come ask for help, even if he really needed it.

I was heading for the courtyard when I heard someone calling my name. I glanced behind me and saw Paige weaving her way through the crowd, heading straight for me.

*Crap. Just what I need, the leader of the free love brigade. What do I do? Pretend I didn’t hear her?*

I turned around and kept walking, hoping she hadn’t noticed that I’d seen her.

She called my name a few more times, and then moments later, her hand was on my shoulder. “Cali, wait!”

“Yeah?” I said, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice as I turned and looked into Paige’s smiling face.

*At least she has on clothes this time. That’s a start.*

The Aspen Luna’s smile widened. “Hey, I just wanted to catch up with you for a moment before the night got away from me.”

I tried to think of why that might be. I thought I’d finally gotten out of her and Duke’s crosshairs earlier when I declined to join them for the orgy. If I were in her position and had been turned down like that, I probably would’ve avoided my mates and me like the plague.

“Could we talk, Cali? I kind of feel like we got off on the wrong foot.”

I cleared my throat and managed to give her a watered down smile. *Uh, yeah. I guess you could say that.* “Um…”

“Since you’re the Redwood Alpha’s mate,” Paige said quickly, “we should try to get along—for our mates’ sake if nothing else, right? So, could we maybe go somewhere a little quieter to talk? It won’t take long, I promise.”

*She seems so eager—she’s not going to let me wriggle out of this. And I suppose I should be cool to her, for the sake of pack diplomacy…*

I sighed. “Yeah, sure.”

“Great!” Paige said with a little clap.

I followed her out of the ballroom and into a quieter room that branched off from the main space. We both sat down on a bench, and Paige seemed to be psyching herself up before she finally turned to face me. “So, Cali, I’m going to be honest with you. Duke and I had an ulterior motive for coming here tonight.”

*What? Other than trying to find a third, or fourth, or fifth to join in your orgies?*

“Oh?” I wondered if there might be a political reason. If I’d learned anything in my time with the Redwood pack, it was that werewolves could be very sensitive and that they almost always had a secret or two, or three. And they were usually big ones.

Paige was fidgeting almost uncomfortably in her seat, and I did my best to be patient while she gathered the courage to say whatever was on her mind.

“I’m so sorry about earlier. I didn’t mean to come on so strong earlier,” she said. “Me and Duke, we got a little carried away. Lucian’s parties usually have a certain… type in attendance.”

I’d noticed.

“It’s, uh fine!” I said, wanting this conversation to be over. “I’m just not into that, you know? Not my thing.”

I was starting to feel just a little bad for snubbing her so hard, but I hadn’t had much of a choice at the time. She was right—they’d come on pretty strong. But she’d apologized at least.

“Plus, I’m sure you know how Alphas can be. Lunas, too,” Paige continued.

That piqued my interest. I got the Alpha thing—they could be overbearing and completely laser focused on what they wanted, but I hadn’t had much experience with Lunas beyond Joss. Of course, I’d thought a lot about being a Luna and what it would be like. I knew that the position came with a lot of responsibility, but I hadn’t really thought much about it beyond that.

“Not every Alpha-Luna couple is as open-minded as Duke and me, so it’s not like we’re the norm or anything,” Paige said.

I was happy to hear that. If I ever did become Luna, I had no plans to go orgy hopping with my mates.

While I appreciated Paige’s candor and was doing my best to be patient with her, I was really anxious to go and find Xavier.

“Thanks for clarifying things,” I said lamely, itching to get up and go look for my mate.

“When I saw you that you were the Redwood Luna, I assumed… And maybe you wouldn’t understand, but…” Paige trailed off.

I couldn’t for the life of me figure out where all this was headed, but I wished she would just come out with it. “Whatever it is, Paige, you can say it.”

Paige wiped away a tear that had slid from her eye. “I’m sorry, this is just really hard for me to admit…”

I couldn’t help but feel for Paige. It was clear that she was in pain and struggling over something. I was starting to realize that being a Luna was maybe even more complicated than I’d first thought.

“Lunas aren’t just there to help their Alpha lead the pack. There’s much more. For one thing, they’re supposed to have children.”

That part I knew. I remembered hearing that little archaic tidbit when I was learning about the Redwood pack.

“But no matter how much Duke and I try, I can’t get pregnant.” She wiped away another tear and looked down at her feet.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” I said, wondering why Paige was telling me such an intimate, painful thing. We’d only just met each other, after all.

Paige went silent while she tried to collect herself. “So, all of this to say… I was hoping that you could help me.”

My mind raced through all the possible ways that this Luna who barely knew me might think I’d be able to help her. “Um, okay… How?”

Paige sandwiched my hand between hers. “We’re looking for a surrogate.”

# Episode 3425

**Xavier**

*Did I hear Ava right? Did she really just tell Zeke that he isn’t the Samara Alpha anymore? What the hell is she thinking?*

Zeke must have been as confused as I was, because he didn’t even seem to have registered what she’d said. He’d told us that puking had made him feel better, but he still looked like death warmed over. Zeke wavered a bit, and for a moment I wondered if he was going to puke all over my shoes again, but instead, he leveled a blank stare at Ava.

“What did you say? I don’t think I heard you correctly.” He slurred the word “correctly” so badly that I had to use the context of the rest of his sentence to understand what he’d said.

“You heard me! You can’t do this!” Ava hissed. “You’re ruining our pack and embarrassing us in front of everyone. You should be ashamed of yourself! You may not have realized, but everyone’s watching us to see how we’re operating since we’ve only just re-formed, and you’re not making a good impression at all. So, you’re done. I relieve you of your Alpha duties.”

*Yup, she’s really doing this.*

I marched over and took Ava by the arm. “Excuse us, Zeke. We’re going to have a little chat. Stay out of trouble while we’re gone. And I’m serious this time—no more alcohol.”

“You got it,” Zeke said, saluting me like I was his superior.

Ava immediately jerked out of my hold and glared at me. “What are you doing?”

“What am *I* doing? I’m trying to talk some sense into you! Don’t you realize what will happen if the Samaras lose their Alpha? Interim or not?”

Ava had made a stink about the scene Zeke was causing, but she had to realize that it was way worse for a senior member of the pack to be screaming and yelling at her Alpha in front of everyone.

Ava shrugged. “Whatever happens is better than what Zeke is doing. I would’ve thought that you of all people would understand how important it is to have an Alpha worth his salt leading the pack.”

“Sure, but have you ever heard the phrase ‘beggars can’t be choosers’? Zeke is all you have right now. Need I remind you that a pack without an Alpha is a sitting duck? Lucian’s already made it clear that he wants to take over the Samara pack, and with Zeke out of the picture, that’s one less barrier to him doing exactly that.”

Ava laughed and shook her head.

“Do you think this is funny?” I asked, confused. Then I realized that this laugh was a bitter one, not at all like the carefree laugh I’d heard countless times when we were younger. *But we’re not young anymore, and this is no laughing matter. She can’t just up and oust her Alpha like that, even if he’s had a bit too much to drink.*

“Oh, Xavier, why don’t you make up your mind? Didn’t you just tell me that you want nothing to do with the Samara pack? I think your exact words were something along the lines of, ‘It’s your problem, not mine.’ So why do you care what happens?”

I gritted my teeth in frustration. *I know what I said, and I know how I feel. Fuck this! Maybe I should just let Ava send her pack into a death spiral. What do I care? I’ve tried my best, but maybe that’s not enough—and I’m not in a position to give any more than I have already.*

Ava was looking at me, waiting for a response. “So? Tell me, former Alpha. Why are you so concerned about what I do with the Samara pack when you don’t give a flying fuck about us?”

I shrugged. “You know what? You’re right. Why *am* I concerned? Do what you want. I’m done.” I’d had enough of this.

*Screw Greyson. If the safety and security of the Redwood pack somehow hinges on the success or failure of the Samara pack, then Greyson is just going to have to find another way to keep us safe. It’s not my job to keep the Samaras in check anymore. It never should have been in the first place. After all, Greyson’s the one giving orders. Let him order his way out of this one.*

Ava sucked her teeth and smirked. “I can’t say I’m surprised. I was a fool to think that you would help me.”

I paused as it dawned on me. *Oh, so that’s what this is all about. I should have known. It was never about me helping the Samara pack, it was about me helping Ava. How could I have ever thought otherwise?*

It was becoming apparent that this was all just another of Ava’s many failed attempts to keep some shred of our mate bond alive by any means necessary. Ava would do anything and everything in her power to keep me close, and this was just another way for her to do that—just like her suggestion that I become the Samara Alpha. None of her tactics had worked before, and they weren’t going to work now.

I was committed to Cali, and Cali only. She was the only person I owed a damn thing to. She was the only one I cared about, the only one I would risk my life for. I was more than ready to sever my link to Ava completely this time—Greyson be damned.

I smiled darkly at her. “I was wrong.” Ava looked a taken aback, and there was a small glimmer of hope in her eyes that was extinguished as quickly as it came when I added, “You should go to Lucian. Let him help you. You both deserve each other. Go do whatever the fuck you want. You always do.”

With that, I turned and walked away, furious.

I’d been stupid to hope that we might have fun at this party. I’d wanted more than anything to unwind with my pack mates, and, of course, spend a memorable New Year’s Eve with Cali. Clearly, that wasn’t in the cards. No matter how positive I tried to be, anytime I got within two feet of this palace or Lucian himself, everything went to shit. I suddenly wanted to be anywhere but under Lucian’s roof.

I snatched a drink from a passing attendant’s tray. Zeke needed to stop drinking, but I didn’t. I could actually handle my alcohol.I downed the drink, grimacing as I realized that it was some kind of uber sweet, fruity wine concoction. I was tempted to spit it out on the floor, but I stopped myself when Gabe came up and slapped me on the back, causing me to choke on the rest of it.

“What the fuck, man?” I spluttered once I’d caught my breath.

“Right back at you. Why do you look like someone just ate all your Halloween candy?” Gabe looked past me. “Oh, and you never did answer me before,” he said, quickly shifting gears. “I can read between the lines, and I’m not stupid. What’s the deal with you and Ava? Because to me, it looks like there’s a whole lot of something going on.”

I looked around, hoping to spot something that could wash away the sickly-sweet taste of wine lingering on my tongue, but the nearest attendant was all the way across the ballroom.

“It’s nothing, man,” I said. “The stupid mate bond I have with Ava is just causing problems, as usual. Nothing I can’t handle.”

*And that’s all over now*, I thought, with no small amount of bitterness. I hated that I’d even allowed Ava to get me so worked up.

“That’s pretty obvious,” Gabe said. “I suppose mate bonds aren’t always the magical, amazing thing that they’re supposed to be.”

Gabe had a wistful look in his eye, and I detected a little something in his tone. *Wow, are Gabe and the bloodsucker having some growing pains? They seem pretty solid, but maybe the Vanguard stink has gotten on them, too.*

“I love Mikah, don’t get me wrong,” Gabe continued. “But it’s weird. My mate is a vampire. He’s immortal, and me? I’m going to age out while he just… doesn’t. It’s a lot to think about, a lot to wrap your head around.”

I cocked my head to the side as I processed what my friend was going through. I’d never really thought about that part of it before. There had to be some major differences between Gabe and Mikah that caused challenges in the relationship, but I hadn’t considered what was arguably the biggest barrier between them—Mikah’s eternal life, and Gabe’s unavoidable death. I felt for my friend, but I wasn’t sure what advice I could give. I was no expert on vampire/non-vampire relationships. But on the bright side, at least we weren’t talking about Ava anymore.

Suddenly, Armin came up and grabbed my arm. “You and me. In the courtyard. Now.”

# Episode 3426

The word “surrogate” seemed to just hang in the air between us, and I was absolutely stunned. *Well, this conversation has certainly taken a turn that I didn’t see coming.*

Paige was biting her lip, waiting for me to say something, anything, no doubt reading the deer-in-the-headlights look that was undoubtedly on my face.

“This is obviously very hard for me to talk about, Cali,” Paige said gently. “But you’re just so easy to talk to—I hope I’m not freaking you out.”

I was thoroughly freaked out, but there was no way I was going to admit it—I didn’t want to be insensitive. This had to be a very difficult revelation for Paige, but it was also hard for me to hear something so heavy from someone who was little more than a stranger. I was working to process it all, and my mouth went dry as I struggled to find the right words.

“A surrogate… To have a baby?”

Paige nodded slowly. “Yup, to have a baby.”

My eyes widened. *She can’t really be asking if* I *will be her surrogate, right? That would be absolutely nuts!*

“I—I’m only twenty years old, and I’m not at all ready to carry a baby,” I said. I was trying to resist the urge to get up and bolt out of there.

*I can’t even choose a mate; how would I even begin to make a decision as big as having a baby? For someone I don’t even know, at that? Maybe* ‘no’ *would suffice.*

“Oh—I’m not expecting *you* to be our surrogate,” Paige said. “Wow, is that what you thought I was getting at?” Paige smiled and looked at me like I was the one who’d just said something shocking.

“But… Didn’t you just say that you needed my help?”

“Yes, but maybe help wasn’t the right word. What I’m looking for is support.”

I paused, relieved that she wasn’t asking me to carry a child for her, but also confused about what kind of support I could offer. “I’m not sure how I can do that… Aren’t you from Utah?”

Paige looked wistful as she nodded.

“Why don’t you seek the support you need from your pack? That’s the kind of thing they’re around for, right?” The Redwood pack was very supportive, and I knew that if I ever had an issue like the one Paige was having, I’d be able to lean on any one of the pack for help.

“Sure, but I’m a Luna, and Duke is the Aspen Alpha. How would it look if other members of the pack learned that we can’t conceive?” Paige shook her head. “I can’t tell anyone about this. Ever.”

“Wow. I hadn’t really thought of that… But I assume they’d be understanding. They’re your pack! Shouldn’t they have your back, no matter what?”

“It’s complicated. You might not understand because you’re not a werewolf,” Paige said with a sigh.

*Not this again. I’m tired of werewolves feeling the need to constantly remind me of how little I know about them.*

“Just because I’m not a werewolf, doesn’t mean I don’t know anything about werewolves!” I snapped.

“Sorry, I only meant that werewolves are exceptional at spotting weaknesses. If they thought for a minute that Duke and I couldn’t fulfill our obligations as Alpha and Luna of their pack… Well, let’s just say that I don’t think I could watch my Duke go through a Lupo Finale.” Paige’s voice broke, and she clasped her hands in her lap and looked down. “So, because of that, here I am, spilling my guts to you.”

I reached out and tentatively touched Paige’s arm. I remembered how terrifying it had been to watch my mates in a Lupo Finale. It had been brutal and unpredictable, so I understood why Paige wouldn’t want to risk her mate going into one.

“Have you two considered adoption?” I asked. “There have to be plenty of wolf babies looking for a good home.”

I thought about how Lola was adopted, but technically that hadn’t happened within a werewolf pack, and Lola’s dads were human. It wasn’t quite the same thing, but I was at a loss and just trying to offer any solution I could.

Paige looked confused. “You do understand that we can’t adopt, right? The pack needs us to continue the Alpha bloodline. We can’t do that if we adopt. Even though Duke and I would be open to that, it wouldn’t fulfill our pack obligation.”

I couldn’t believe the pressure that Paige was under. Not only was she responsible for leading the pack at Duke’s side, but she was also responsible for bringing another Aspen Alpha into the world. That had to be a lot to deal with. No wonder they were here, blowing off major steam.

*Werewolves really need to move into the twenty-first century! A woman’s body is her own, to do with what she pleases, and Paige shouldn’t be under any kind of obligation to have kids. It doesn’t seem right that she can’t even lean on her pack at a time like this.*

I was about to suggest IVF, but I stopped myself.

*Do werewolves even have fertility clinics? I suppose not…*

“I guess I don’t know as much as I thought about werewolf dynamics,” I admitted. “Are there werewolf doctors that you could go to about your problem? I mean, I know you don’t tend to need doctors because you heal so fast, but maybe seeing someone about your issues is the right thing to do? Are there werewolf ob-gyns you could go see? I don’t know much about surrogacy either, but I’ve heard it can be pretty expensive.”

Paige waved that away. “I’m not concerned about the cost. The problem is finding the right surrogate. I wouldn’t want just anybody carrying the next Aspen Alpha.”

“What would make the ‘right’ surrogate?” I asked. This was all so complicated. I couldn’t imagine trying to deal with reproductive issues while also having to find the right person to carry and deliver my Alpha heir. I was getting overwhelmed and anxious just thinking about it, and it wasn’t even my problem.

“I’ve thought a lot about what makes the perfect surrogate,” Paige said thoughtfully. “They would need to be smart, healthy, strong, responsible…” Paige fixed her gaze on me. “Someone like you.”

“W-Wait. You said you weren’t after me to be your surrogate!”

“I’m not. I meant someone *like* you—a *due destini* mate.” Paige smiled. “That would be ideal.”

“What? Why? It’s not like I know any other *due destini* mates. I’m not, like, a member of a *due destini* club or anything.”

“Hmm. You must be so fertile!” Paige said suddenly, her voice positively dripping with admiration.

“*What?* Why do you say that?” Once again, Paige had thrown me for a loop. I didn’t think I’d ever even thought about my own fertility before this conversation.

“Because you’ve got two mates,” Paige said matter-of-factly.

“No, it’s not like that.” This conversation was taking so many twists and turns, I could barely keep up. It was so involved and all over the place that I’d even forgotten about Xavier for a moment—but suddenly all I could think about was how much I wanted to be talking to him right now, rather than having a deep conversation about Paige’s challenges. Though that didn’t mean I didn’t genuinely feel for what she was going through.

“Oh, that’s a shame,” Paige said. She leaned close and took my hands again. “Will you at least think about what we talked about?” Paige suddenly seemed distracted. “Sorry, Duke’s mind linking me right now. He’s found someone he thinks I’d like to play with.” She smiled. “He’s always so thoughtful.” She hopped up from the bench, the somber look gone from her eyes. “Nice chat, Cali. See you later!”

Once she was gone, I sat there for a while, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Paige had insisted that she didn’t want me to be her surrogate, but then at the same time she’d kind of implied that she did. It was so confusing. And why would Paige assume that I was super fertile just because I was a *due destini* mate?

*I hope super enhanced fertility isn’t a side effect of the* due destini *curse. Like, is normal human contraception enough? I’ve never even considered that it wouldn’t be. I want the option of becoming pregnant someday, but not right now.* *Maybe down the line, once I’ve made a choice between my mate, I’d possibly be ready to have children.*

That seemed like such a far-off possibility. I was still so young, and my life was already complicated enough without adding children to the mix.

Still, there was something about the thought of bringing a little Xavier or Greyson into the world that made me smile. I toyed with that thought for just a second before I shook it off.

*I’m way too young, and I have to choose a mate before I can even* think *about having kids.*

I sighed and stood up, my stomach suddenly in knots as something occurred to me. Maybe it was time to speak with Big Mac and see if I could finally make the biggest decision of my life.

# Episode 3427

**Greyson**

I ripped my arm out of Jacqueline’s grasp. “Excuse me? Do you need something?”

Jacqueline tipped her chin up. “Yes. I need for you to stay away from Cali. Please and thank you.”

I snorted a laugh, in total disbelief at the vampire’s gall. *That was a bold statement, I’ll hand it to her. She always has a flair for the dramatic.* “Why exactly do I need to do that?”

Jacqueline narrowed her eyes at me. “Because I have money riding on you doing just that, and I need that money, so you can’t mess this up for me.”

I shook my head in confusion. “Money? What are you talking about?”

Jacqueline gave me a conspiratorial look and lowered her voice. “I’m probably breaking the rules telling you this, but Lola and I placed a bet on who Cali was going to kiss at midnight. You or Xavier. My money’s on your brother, so do me a favor and give Cali some space tonight.”

I was kind of taken aback by this. “Seriously? You two made a bet about us?” I wasn’t sure what offended me more: the fact that the women had made the bet at all, or that the vampire hadn’t bet on me. “I’m sorry, but it’s not my problem if you lose a bet that you shouldn’t have made in the first place. If you really think you’re going to keep me, an Alpha werewolf, away from my mate, then you’re the most delusional vamp I’ve ever met, and that’s saying a lot.”

Jacqueline narrowed her eyes even further and stepped close. “Want to see me try?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes in her face. “How? And what do you need the money for, anyway?”

I was surprised to discover that I was more amused than angry at Jacqueline’s behavior. She was disarming, to say the least.

“That’s none of your concern!” Jacqueline snapped. “Just stay away from Cali, and you and I are good.”

“I’d say it’s most definitely my concern if you’re trying to keep me away from Cali.”

Jacqueline sighed, deflating a bit. “Fine. I’m trying to save up money to go to college next semester. Every little bit counts, all right? So if I win this bet, I’m putting the winnings right in my college fund.”

That wasn’t at all what I’d expected. “Really? You’re saving up for college?”

“Really. Since I left Tottenville, I’ve been thinking a lot about what’s next for me. Tottenville focuses on teaching vampires how to behave in the human world, and now that I’m in that world, I need to figure out what I’m going to do with my life. Rafe is gone now, so I’m free to go back to school—real school. There’s no time like the present, but school is expensive, so I’m going to need every penny I can get. Winning this bet will get me one step closer to reaching my goal.”

“Wow, I didn’t know you were interested in that sort of thing—your education and all.” I didn’t know much about Jacqueline, but I certainly hadn’t pegged her as the type to put schooling at the top of her list of interests.

“Well, I need something to do,” she said. “It’s not like you’re going to let a vampire hang around on the fringes of your werewolf pack forever. I need to start thinking about my future. Life after the Redwood pack house, you know?”

“I get that, but you should know that you’ve more than earned your stay,” I said. She’d fought alongside us and protected Cali and shown herself to be a friend of the pack, so her sticking around didn’t bother me in the least. I’d never thought that I would share a pack house with a vampire, but it wasn’t so bad, having her around. “You’re a good ally to have, Jacqueline. The Redwood pack house is your home for as long as you need it.”

“Thanks, Greyson, but that doesn’t change the fact that I need money if I’m going to go to a university. I don’t really want to go to college with Lola… But beggars can’t be choosers, you know?”

I stopped to really consider what Jacqueline was saying. I had to admit that it was pretty admirable that she wanted to go to college. I’d never gone. I’d sort of just jumped right into the real world as Rogue, and now I was Alpha, so that was kind of it for me. I hadn’t even really had the chance to stop and think about going to university, or learning a trade—not that I regretted the direction my life had taken, especially since it had led me to Cali. Also, I’d been fortunate enough that I didn’t need to worry about money, but if things changed, what would I have to fall back on? It was definitely a sobering thought.

“Listen, I might have an idea that’ll make it so you won’t need the bet with Lola.” The idea was still forming in my head, but I couldn’t find a downside to it.

“I’m listening,” Jacqueline said, eyebrows raised.

“Teach Elle some of the techniques you learned at Tottenville, modifying them for her, as a werewolf. She needs someone completely devoted to preparing her for the real world. She wants to learn, and she needs a bit more attention than I can give her right now.”

“What, so I’d be her teacher or something?”

I nodded. “Do it, and I’ll pay you for it. It’ll be enough for you to go to school and get at least two degrees—or whatever else you want.”

A slow smiled spread across Jacqueline’s face. “Deal.”

We shook on it, then Jacqueline lifted her champagne glass to me as she walked away. “Time to go celebrate my new job!”

I went searching the ballroom for Elle, excited to tell her the good news. There was so much that she still needed to learn—that she *wanted* to learn—so I was happy that I’d found a solution for getting her up to speed. She was going to be thrilled.

Cali had taught her some things, and I tried to pitch in when I could, but having Jacqueline working exclusively to help Elle out would be perfect. Jacqueline was no-nonsense, could be stern, and was pretty sharp, from what I’d seen of her. It was even better that Jacqueline had a good foundation from Tottenville that would allow her to give Elle real, tried and true tips that she’d be able to use in her dealings outside of the pack house.

Aside from how much Elle would enjoy having someone dedicated to teaching her the ropes of the human world, I wanted Cali to relax now that we’d fixed our Seluna problem. I didn’t want her to worry about anything—not even training Elle. It wasn’t that Cali minded, and she always tried to be a good friend, but leveraging Jacqueline for Elle was a no-brainer, and it would free Cali up to spend time on whatever she wanted to do now that she didn’t have Seluna’s curse hanging over her.

I finally spotted Elle talking to Charlie. I pivoted to head straight for them, but Lucian intercepted me.

“Having a good time, Greyson?” Lucian asked, one eyebrow raised. He had a strange look on his face, almost like he was up to something—which of course, he probably was.

“I have to admit, it’s not the worst Vanguard event I’ve ever been to.” I was surprised to find that I really meant that. The burning Seluna statue aside, this had been the most “normal” Vanguard bash yet. No one had died, Lucian hadn’t tried to forbid us from leaving the palace grounds, and best of all, there hadn’t been any moon goddess rituals… However, the night was still young.

Lucian’s eyes sparkled. “Ah, I’m so happy to hear that! Just wait until you see what else I have in store!”

I cringed internally. *I would much rather get the hell out of here before I have to witness anything else you have planned.*

“Oh?” I said, trying my hardest to maintain a civil expression for the princeling.

“I wasn’t lying earlier—I think it’s going to be something that you and Caliana will appreciate.”

*I truly doubt that, but I’m sure that won’t stop you from forcing it down our throats anyway.*

“Cool,” I said, flashing a quick smile as I tried to move past him. Not surprisingly, the Vanguard Alpha moved to block my path. I sighed. “What, Lucian? Is there something you need?”

“Yes… I was wondering if you might be kind enough to tell me a little more about Elle.”

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes in exasperation. *Does this guy ever stop plotting?* “We already talked about Elle.”

“She’s a peculiar creature,” Lucian said. “And I must admit that we’ve only just scratched the surface of my interest in her.”

I didn’t like the way that sounded. “Listen, forget about Elle, okay? She’s off limits.”

The Alpha princeling’s bright look darkened for a moment before he pasted his charming smile back on. “It’s fascinating, how protective you are of her.”

I thought about the promise I’d made to her father to protect her, and how I’d developed a soft spot for her. I shrugged and sighed. “I’m protective of all my pack members, Lucian. That’s kind of the point when you’re an Alpha.”

Lucian stepped close, his eyes still shining bright. “Or is it because you turned her?”

# Episode 3428

**Xavier**

I had no idea what this new guy Armin wanted, but I kept my eyes fixed on him as we walked outside. If he tried to fight me, he’d have another thing coming. I’d literally just finished dealing with the demon world—a werewolf scuffle would be small potatoes at this point. Even if the guy was as big as an ox.

The moment we were out of earshot, Armin turned around to stare at me, his expression serious. He didn’t seem threatening, or like he was plotting something, so I just stared back for a moment. If Gabe were here, he’d probably have told Armin to get on with it if he was going to ask me on a date.

In the end, Armin took a deep breath and said, “How do you do it?”

I frowned in confusion. “Do what?”

Armin gestured at me with a huff. “You know. How are you such a good second to your Alpha?”

I paused. In shock. Trying to process what the fuck this dude had just said.

Getting propositioned would’ve been better.

“*What*,” I said. It wasn’t a question. It was a word made up of disbelief and complete and utter fucking rage. And if I sounded like I wanted to tear someone’s head off and use it as a basketball, it was because I did. That head would’ve been Armin’s.

Or Greyson’s.

“I’m new as Lucian’s second,” Armin continued, completely oblivious to the danger right before him, “and I’m not sure how to do all of this yet. It’s a pretty big role for me, a major step up. I was just part of the guard before, but then Princess Aysel decided she liked how I looked, so…”

Armin kept talking, but I’d stopped listening. Because continuing to listen would mean murdering Armin to appease my wolf. It had turned into a howling monster inside me. This couldn’t be real life.

Armin, this useless, ridiculous asswipe, thought that—

I. Me. *Me*. Xavier. The thought that I was Greyson’s *SECOND?*

“Lucian can be so demanding that it’s difficult to keep up.” Armin was still going, clearly not even suspecting that I was ready to absolutely lose my shit. “I have such big shoes to fill! For example, the party tonight—Lucian kept comparing me to Andre and—”

I held up a hand. “That’s enough.”

Armin looked confused. “What?”

*You can’t attack someone in the middle of a party, Xavier. Think of our pack!*

The voice of reason in my head sounded suspiciously like Cali’s.

God dammit.

“I do not give a flying rat’s ass about Lucian being mean or whatever his bullshit requests might be,” I told Armin, shaking with barely contained fury. “But let’s get something clear, you and me.”

I stepped closer. Armin did the same, though he should’ve run for the hills. Reading the room *clearly* wasn’t one of his strengths. I grabbed him by the collar, dragging him toward me hard enough for him to stumble.

“I am *no one’s* second. Not even the Alpha,” I hissed.

Armin had finally caught up. His eyes widened. Gripping my wrist and pulling, he said, “Hey! Don’t—”

I didn’t fucking budge.

“If you ever call me a fucking *second* again, there will be a need for an Andre 3.0.” I tightened my grip around his shirt. “Do you understand me?”

Armin got the fucking memo. Swallowing roughly, he nodded. I let him go, shoving him backward. He immediately walked away, glancing over his shoulder as if suddenly realizing that he’d just escaped death.

Safe to say, I was *beyond* pissed off.

I had no idea what the hell had given this asshole the impression that I was at Greyson’s beck and call, but clearly it had happened. And I fucking hated it. After all, *I* was the one who’d made sure the ashes were back in the demon world. *I* was the one who’d given Cali back her sense of safety.

Yeah, it could be said that I was the reason why the ashes had been stolen in the first place, but that was bullshit—I’d done my best here. Unlike Greyson. *I* was the one who always did all the dirty work; and speaking of, that included Ava and the Samara pack. Greyson kept sending me on all these “missions” as if I was—

His fucking second.

I *was* Greyson’s second, wasn’t I?

Even if I didn’t feel like I was, that was how people saw me.

How the FUCK did that happen?

I looked up at the starry sky and took a deep breath. It didn’t serve to ease my anger. The disrespect and the audacity and the messed-up nature of this whole situation remained. I was still ready to cut someone when I returned to the ballroom.

Gabe was the first person to intercept me. But he was my friend, so I didn’t kill him.

“Whoa, man,” he said with arched eyebrows, looking me up and down. “What the shit did I miss? You were completely fine when I saw you two seconds ago, and now you’ve got this ‘I’m ready to go on a rampage’ expression. What’s going on?”

I bit the inside of my cheek to swallow a growl and moved closer to him. At least Gabe was on my side.

“I need you to be honest with me,” I said in a low voice.

Gabriel nodded. “Always.”

“Am I Greyson’s second?”

Gabriel’s eyes went wide. He glanced around. “Is this really a question that you want to ask me right here and now?” The motherfucker actually looked like he was about to laugh.

I glared at him. “*Gabe*.”

And now he snickered. “Look, I’m not sure there’s anything I can really say here that’s not going to put you into an even bigger rage, my friend.”

I clenched my teeth and shook my head, turning my back on him to walk away. But Gabe followed. We’d spent too much time together for him to be scared of me. It was fucking appalling.

“So it’s true,” I said between gritted teeth.

“Hmm, isn’t the truth relative, anyway?” Gabe asked.

I shot him another glare.

“I *mean*…” Gabe cleared his throat. “I saw the dynamic between you both in NOLA, and I would say it’s relatively clear who’s calling the shots.”

I stopped walking and turned to look this complete and utter traitor dead in the eye. “And that is?” I snapped.

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Xavier, come on. You’re better than this petty bullshit.”

I really, *really* wasn’t.

“Look, it’s not a bad thing that you’re following the orders of a competent Alpha. That’s how it works, okay?” Gabe said.

That was the last answer I wanted to hear, even though I knew that Gabriel was right. I *had* been following Greyson’s every command. A lot of his decisions had been mutual, but those were always related to Cali. At least we were on the same page about her safety.

But then there was the Samara bullshit.

Every time I went over to babysit the Samara pack, I felt like Greyson’s goddamn errand boy, when the truth was that *I* was meant to be the Alpha. Not Greyson. Even looking all the way back to the Lupo Finale, Greyson had only won because I’d been silver poisoned. Would things be the same now if we’d fought fair and square?

I fucking doubted it.

I *despised* the idea of just doing whatever the fuck Greyson wanted instead of what I wanted, and the prime example here was the Samara pack. I never would have been the one to personally deal with the Samara pack if Greyson hadn’t forced me to. Never. Not at all. Nope.

I paused, closing my eyes tightly.

“Bro,” Gabe said, squeezing my shoulder. “You good?”

No. I wasn’t fucking good. Because I was trying to tell myself that the Samara situation was something that Greyson had shoved me into—I *wanted* to blame Greyson. But the truth was that anything involving Ava was my business. That I would’ve helped her, come hell or high water, because that was just the way things were between us…

And that last thought was horrible.

“Okay, you gotta calm down,” Gabe said, grabbing a glass from a passing waiter’s tray. He thrust it into my hands. “Here’s another drink.”

I stared at my friend, fighting to swallow down all the emotions that were going through me right now. Anger, apprehension, doubt, wounded pride—all of it was bad.

“I’m not so sure I can relax right now,” I forced out.

“Xavier!”

Jay’s voice came from behind me. Both Gabe and I turned to see Jay hurrying toward us. I scowled. This was weird—Jay’s clothes were on haphazardly, and his shirt looked inside out.

“What the hell’s going on with you?” I asked, looking him up and down. “What happened?”

Jay grabbed my arm. “Xavier, I need your help. Lola’s stuck!”

# Episode 3429

**Violet**

I stumbled back to the ballroom, looking around. My brother had vanished, and I wasn’t sure where Marta and Okorie had gone. I felt my stomach twist as I tried to spot them in the crowd. Nothing. I tried to use my werewolf sense of smell to find them, but the scents in the space were overwhelming.

Too many people, too many voices, too much all around.

Everything had blown up so horribly tonight.

I hadn’t expected Lilac to react so explosively when he was faced with Okorie. Yes, I’d known he would be upset, but going up against a warlock of Okorie’s level without any precautions wasn’t smart at all. Not to mention my point of view had been entirely distorted when I’d told Lilac about Marta and Okorie’s kiss. I’d thought that Lilac and Marta were still together, and I’d had no idea that Lilac had been kissing Perrie.

This was such a mess.

Why hadn’t Lilac told me the truth about Perrie? Why would he let me get angry at Marta when he’d clearly played a huge part in this train wreck? Lilac was my brother, but Marta was my friend, and if I lost her because of this… The thought made my eyes sting. I had no idea what to do right now.

My night was officially ruined.

“Violet, hey!” Artemis rested her hand on my arm. “What’s going on with you?” she asked, gesturing at my face. Her lack of tact was always charming, but right now, I just felt like hiding somewhere.

“Nothing,” I lied. “Just feeling a little tired.”

“Aw, cheer up!” Rishika smiled. “Come dance with Artemis and me!”

“Maybe later,” I said. I didn’t have the heart to say no to her when she looked so enthusiastic. “I have to talk to Charlie first. Have you two seen him?”

I could really use one of his hugs right now.

“I think I saw him head out to the courtyard with some of the others,” Artemis said.

I thanked her, making a move to walk away.

Rishika wrapped an arm over Artemis’s shoulder and called after me, “See you later!”

I nodded and forced a smile before heading to the exit. Thankfully Rishika and Artemis had been too excited and buzzed with holiday cheer—and probably alcohol—to notice exactly how bad my mood was.

At least when I entered the courtyard, the fresh air felt good on my hot cheeks. Looking around, I took a deep breath. Sure enough, I saw Charlie across the way. He was talking with Sage and Zainab animatedly, all three of them laughing. He looked so handsome and happy tonight that for a moment, I hesitated.

Should I really go over there and ruin his good mood with my problems?

I was the one who’d brought this on myself, and the notion of going over there and ruining Charlie’s fun just because I was down in the dumps wasn’t fair to him. If the situation between Marta and Lilac had been bad before, I’d made it ten times worse by intervening, and this was all a horrible mess of my own making…

A lump grew in my throat, and I turned around, ready to go back inside.

*Hey, sunshine!*

Charlie’s happy voice echoed through my head in a mind link. Apparently, I hadn’t been quick or stealthy enough to escape his notice. This had to be one of those mate things that made you aware of the other person the moment they were in the vicinity. I should’ve expected this situation, but that didn’t mean I was ready for it.

I’d been able to lie to Rishika and Artemis, but lying to Charlie about how horrible I felt would be so much harder. Bracing myself, I turned around to face him. When our eyes locked, his gaze moved from my face down my dress and back up, heady and appreciative. I tried to smile at him, but his own smile fell immediately.

Crap. He’d already seen through my dumb little charade.

*What’s wrong?* he mind linked. Before I could even reply, he added, *Stay there—I’m coming to you*.

My heart fluttered as I watched him excuse himself from Sage and Zainab and walk over to me. The worry was evident on his face, and I realized there was no escaping this now. My eyes tickled with unshed tears as he approached, and I looked away, embarrassed.

“Violet?” he said softly, putting his arm around my waist. Pulling me into an embrace, he said, “Is everything okay? What’s going on?”

Sniffling, I buried my face in his chest. He felt so warm and solid against me, his arms a protective ring that always made me feel secure and accepted. I took in his scent, pressing myself against him tighter, and suddenly, everything wasn’t too bad.

Suddenly, I felt safe enough to admit the truth.

“I messed up,” I blurted out.

Charlie cupped my cheek, making me face him. His eyebrows were knitted together, his expression thunderous. “What do you mean? Did someone hurt you?”

“No, sorry—I mean, it’s nothing like that,” I explained quickly. “I just messed up some stuff with Lilac and me, and Marta too. Like, all at once.”

Charlie wrapped his arms tighter around me. When I rested my cheek against his chest, he asked, “What happened?”

I started blubbering about the entire thing—the Marta-Okorie kiss, the apparent Lilac-Perrie kiss, and how Lilac had tried to punch Okorie and then blown up at me.

By the end of it, Charlie looked shocked. “Wow. That’s a lot.”

“Ugh,” I grumbled. “You’re telling me!”

He pressed his lips together. “No matter what, you and Lilac are going to be okay. You’re twins—you’re family. I bet Lilac is just very upset and jealous about Marta and Okorie. As for you and Marta…”

I winced. “Marta is too nice, and I might’ve ruined our friendship forever?”

Charlie shook his head. “I wouldn’t go that far. You did throw around some accusations that must’ve hurt her a lot, but you were just missing the context of the situation. It was just an unfortunate misunderstanding. I’m sure if you managed to get her to talk to you without Lilac and apologized, she’d understand. She probably needs time to process this entire thing. No matter what happened with Okorie, she definitely has feelings for Lilac—”

“—who now has a mate, who he kissed.” I finished Charlie’s sentence, cringing. “And I went ahead and made everything worse!”

“Marta is your friend,” Charlie murmured, stroking my arm. “I’m sure she’ll understand where you were coming from. You two have been through a lot—that has to count for something.”

I paused for a moment, processing his words. Then I nodded, sighing. “You’re probably right. About both Marta and Lilac. Thank you for talking to me.” I leaned up, giving him a peck on the mouth.

He smiled against my lips. “Feel better now?”

I chuckled. “Yeah, actually…” My smile faded. “I’m sorry I’ve been weird tonight, though. I’ve been so fixated on this whole situation between Lilac and Marta that I haven’t been the best mate or girlfriend.”

Charlie stroked my cheek, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Don’t beat yourself up. I love you, and I’m glad you’re here.” He smirked. “And I look forward to kissing you at midnight.”

The way he looked at me made butterflies flutter in my stomach. I glanced at his mouth. “You don’t *have* *to* wait until midnight…”

He gave me another gorgeous smile and lowered his lips to mine. When we kissed this time, it wasn’t a peck—it was deeper, more intense, full of love, and comfort too. I held him close, my skin heating up at the contact, my hands shaking as I ran them through his hair. This was where I was meant to be—with Charlie. My sadness hadn’t brought him down, not at all. Instead, he’d managed to pull me up and soothe me in so many ways.

I loved him so much.

When we broke apart, we were both breathing shakily.

I chuckled, caressing the side of his neck. “My god, how can you just turn my mood around like that?”

He laughed. “It’s a skill.” Suddenly, his expression grew pensive.

“What?” I asked.

“Since we’re sharing things right now…” He cleared his throat. “There’s something I wanted to mention.”

And now I was alarmed. “About what?”

Charlie cleared his throat, obviously trying to appear nonchalant. “About Minnesota.”

I blanched. *Crap!* We hadn’t ended up discussing buying tickets to go see his family after everything that had happened with Seluna. I’d been so relieved—the idea of starting the new year by hanging out with Iris wasn’t one of my top resolutions. Or on the list at all. But I felt so guilty about taking the experience from Charlie. He’d wanted to see his parents, yet here we were, hanging out at the stupid Vanguard palace!

I opened my mouth to offer another apology when Charlie raised his hand. “Before you say anything, this isn’t about my parents.”

I paused, confused. “What is it, then?”

He took a deep breath. “The Bridgeham hunter camp is asking me to come back.”

# Episode 3430

**Greyson**

Lucian was back on his bullshit, but what else was new? The man couldn’t go five seconds without scheming.I’d never said a goddamn thing to him about turning Elle myself. The only people who knew her true origins were the Redwood pack.

But… Was there a chance that someone else had let it slip? That couldn’t be it. The pack knew that things with Elle were sensitive. The most plausible explanation for Lucian’s question was that he’d suspected something, and he was now fishing around to see my reaction. I had no fucking idea what his goal could be here, but I wasn’t about to admit anything to him.

And I was prepared to lie my ass off.

“What do you mean?” I cocked my head. “You think I turned Elle into a werewolf?”

Lucian squinted at me. “I’m not sure. But I’ve never met anyone quite like her. She certainly is *very* interesting.”

There it was, for yet another time tonight—Lucian’s “interest” in Elle.

The way she felt about him was a little murkier. She’d told me earlier that she’d let Lucian give her the castle tour because she knew I wanted to keep pack relations smooth. But at the same time, she’d called him pretty, and she had thought that she had a mate bond with him. At least that had been the case before Cali and Lola had explained to her that it was just attraction.

Was there a chance that there was any truth to it, though?

The thought of the two of them being mates made my stomach churn. It would be a joke from the universe—a very bad fucking joke that would probably cause me a bunch of sleepless nights. Elle was nothing like Lucian. She was so new to being a person, and she was still figuring herself out. Meanwhile, Lucian was a man so full of himself it was both comical and dangerous.

“There’s just something about Elle that’s so… *raw*,” Lucian was saying, speaking as if Elle was some sort of spectacle. “Animalistic.”

“You mean she doesn’t put up with bullshit?” I snorted. “She speaks her mind?”

Lucian nodded thoughtfully, ignoring my tone. “Yes, that could be it. But it seems like something else. Something more.”

“There’s nothing more, Lucian,” I said with a sigh. I was *really* selling this here. “I know you enjoy making up stories, but Elle isn’t a good candidate for that. She was a Rogue who we came across, and she wanted to join a pack, and we clicked with her. That’s it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

I raised an eyebrow right back. “That’s too simple for your tastes, I know. But it’s the truth.”

“Well then…” Lucian smiled, clapping a hand on my shoulder. A little too hard, actually. “Good thing you didn’t turn her. That’d be a mess, wouldn't it?”

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

“What are you talking about?” I asked Lucian, trying not to look as surprised as I felt.

Lucian’s eyes went wide. “Don’t you know the stories, Alpha?” He patted my shoulder again—a little too hard, but a friendly enough gesture between Alphas. I shoved down the urge to shake him off. “I would never, ever even *think* about turning a human into a werewolf. The things I’ve heard…”

“What kind of things are you talking about?” I asked, ignoring the antsy feeling inside me.

“Turning someone into a wolf, the bond that it can create, sounds like something way too strong to handle,” Lucian said gravely. “Almost like a mate bond, if you will.”

I shifted uncomfortably. Thankfully Lucian was too enraptured by the sound of his own voice to notice.

“It’s been around for as long as the mate bond, you see, all based on ancient werewolf instincts. I’ve heard stories that say the two, the sire and the werewolf turned, become codependent on the bond. Other stories say the that person who changes the human becomes drunk on it. *Addicted to it*.”

Lucian paused for dramatic effect, and I remembered how Charlie had been turned. That werewolf certainly had been addicted to running around and biting people.

But of course, this was Lucian we were talking about. He loved a good story—just look at the Seluna madness. He’d taken a demon for a goddess and run with it till the world around him had been set on fire. Literally. The man lived for this bullshit, so I forced myself to ignore him.

“Never heard any of that before,” I said, keeping my composure. “Sounds fascinating. Though it seems like a bit of an old wives’ tale meant to keep werewolves from turning humans left and right, nothing more.”

Lucian paused at that, dropping his hand from my shoulder. He stared at my face, as if searching for a conspiracy theory. Or a new way to be a pain in my ass.

“Perhaps you’re right…” He trailed off.

*Ding!*

A little chime echoed, and Lucian let out a startled laugh, looking over his shoulder. “Oh, it’s almost time for the grand finale!” He gave me a nod. “Great chat, Greyson. So pleased we can be allies and discuss our thoughts.”

“Sure,” I said dryly.

Lucian tipped an imaginary hat at me as he walked away, calling over his shoulder, “I’m looking forward to seeing more of Elle as well!”

Right.

Hadn’t I told Lucian at least twice to stay the fuck away from Elle? Because I was pretty sure I had. But Did Lucian care about that? Of course not. He was like an invasive, toxic relative who needed to be taught boundaries over and over and *over* again. It was ridiculous.

I didn’t even have it in me to feel anger right now. Anger didn’t work with Lucian.

I needed to be crafty with him. Right now it seemed like his suspicion was that I’d turned a *human* Elle into a werewolf. I didn’t want him getting any closer to the truth: that I’d actually turned a *wolf* Elle. A way more unprecedented act.

With those thoughts twisting in my head, I walked over to join the Redwood pack. My mom and Torin were standing beside the chocolate fountain, chattering animatedly about all the different types of chocolate that one could use to make a hot beverage. Meanwhile, I recalled that the story Sabine had told me about a werewolf turning a real wolf had been dire—but not the same as Lucian’s account.

Sabine had said that the pack might reject a wolf turned werewolf, but so far, the Redwoods had accepted Elle with open arms, and she’d done the same with us. There was no real reason for me to worry. I forced myself to keep those thoughts at bay, for now.

Just as Torin rushed off to talk to Tom, I arrived at my mom’s side and gave her a side hug.

“There you are,” she said, patting my arm with a warm smile. “It’s almost midnight. Where’s Cali?”

“Not sure,” I said, looking around the room for my mate. “I’m sure she’ll be here soon. Are you having a good time?”

My mom picked up a pink cocktail from a passing waiter’s tray. “I have to admit, I expected a lot worse.”

I snorted. “After whatever Lucian has planned for midnight is done, we can get out of here.”

My mother smiled again, leaning up to kiss my cheek. This kind of simple affection was still so new to me. I found it a little startling, but I couldn’t help but appreciate it.

“Despite the Vanguard pack’s many flaws, interacting with neighboring packs is key. And it’s not actually been too bad a time,” she commented. “You did a good job, bringing the pack here tonight.”

Just like affection, words of praise were foreign to me. And yet, it felt like I could get used to it.

“Thank you,” I said. “It’s been a bit of a mess, but good for the alliance. Right?”

“For sure,” my mom replied. “You never know when it might come in handy.”

I nodded, looking around for Cali again. Where was she?

“I’ll go let everyone know about our plan for after midnight,” I told my mother. “We need to wrap this up before Lucian gets any ideas about us spending the night.”

She looked amused. “I’m sure he’s learned his lesson and won’t attempt to kidnap anyone this time.”

I *really* wanted that to be true. But as I walked away from my mother, Xavier’s words echoed in my head. *Why the fuck haven’t we killed the princeling yet?*

Shaking my head, I spotted Elle across the way. Sage was with her, talking animatedly about something, but Elle didn’t seem to be paying attention. I followed her gaze and realized she was looking directly at Lucian. And in the end, I couldn’t deny the obvious.

Elle *did* seem interested in Lucian as well.

I didn’t like this one fucking bit.

This situation had the potential to get so messy for the Redwood pack that I had to wonder: did I need to keep Lucian away from Elle permanently?

# Episode 3431

At this point, I wanted to know the truth. Forget the new year—I had to learn whether the killing part of the *due destini* curse was broken. This was a right-here-right-now kind of resolution, and the moonshine had worn off, so I was totally coherent and able to deal with whatever Big Mac had to say.

Mostly. But Big Mac couldn’t refuse me again.

*If I don’t chicken out again, at least,* I thought. *You can do this!*

I could totally do this. Sure, I was obviously nervous about it, but I was in a much better place overall now that we’d done away with Seluna. She’d tried to force me to pick between Xavier and Greyson, and that was part of the reason why I hadn’t wanted to figure out if there would be deadly consequences to my making a decision. Watching my mates trying to kill each other because a demon made them had actually been very traumatic, thanks very much. It had been the cherry on top of an extremely terrifying and literally haunting situation.

There was just… a lot of trauma, all over. Like, I didn’t really talk about it, but it was there. Along with the fact that I didn’t want to choose, anyway. But at the same time, I was always worried that one of my mates could just drop dead if I said something silly and the curse took it as a choice.

*A lot of VERY VERY VERY stressful things to consider!*

I had to find Big Mac and figure out if the curse murdering one of my mates was still on the table. Something told me that it wasn’t, but something else told me that it was, and I didn’t like any of this. But being stuck in this limbo was making me feel extra anxious. I blamed the moonshine’s lingering effects.

*Good times!*

I was roaming around, looking for Big Mac, when I spotted Xavier. He was with Gabriel and Jay. Not Ava. The farther away she stayed from him, the better. I reached for Xavier’s hand after going over to the boys, and he pulled me closer.

“Hey,” I said, “have any of you seen Big Mac?”

Xavier shook his head. “No, but we have to find her. We have a big problem, apparently.”

“What?” I said. “What’s going on?”

Xavier shot Jay a pointed look. “Care to explain?”

Jay swallowed audibly, and I realized that Lola wasn’t with him. *Shit*, why wasn’t she with him?

“Well,” Jay started, “Lola and I were in the… you know. And there’s kind of a situation.”

All my concerns about Big Mac and the *due destini* were shoved aside when I realized that Lola was in grave danger in this hellhole of a palace. *Oh, no!*

“What kind of situation?” I asked urgently.

Jay cleared his throat. “The magical handcuff kind?”

I gaped. “What the hell does that mean? Where’s Lola?” I shoved Jay in the arm when realization dawned. My voice escalated to a shriek. “Oh my god, Jay, did you *leave Lola there?* All alone in the orgy room?”

Jay raised both his hands defensively. “Look, I didn’t *want* to leave her! But I had to come get help, and this isn’t something that—”

“Sorry, hang on!” Gabriel cut in, laughing his ass off. “So the handcuffs are magical? What does that mean? Just trying to paint a picture, here.”

I gasped, deeply offended on my best friend’s behalf. “Gabriel, this is serious!”

He chortled. “Oh, I *know*!”

“Let’s just find Big Mac or Kira and fix this,” Xavier said matter-of-factly.

“Thank you,” I declared, pointing at Xavier. I really appreciated his decision-making skills, especially in the face of Gabriel’s reaction—laughter—and Jay’s reaction—freaking out. Xavier was taking charge, and it was pretty cool. And also very hot. He looked around the room like a brooding action movie hero, then took my hand and started walking.

“Let’s go,” he said, gesturing for the guys to follow.

“Sir, yes, sir!” Gabriel joked, while Jay rushed to catch up with Xavier and me.

While the boys tried to find the witches in the sea of people and scents, I processed my current predicament. I obviously had to reconsider my priorities, here. First, I would save Lola from whatever this handcuff situation was, and *then* I could talk to Big Mac about the *due destini*.

*There*, I thought. *Excellent organizational skills, Cali!*

Giving myself a pep talk wasn’t exactly working, though. Because as we started looking for the witches, all my determination fizzled out, and I thought that, hey, perhaps I *didn’t* have to ask Big Mac about the curse right now. Like, it was New Year’s Eve. I deserved a break from any drama, right?

*Oh my god, I’m getting cold feet.*

I definitely was. I was also ready to start bargaining with myself.

*Focus on Lola first*, I told myself, *and then see how you feel.*

“There’s our witch savior!” Gabriel said, startling me. I turned to see him pointing at Big Mac—she was in one of Lucian’s three million sitting room-slash-dining rooms, enjoying a meal in peace. Not for long.

“What is it this time?” Big Mac said, glaring up at us when we rushed toward her.

“We need your help,” Jay declared. “Lola’s in trouble!”

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of trouble?”

Xavier’s expression was serious. “She’s in a compromising position.”

I smacked his arm.

“What?” he said. “It’s true!”

Big Mac sighed heavily and stood up. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“Thank you, thank you!” Jay said and almost ran forward, leading us back to the orgy room.

I internally cringed when the doors opened, preparing myself to see wiggling butts and enthusiastic penises all over. To my relief, though, the space had cleared out. Thank god.

Of course, that didn’t mean I wanted to go in there. Or embarrass my friend any further—I knew that I wouldn’t want a huge audience if I was stuck on a bed with magical handcuffs.

“Ahem,” I said, pausing by the entryway. “Let’s maybe just have Big Mac and Jay go in?”

Big Mac sighed again, like a fed-up mother of twelve, and Jay nodded emphatically. As the two of them walked inside, I called, “Don’t worry, Lola! Help is on the way!”

Lola’s voice echoed back immediately. “Cali? Oh my god, I’m stuck!”

Big Mac’s voice came next, and it was—as expected—very pissed off. “Stop shouting in my ear, Lola!”

“Cali, please, I need you!” Lola called desperately. This poor girl!

“I’m going in,” I told Gabriel and Xavier, nodding with determination.

“We got your back,” Gabriel said teasingly.

He clearly hadn’t realized the severity of the situation.

I rushed inside and immediately spotted Lola a few feet ahead, sitting on a massive bed. My best friend had a giant fluffy bathrobe half on, and her wrist was shackled to a bedpost.

“Cali!” Lola burst out. “You’re here!”

“I couldn’t let you go through this alone.” I immediately sat by Lola’s side and took her free hand in mine. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you out of here.”

“Jay left, and then the rest of the people cleared out too, and I was just sitting here all alone, and I…” Lola sniffled. “I was so fucking bored, Cali. You know I hate being bored!”

“You’re doing great, Lola,” Jay told his mate reverently. “It might take a moment, but Big Mac will do her best to help you.”

Meanwhile, Big Mac was rolling her eyes so hard I thought they’d fall out of her head. Inspecting the handcuff, she snapped her fingers. The handcuff broke open.

Lola gasped, rubbing her wrist. “I’m free!”

“Wow,” I said, eyeing Big Mac appreciatively. “You really *are* good at this.”

Big Mac shot me a look. “Obviously.”

“Damn it,” Gabriel grumbled from behind me. “I thought this would be more dramatic!”

Xavier snorted, but Jay was just gaping at the witch. “Thanks so much, but uh—was it really that simple? I thought it was charmed?”

Big Mac gave Jay a wry look. “The handcuff was definitely charmed, but it’s nothing I can’t handle. It had a time spell. Seems like someone didn’t want this to unlock for quite a few hours.” She raised an eyebrow at Jay. “I’m guessing you two just picked the pair up and went for it?”

Jay nodded nervously.

Big Mac stood up and sighed for the millionth time in the past five minutes. “Next time, do us all a favor and don’t play with anyone else’s toys.”

Lola scoffed. “You don’t have to tell me twice.” She gathered the robe around her and grabbed Jay’s hand. “I’m out of here.”

The two of them walked to the door. Gabriel trailed after them, teasing Jay mercilessly. “The handcuffs turned out to be a little too much for you to handle, huh, lover boy? Next time, you should try tickling her with a feather.”

I smirked, shaking my head while Xavier chuckled. I was about to leave the room too when he suddenly blocked my way, closing the door on our friends in the hallway.

I blinked up at him. His devilish grin made me swallow roughly. “Xavier?”

Xavier pulled me close. “You know, we don’t have to leave just yet…”

# Episode 3432

I immediately blushed at the proposition, and I looked around as if I expected a naked person to appear out of nowhere. “Do you really want to stay here?”

He shrugged, still wearing that devilish smirk that made my heart rate spike. “It’s empty now. I wouldn’t mind us spending some time away from the rest of the party.” He wrapped his arms around my waist tightly. “Just think about it…” His hot breath brushed my cheek before he started to kiss across my jawline, making me feel hazy. “We could take those cuffs and try them out later.”

Clinging to him, I choked out, “No way, I don’t want to have Big Mac come save me!”

Xavier laughed. “Cali—”

“Seriously, did you see the look she gave Lola? So embarrassing!”

Xavier chuckled against my throat, his hand moving from the small of my back to my backside. “Don’t worry. I’ll save you.”

I laughed. It came out breathy, and when his lips brushed the shell of my ear, I wrapped my arms around his neck. He looked at me, his dark gaze flickering between my mouth and my eyes, so intense I felt all warm and tingly. He leaned down to kiss me full on the mouth, but he pulled back too soon, made it a teasing, tempting little game while I tried to inch closer.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay?” he said against my mouth. “That dress would look good on the floor.”

My heart was pounding, my head spinning. If Xavier tried to reach under my dress right now, I’d probably tell him *please*.

*Am I really doing this?* I thought, biting the inside of my cheek.

“You’re certainly making a strong argument…” I swallowed audibly, looking at the door. “But what if someone comes in? This door doesn’t lock.”

Xavier’s full lips turned into a grin before he gave me another peck. Then he let go and leaned back. “I was just testing you.”

I gaped at him. “Excuse me?”

He winked, straightening his clothes. “Thought it would be fun to tease you.”

I gasped—mock offended—and smacked his arm playfully.

He laughed, taking my hand as he opened the door. “Of course I was kidding, Cali. I’d love to see your dress on the floor, obviously, but not in here. I know this isn’t your style.”

“I’ll say,” I said, snorting.

“It’s not my style, either,” Xavier said as we walked out of the room. With a wink, he added, “But don’t worry, we can ring in the new year together later.”

“Xavier!” I hissed, giving him another playful smack. He pulled me closer, linking his arm with mine. The hallway was empty—the others were long gone—so Xavier and I could steal another kiss. And another.

As we approached the end of the hallway, though, I heard the sounds of the party.

“No, be good now!” I scolded, pushing Xavier’s hand away from where he’d been shamelessly groping my ass.

*Men.*

“You know,” Xavier said, looking very pleased with himself, “when you’re alone later, I—” His gaze flicked forward, and he stopped talking.

When I looked in the same direction, I saw Lilac marching down the hallway toward us. He looked upset, and his eyes were red, like he’d been crying.

*Oh, no!*

“Lilac,” I said worriedly. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Lilac paused a few feet in front of us, glaring at me. “What do you care?”

I flinched at his tone. He made a move to walk past us, but Xavier blocked his path. “What’s wrong with you? Don’t talk to Cali that way.”

“I’ll do whatever I want,” Lilac bit out.

Xavier stepped closer, his expression severe. “I told you not to talk to Cali that way. Get a fucking grip.”

Lilac shook his head. “Whatever, man—leave me alone!”

He pushed past Xavier forcefully, marching away like a raging bull. I had never, not once in my life, seen the kid like this.

*Oh my god*, I thought*. When did sweet, funny Lilac transform into a moody teenage boy?*

I stood there speechless and stunned while Lilac moved back down the way we’d come.

“What on earth was that?” I asked Xavier, my voice cracking.

Xavier wrapped an arm around my shoulders and planted a kiss on the top of my head. “Sorry about Lilac’s behavior.”

I shook my head. “What do you mean? You shouldn’t apologize for him.”

Xavier’s expression was serious, but I could pick up a hint of worry as he glanced in the direction Lilac had vanished. “I feel like Lilac is my little brother—like I’m responsible for him and Violet. So for that boy to treat my mate this way…” Xavier huffed. “I have to go talk to him. Something’s wrong.”

“For sure,” I said. “That wasn’t the Lilac we know—you have to figure out what’s going on with him.”

Xavier made a grimace. “I fucking hate to leave you, though. I wanted us to have one last dance before the new year.”

Smiling, I went up on my tiptoes to kiss him. “We can dance later.”

“Are you sure?” Xavier asked. “It’s fine?”

“Of course,” I said. “Go, before Lilac gets too far.”

Xavier gave me one last lingering kiss before he started off down the hallway. “Go straight to the ballroom where everybody else is—don’t go off exploring!” he called over his shoulder.

That sounded suspiciously like an order—at least Greyson had the tact to frame his orders as suggestions—and I rolled my eyes. Where on earth had Xavier gotten the idea that I *wouldn’t* go directly to the main room? It wasn’t like I had a reputation for going off on my own and investigating strange places…

Well, at least usually I had a reason.

“Yes, yes, go!” I said, waving him off.

As I headed down the hallway and the sounds of the party got louder, my mind went back to Lilac. His outburst had been so strange—he was usually such a happy-go-lucky kid—so I didn’t take it to heart. Something was clearly going on, and I was glad that Xavier had gone to check on him.

*I wonder where Marta is… Did something happen between them? It looked like Lilac had been crying, the poor kid, so maybe—*

I’d just arrived at the ballroom when my thoughts were interrupted by a startling flourish of trumpets.

“Jeez!” I huffed under my breath, almost jumping when an announcement followed.

“Ten minutes to midnight! Everyone please report back to the courtyard!”

I scanned the crowd for the rest of the pack, but I didn’t see anyone, so I decided to just go outside and figured I would meet them there.

*I hope Lola’s put her clothes back on. I know I prefer to be fully dressed when the new year is upon me.*

Someone linked their slender arm with my own, and I thought that *surely* it had to be Lola. But no. When I twisted to face the person holding me, it was Aysel.

Seriously.

“Fancy seeing you back here!” she chirped, looking me up and down. “Were you enjoying some of our festivities?”

Her suggestive smirk made my mind to wander back to Xavier’s hands all over me.

“What?” I blurted out nervously. “No!”

Aysel raised her eyebrows at me. “Well, you look a little rumpled.”

*And you look a little evil*, I thought but didn’t say it out loud.

“It’s a stylistic choice,” I told Aysel, trying to channel Lola’s brand of confidence.

Aysel seemed to buy it, because she changed the subject. “Are you looking forward to midnight?”

“Sure,” I said. “The new year countdown is always fun.”

Aysel nodded happily. “I’m sure you’ll have a wonderful time with both your mates.”

I appreciated the fact that Aysel was smiling instead of smirking suggestively like she had earlier. I’d dealt with enough innuendo for one night. To my constant embarrassment, I still had a lot of shame left.

“Do you know what Lucian has in store for that Seluna clock?” I asked Aysel, nudging the conversation in a direction that was actually important to me.

“Not sure,” Aysel said with a shrug. “My brother is always up to something dramatic.”

I gave Aysel a wry look. “Everyone already knows that.”

Aysel snorted at my words, rolling her eyes as I spotted a few of the Redwoods a few feet ahead. I was about to excuse myself from the (fake) princess’s company when Aysel spoke up again.

“I do have another question for you, though,” she said. “Who are you going to kiss at midnight?”

Seriously? Why was everybody asking me that? And Aysel had a lot of nerve to pry like that—we weren’t friends. She’d probably tried to kill me at least five times since we’d met.

“I don’t feel like that’s any of your business,” I told her with my best mean girl smile. Asking myself, “What would Lola do?” was really helping me out here.

But Aysel remained weirdly unfazed.

“Well, it might be,” she said and shrugged again. “I might not know what Lucian has in store for the clock, but I do know that there will be consequences for anyone who doesn’t kiss someone at midnight.”

# Episode 3433

**Xavier**

I went after Lilac, following the young wolf’s scent. Moving quickly, I turned left and found him just a few feet ahead, pacing furiously.

“Hey!” I called. “What is your problem, man?”

Lilac whipped around to glare at me. Then he kept on walking, shouting over his shoulder, “Leave me alone, Xavier! I already told you!”

I gritted my teeth. I wasn’t very good at the whole brotherly thing, but I was pretty sure that when a kid disrespected you, you had to make sure they realized they couldn’t act out like that. No matter the circumstances.

I hastened my pace, almost running now. “This is not how it’s gonna go, Lilac,” I half-shouted. “It’s almost midnight; didn’t you hear the announcement?”

The moment I was within reach and ready to grab Lilac and pull him around, he stopped and faced me. Finally. His chest was heaving, his eyes were red, his hands clenched.

This was bad.

“You don’t get it, do you?” he snapped. “I don’t want to be around anyone right now, least of all *you*!”

I was trying not to let Lilac’s attitude piss me off further. But still, I couldn’t keep myself from asking, “What the *hell* is that supposed to mean?”

Lilac huffed, arms flailing as he pointed at me. “You’re a shining example of someone who can’t handle a mate bond!”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “What did you just say to me?”

“Oh, please!” Lilac scoffed. “You have Cali, and you have Ava, and you can’t even pick, Xavier. With you as an example, how am I supposed to figure out what the hell to do about Marta and Perrie? I love Marta, but Perrie’s my mate!”

I fought to process. This was about Marta and Perrie. At least Lilac’s unprecedented outburst made more sense, now. Though I still didn’t appreciate the disrespect.

“Your situation seems pretty clear to me,” I said, keeping my voice even. “You don’t have two mates, Lilac. You have one. Explore that.”

Lilac looked even angrier than before. “Marta brought me back from the fucking *dead*, Xavier. But apparently that doesn’t mean anything to you!”

I had never seen the kid so furious, so I fought to be patient. “Obviously it matters, man. But come on—we can talk about this later.”

“No, Xavier,” Lilac snapped, turning around. As he kept walking, he bellowed, “Leave me the hell alone! You’ve already done enough!”

I stood there, gaping at Lilac’s retreating back. How the hell was I the bad guy here? Talking to him felt like a lost cause right now. He’d made up this whole scenario in his mind, likening my situation to his when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

I had obviously picked the person I wanted.

It was always Cali.

Shaking my head and straightening my jacket, I turned around to go back to the party and find Cali. I was done for the night. When I entered the main room, though, my mate was nowhere to be seen. I scowled—she’d said she’d be here, but I couldn’t find a recent trail of her scent anywhere. And with all these people around, it would be hard to track her.

I decided that my best bet would be to return to where I’d last seen her and take it from there. I climbed back up the staircase, and I immediately spotted Ava climbing down. She stopped a couple of steps in front of me, effectively blocking my way.

“Did you not hear the announcement?” she asked, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, I heard it,” I said.

She gestured behind me. “It’s almost midnight, and the party is that way.”

“I know where the party is,” I said curtly. I forced all the things that Lilac had told me just moments ago out of my head and added, “I’m looking for Cali.”

Ava sighed and rolled her eyes. “Of *course* you are. She’s just got you on a leash, doesn’t she?”

She made a move to brush past me, but I wasn’t going to fucking let her talk to me like that. Grabbing her arm to pull her back, I snapped, “What did you just say to me?”

This thing with Ava… It was never-ending. I was still annoyed at her for making shit awkward with Cali earlier, with the whole shower debacle. Not to mention the way she kept doubting me about all the Zeke stuff.

She was fucking exhausting.

Ava scoffed. “You suffocate that girl.” She was talking about Cali, but I was the one who felt suffocated. By Ava. “She’s all you care about, and you keep obsessing over her, like—”

“You’re right,” I interrupted. “Cali is who I care about. She’s my mate.”

Ava yanked her arm out of my grasp, glaring at me. “Whatever, it’s not my business. Why am I even talking to you right now?”

I sneered. “Great question.”

“You’ve made it clear that there’s no room in your life for anything other than Cali,” Ava said sharply. “Even though you promised you’d help with my pack.”

I huffed. “Jesus fucking Christ, what the hell do you want me to do, Ava? You’re the one who flirted with Lucian and entertained his grandiose ideas about joining packs! You’re the one who keeps pushing for—”

“I know finding the next Samara Alpha might seem like a joke to you,” she snapped, “but it’s not a joke to me.”

She pushed past me and walked away. But I’d had *enough*. How dare she imply that I didn’t give a shit about the Samaras, after everything I’d done for them?

I stormed after her, aggravated, and caught up just as she entered the main room. Gripping her arm, I made her face me.

“Why the hell are you being so difficult?” I demanded through gritted teeth.

Ava looked up at me, and the moment our eyes locked, my wolf reared up, feeding on my energy. I was breathing hard, and I realized that I needed to get a grip. Right the hell now. I had to contain myself, just try to keep things from escalating here.

I couldn’t keep doing this with Ava.

I just fucking *couldn’t*.

Forcing my voice to be steady, calm, I said, “We were working pretty well together before. We still could, if you stopped whatever this is.”

Ava frowned and tried to pull her arm away. I didn’t let her.

“What the fuck is going on with you?” I demanded. “I never did anything to—”

“You left me alone to deal with the disaster that is Zeke!” she snapped.

I was so confused. “*When?*”

“When you went to New Orleans,” she declared.

I stared at her for a moment, shocked. She looked back at me defiantly, and I realized what she was getting at. She’d felt abandoned? *What?*

“I told you I was leaving,” I said gruffly. “And It’s not like I went on vacation, Ava.”

“I know, I know,” she said with a bitter smile. “Precious Cali was under threat from a witch or a ghost or a demon or whatever her villain of the week is!”

I scowled. “That’s not fair, and you know it. It’s not like Cali goes searching for these threats. What sane person would want to fight for their life every second of every day?”

Ava laughed, shaking her head. Her eyes were glistening. “Right! Cali is just so unlucky and so innocent and so special that—”

“You know what?” I took a step forward, glaring down at her. “Keep Cali’s name out of your mouth. This has nothing to do with her. I said I’d help with the Alpha thing, and I have been. I don’t go back on my word.”

When Ava pulled away from me this time, I let her.

“No, you don’t,” she snapped. “You just reprioritize and push everything that isn’t Cali to the bottom of your list, so just—” Her voice cracked, and there was both fury and sadness in her expression. “Just forget it, Xavier. I’ll figure this out on my own. I’ve already got enough stress to deal with—I can’t keep fucking worrying about you going back on your word. I’ve been through this before, and I just can’t take it!”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “What are you talking about? When the hell have I ever broken my word, or—”

“When you betrayed our mate bond and killed me, Xavier!”

The moment the words left her mouth, all the noise from the party dimmed in my ears. My heart was pounding so fast I thought it might burst.

“Is this some sort of sick joke?” I asked her. My voice was barely audible. Scratchy.

Ava looked like she was about to start crying. Like she regretted her words.

Too late.

I felt numb.

I made a move to leave, to go find Cali. I had to find Cali, right now. I just had to find Cali, if it was the last thing—

“Wait!” Ava’s fingers locked around my wrist. Her voice was a whisper. “I didn’t mean that…”

I faced her. Her eyes were still glistening. “I think you did,” I said.

She swallowed hard. “I want to trust you Xavier. I really do. My pack means everything to me, and they’re all I have left. Please, just tell me I can trust you to help with this.”

I looked into Ava’s eyes. Her deep, intense eyes. I knew how much this mattered to her, because I knew *her*. I’d known her for years upon years, and when she stared at me like this, it was hard to look away. I felt numb, still.

I felt trapped.

And I didn’t know if I could blame my wolf for what was happening right now.

“You’re wrong about something,” I muttered.

She wiped her eyes. “What?”

“I never wanted to break my promise. I never wanted to kill you.” I hated how my voice was a whisper, but that was the only way I could speak right now. Admitting this one truth to her hurt violently enough that the numbness broke, and what came through was just me. Being honest. “I had no choice, Ava. You broke my heart. You know that, right?”

She got choked up. “Xavier, I’m so sorry, I—”

I didn’t want to hear her apologies. My mother couldn’t come back from the dead. Not like Ava had. I cut her off and simply said, “Bottom line, you *can* trust me.”

Ava didn’t speak.

Her burning gaze still locked with mine, she lifted onto her toes and kissed me.

# Episode 3434

“I might not know what Lucian has in store for the clock, but I do know that there will be consequences for anyone who doesn’t kiss someone at midnight.”

I blinked at Aysel, alarms blaring in my head.

*Good god, what fresh hell is this?*

“What kind of consequences?” I demanded.

Aysel burst out laughing. “I’m kidding, darling! I just wanted to see your face when I said that.”

I scowled. I sure as hell hoped she could see my face now.

“Oh please, don’t be mad,” Aysel said with a giggle, nudging me. “I’m just so very curious about who you’re going to kiss tonight!”

“Again,” I said impatiently, “I don’t think it’s any of your business.”

Aysel waved me off, entirely nonchalant. “Oh, come on! You know how things are with werewolf packs. Everybody’s in everyone’s business—it’s practically our way of life.”

I just hoped that Aysel didn’t get in on the bet with Lola and Jacs. Because if that happened, I would have to have a very, very stern talk with both of them.

The announcement started again. “Seven minutes to midnight. Everyone please report back to the courtyard.”

“Oop, I’d better go find my brother outside,” Aysel said, smirking. “Enjoy your New Year’s with whoever you choose to kiss!”

The princess winked at me and finally skedaddled, disappearing into the crowd of people that was heading toward the courtyard.

To say that I was relieved to see her go would’ve been a massive understatement.

Sighing deeply, I started to look around for Greyson and Xavier. I thought I’d seen Rishika and Artemis in the crowd earlier, but now they were gone. I wondered if I should go directly outside, but then I suddenly realized that I, in fact, wasn’t sure what I’d do when I did find my mates. Ugh, I hated thinking about this, but now that the problem was in my head, I couldn’t get it out.

*What if I kissed neither of them? Would that make Lola win the bet? But what if I kiss one and the other dies? Because I never got to ask Big Mac if the killing part of the curse is over, did I? No! Because my best friend got handcuffed in an orgy room, like that was totally normal!*

Actually, I couldn’t seem to find either of my mates, so there was no point in wondering. It was the perfect solution—I would ignore all my problems until they went away. Pushing away the anxiety like the pro I was, I decided to go to the courtyard, hoping that I’d find some of the other Redwoods there.

Instead of getting to the courtyard, though, I took a wrong turn with a bunch of other random people and ended up in a balcony-slash-overpass kind of area that looked down on the main part of the house. The view was actually very nice from up here.

I looked down at where most of the partygoers had gathered with Lucian on a raised dais. The Seluna clock face was visible in the distance. I looked away. I wasn’t sure what Lucian had planned, there, but I didn’t want to stare at the thing if I didn’t have to.

*I’ve dreamed of that face more times than I can count.*

Suppressing a shiver, I looked behind me and finally spotted Greyson in the distance.

“Greyson!” I called, and he turned. With a smile, he made his way to me. A moment later, I was reaching out to take his hand, relieved that I’d found him in this chaos.

“Hey,” he said, leaning down to kiss my cheek. “I was looking for you—where have you been?”

My mind immediately went to Xavier, but I shoved the memory of our kiss aside and waved a hand. “Oh, you know,” I said, “just saving Lola from the orgy room—it was a whole thing.”

If Greyson noticed me flushing, he didn’t comment. His reaction was to laugh. “It seems like I missed quite a bit. Do you want to go back downstairs? I can see some of the others down there.”

I glanced down and spotted Sage and Zainab and Ravi, but my sister and parents were nowhere to be seen. I also didn’t like the idea of fighting through the crowd down there with midnight so close.

“I don’t want to get stuck in the crowd when the clock strikes midnight,” I told Greyson. “Let’s just stay up here—we’ll have a good view for whatever happens with that clock.”

Greyson arched his eyebrows, looking at Lucian. “Well, I was promised it would be worth it.”

“We can only wait and see,” I said, pulling Greyson’s arm over my shoulders and nestling against him. At the same time, a bunch of trumpets echoed, and Lucian took his place behind a stand. Like a peacock flapping its wings, he waved his hands for the crowd to quiet down. Then he grabbed a bedazzled microphone.

“Oh, boy,” Greyson said with a sigh.

“Of course there’s a speech,” I grumbled. I was ready for something grandiose and over-the-top and mildly annoying. Because that was Lucian.

Instead, Lucian kept it shockingly simple.

“I am deeply grateful to all of you for gathering here tonight to celebrate a new beginning. This past year was hard for many, but now the future seems bright. Renewal and rebirth are the only path forward. Let us all leave behind the past and look forward to new connections that are only going to make us stronger and wiser. This is a…”

I stopped listening when I realized that Lucian had been staring at a specific spot in the crowd when he’d mentioned making new connections.

Ava stood right there, her head held high.

And Xavier was right next to her.

I felt a little lurch in my chest. What was he doing with Ava?

*I mean, there’s no reason for me to freak out. I trust Xavier. Obviously. He can stand next to Ava; it’s not a crime! It’s totally and completely fine, so—*

A flourish of music interrupted my train of thought.

Lucian smiled widely. “Please find your partner to kiss, if applicable, and we will begin the countdown and our grand finale in a moment.”

I glanced at the Seluna clock. “What in the world is that man planning?”

Greyson chuckled and wrapped both his arms around me. I rested my face against his chest as he murmured, “Want to celebrate midnight, just the two of us?”

Greyson’s voice was husky and sexy and all the good things, but at the mention of midnight, I remembered the choice I’d been worrying over. Oh god, *would* kissing him at midnight count as a choice? My earlier anxious thoughts returned tenfold, and my head started to spin.

*What if the killing part of the curse is still around?*

I pulled back from Greyson, feeling shaky. Greyson looked down at me, his eyebrows scrunched up in confusion as he examined my face.

“Greyson, I… I can’t just—” My voice caught in my throat.

Realization dawned on his face. “It’s not making an official choice, Cali,” he said. “It’s just a midnight kiss. You know I’d love to kiss you, but we don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

I stared at him, at the softness of his face, at all that understanding and care. My breath caught when our eyes locked, and I gripped the front of his shirt tight.

Swallowing hard, I murmured, “Are you sure you want to kiss me?”

Greyson cradled my face in his hands. His voice was tender. “I’ve already told you that I believe the killing curse is gone, love. And I hope you know I would never put my own brother’s life at risk for a kiss. Right?”

The sincerity in Greyson’s gaze was so compelling that it made my heart pound. We’d been through so much, the three of us. And I was certain that Greyson and Xavier really did love each other, in their own complicated way.

“Of course,” I whispered. “I’m sure you’d never play fast and loose with your brother’s life.”

Greyson nodded, offering me a gorgeous smile that could only make me smile back. “Good.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist, cuddling into him. He smelled amazing, and I felt so safe and adored in his arms that it made me woozy. He kissed my hair and swayed gently, nuzzling me.

“I love you so much,” he whispered.

All the stress of the day melted away as he held me, and I slowly turned into a puddle of mushy happy feelings.

*This is it*, I thought with a smile. *Tonight can be beautiful, just like this.*

“Here we are, friends!” Lucian called out, his voice breaking through my perfect bubble. A little annoyed, I turned in his direction as he tapped his glass with a huge smile. “Time for the countdown!”

I frowned when I saw the cannon being rolled into place next to Lucian. It was aimed directly at the Seluna clock.

“What’s he doing with that?” I asked Greyson.

“I have no idea,” Greyson said.

“Ten!”

The countdown had started, and Greyson and I broke apart. Wading through the crowd, we got closer to the railing to look down.

“Five!”

Greyson took my hand.

“Four!”

Lucian grabbed a torch and lit up the cannon.

“Three!”

It was still aiming at Seluna’s face.

“Two!”

And in that moment, I did look her straight in the eyes.

“One!”

*BANG!*

The cannon went off, blasting Seluna into flaming pieces.

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!” the people shouted, but I just stood there.

Breathing in and out, I watched as Seluna’s face burned up, the flames engulfing her.

*Look at her*, I thought, my heart racing. *She’s on fire.*

She was gone.

*BANG!*

The fireworks went next. They were much bigger than the ones that had gone off earlier, giant bullets in the sky that bloomed into stars and flowers and other shapes that dripped with light.

The night was beautiful.

“Lucian was right.” I turned to Greyson, letting out an incredulous little laugh. I couldn’t help it. I felt light, and so fucking alive. “This *was* kind of perfect.”

Greyson smiled, pulling me into the safety of his arms again. “Happy New Year, love.”

I smiled back. “Happy New Year, Greyson.”

And then he leaned in and kissed me.

# Episode 3435

It was incredible to be in Greyson’s arms without having to worry about any world-ending threats. I deepened the kiss, reaching for the back of his neck to pull him closer, to feel this to the bone, and he smiled against my mouth. The heat, his scent, the pressure of it all made me shudder while the cheers erupting all around us faded into the background.

I only broke away when I couldn’t breathe anymore. “I love you,” I whispered.

Greyson grinned, his chest heaving, his gorgeous eyes dancing with pleasure.

My voice was drowned by the chaotic mass-clinking of people hitting their glasses.

“A toast!” Lucian bellowed from downstairs, raising his champagne glass. “To the new year!”

The crowd cheered again, glasses clinking together. Everyone on the balcony with Greyson and me hooted and hollered in delight before they started to disperse, obviously ready to continue the party. And probably return to the orgy room.

*Do werewolves get STIs?*

I let out a little squeak when I was pushed against Greyson in one person’s enthusiastic rush.

“Someone’s excited,” Greyson said wryly under his breath, wrapping his arms around me protectively until everybody had passed us. I shook my head, laughing before suddenly feeling an odd sensation. Like I was being watched.

Sure enough, when I looked down at the courtyard, Xavier was staring up at me.

I jerked in surprise the moment our eyes locked. He didn’t look happy to see me in Greyson’s arms. I hadn’t been ecstatic to see Xavier next to Ava when midnight struck, either, so glass houses and stones and all that. I knew I needed to go give him some attention, though, before he got all fussy.

I gently pulled away from Greyson’s arms. “I’m going to go see the others downstairs, okay?”

I kissed his cheek and hurried off before Greyson could realize I was on Xavier watch. A moment later, I was in the ballroom and spotted Lola, Jay, Torin, and my parents. But not Xavier. Hopefully he wasn’t off brooding somewhere with Ava lurking in the background. Because that tended to happen a lot.

“Happy New Year, honey!” Mom said, and she and my dad enveloped me in a warm hug.

“Happy New Year,” I replied with a smile.

I said the same thing to Lola a moment later, as she squealed and squished me while yelling, “Love you, bestie!”

In the background, Torin was holding up his phone, talking to Kevin on FaceTime. It was kind of corny, but adorable to watch, because the Fae was making exaggerated kissing faces and noises at Kevin. He laughed, pretending to catch the midnight kisses.

“My heart!” Lola sighed as we both looked over at Torin. I couldn’t help but smile, everything was so warm and cheerful. But just as I was wishing Jay a Happy New Year, he let out a shout of surprise.

“What? What is it?” I zeroed in on him, immediately alarmed. But then I realized he was just lifting up his hands to stare at his now too-big jacket with a look of total distress.

“The spell,” he said mournfully. “The spell must’ve worn off!”

I’d told Jay to go ask Lucian for a new outfit, but he’d probably forgotten to do it with all the alcohol floating around. And now he was dealing with the—according to him—dire consequences. I pressed my lips together to hide a snicker while Lola patted Jay’s shoulder.

“Baby, don’t worry, it doesn’t look that bad,” she said, comforting him.

Jay scowled. “This is ridiculous—it’s not that I’m small, you know! Xavier is just a huge, muscly guy!”

“I know, sweetie,” Lola said, nodding reassuringly. “You are very big and very strong and very, very sexy.”

Jay looked sheepish. “You think so?”

“Of course!” Lola said with a smirk before grabbing Jay’s face and kissing him.

Snorting at the exchange, I averted my gaze from the couple and let them do their thing. I spotted Xavier’s head moving through the crowd just then, and my breath caught.

“Xavier!”

He didn’t turn. The noise of the party and the even-rowdier-than-usual crowd must’ve made it hard for him to hear. Staring at him, I mind linked, *Xavier!*

He paused but didn’t even look back.

I scowled. What on earth was this? A little annoyed, I made my way through the crowd, keeping Xavier’s tall head in my line of vision. Why was he running away from me? Was this because he’d seen me hugging Greyson at midnight?

Was he upset because we’d talked about sharing a midnight kiss and I hadn’t come to find him? Well, *he* hadn’t come to find me either, and I’d seen him hanging out with Ava, but you didn’t see *me* storming off dramatically, did you?

*Dammit, this is all too much! I just wanted to have a light, fun holiday party, and now—*

Someone slammed into me and said, “Sorry!” as I stumbled back.

I paused to catch my breath, though I hadn’t realized until now that I needed to. Why was I suddenly so exhausted? Out of the blue, I was feeling really tired and achy. Was the moonshine still messing with me?

I pressed a hand to my temple, trying to stave off the low-grade headache that had suddenly reemerged. When I finally made it out of the main room, I breathed a sigh of relief when the crowd thinned. I eyed one hallway, then another, then a third. There were too many freaking hallways around here. Which one had Xavier taken?

I picked one at random and headed in that direction. Soon enough, I heard harsh whispered voices, and I wondered if I’d gone down the wrong hallway. But then, as I approached the corner, I heard Ava’s voice.

“I get it, Xavier.”

I scowled. Xavier was *still* hanging out with Ava? *Really?* I didn’t hesitate to turn the corner, and I immediately saw my mate and his ex-mate hissing at each other angrily. What on earth was going on? Why did Xavier look so furious?

*Um… Should I make myself known or just try to eavesdrop?*

Deciding that eavesdropping could be the best course of action, I started to back away. But it was too late. Ava’s gaze shot up and latched onto me.

“Oh good,” she said sarcastically. “An audience. Well, we’re done here anyway—right?”

She didn’t even wait for Xavier’s answer before pushing past him.

Scowling, she turned to me and said, “Good luck with him. He’s being extra insufferable tonight.”

Ava was super annoying and also the worst. Though that didn’t change the fact that Xavier had been alone here with her.

I stared at him. “What was all that about? Why were you with Ava?”

I didn’t sound angry or jealous, but I did sound curious, and I wanted to congratulate myself for being so chill. I deserved an award, really.

“It was nothing,” was Xavier’s eloquent response.

Was he mad at me? Despite everything, I hated to think that he was mad at me.

“Did something happen?” I asked, moving closer to him. “I’m sorry I missed our midnight kiss…”

Not that I regretted kissing Greyson. But I did regret *not* kissing Xavier. And those two contradictory statements were the epitome of the *due destini*.

“No, it’s okay,” Xavier said, his blank expression breaking with a wince. “Let’s not talk about midnight kisses. You have nothing to be sorry about, so—”

“Were you trapped in an awkward Ava situation this entire time?” I blurted. “Because I was kind of trapped in an awkward Aysel situation, and then everything started to happen so fast with the ‘grand finale’ and all… And to top things off, I got a headache.”

Xavier shook his head, stepping closer. “Cali, really. It’s all right.” He stepped forward and pulled me into his arms, kissing my head. “I think it’s time to call it a night and get you home to sleep off that headache.”

I nodded. He took my hand and started leading me back to the main room.

*He’s being weird*, I thought. *Or am I just imagining it? Hmm…*

When we arrived in the main room, Greyson was there with Gabriel, Mikah, and the rest of the Redwoods. I didn’t see Lilac anywhere, though. But he had to be nearby.

*When we’re alone, I should ask Xavier what happened when he went after Lilac*,I thought, making a mental note of it. *He seemed so upset.*

“It’s time to go home,” Xavier said after we were all done with the “Happy New Year” hugs.

Greyson nodded. “That’s exactly what I was telling everybody a minute ago.”

The pack agreed. Then suddenly, Elle stepped out from behind Greyson, startling me. I hadn’t even realized she was there—she’d been so quiet.

“No,” she declared. “I am staying.”

The pack seemed surprised, but not Greyson. He fixed his gaze on Elle with a frown. “No, Elle. The night’s over for the Redwood pack.”

Elle shook her head stubbornly. Her voice got louder. “I said I am staying!”

# Episode 3436

*Boy, oh boy, this is BAD!*

“No,” Greyson told Elle in an eerily calm voice. “You’re not staying here. We’re all going back.”

Elle glowered. Oh *god*. We’d already talked about this—the more Greyson told Elle what to do, the more she would rebel. I could see it happening right before my eyes! And it was pretty alarming, actually, because you’d think that a natural-born wolf wouldn’t enjoy contradicting her Alpha.

*Hahaha, this is totally not good! Like, at all!*

“But—”

Greyson cut Elle off. “You’re coming with us. Now.”

I blinked, my worry starting to escalate. Greyson rarely used that kind of stern tone with anyone in the pack. And I realized it was probably because, usually, nobody contradicted him (Xavier didn’t count). But Elle peered up at Greyson defiantly and said, “Lucian invited us to stay, so we should stay. Is he not our ally?”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. Not a single pack member spoke, their gazes bouncing between Elle and Greyson with alarm and/or interest. The Alpha’s voice remained eerily calm, but somehow that made the tension soar.

“Are you doubting my ability to make the best decision for my pack, Elle?” Greyson asked.

Elle paused at that. If someone didn’t step in right now, something really bad was going to happen. I could just feel the energy between Greyson and Elle building in a weird, disconcerting way. Other partygoers all around us were already staring at the Redwood Alpha and Elle, and the last thing we needed right now was to become a spectacle.

*Okay, that’s it, I’m stepping in.*

“Greyson,” I said, taking his arm. “Perhaps you could just let her stay the night at the palace.”

Greyson’s head whipped toward me, his eyes wide with shock. “Really? You think it’s safe to let Elle stay here overnight? After what happened to *you* in this house?”

My stomach dropped at his words. I was ready to mind link with him to say that *of* *course* I didn’t want Elle to stay, but I was trying to figure out a way to convince her to come with us that didn’t involve any ordering around. But before I could do anything, Lucian came over.

“Greyson!” he exclaimed, his tone and expression all apologetic and demure. He’d clearly heard what Greyson had said. “I understand your misgivings, but I can assure you that I will protect Elle as my guest.”

Greyson’s jaw clenched. Evenly, he said, “You once called Cali your guest while you were trying to use her as a vessel for a demon. Your track record is horrible, Lucian.”

The memory made my headache grow, and my grip on Greyson’s arm tightened. He held me back as Lucian sighed dramatically. “Seluna fooled me, just as much as she fooled all of you.”

“That’s completely off base,” Greyson said. “We never invited her into our home or proposed marriage to her, Lucian.”

“And I don’t know about you guys, but she *never* fooled me,” Artemis said, scoffing. Then, in a lower tone, she added, “I always hated the bitch.”

Lucian thankfully didn’t hear that—or he pretended not to hear, because he knew that this wasn’t a battle he could win—and kept staring at Greyson.

“I know that as Elle’s guardian, you’re protective,” Lucian told Greyson. Then he turned to Elle, giving her a look that gave me the ick. “But of course, Elle can make her own choices.”

Elle nodded. “I choose to stay.”

Lucian grinned at her, winking. “That’s my girl.”

“She’s *not* your girl!” Greyson growled.

I flinched in shock while the pack fell dead silent. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d seen Greyson snap like that in an official, “civilized” setting. What the actual hell was that?

*Did I just hear possessiveness in Greyson’s voice? Maybe even jealousy? Am I just imagining it? I’d better be imagining it!*

Oddly enough, it was Ava’s arrival that broke up the tension. I watched, wide-eyed, as she slinked over to Lucian like a flirty cat and wrapped her arm around his. Coyly, she said, “I was actually hoping we could spend some time together tonight?”

*Well, then*, I thought. *Again, what the* fuck*?*

Lucian looked between Ava and Elle, suddenly flustered and indecisive in a way I’d never seen before. “Oh, that’s—well, of course.” He nodded, clearing his throat. “I was simply being a good host, you see. Elle said she wanted to stay, and who am I to say no?”

Ava smiled some more, and it was all teeth. “Well, I also want to stay. What’s your answer for me?”

Lucian glanced at her mouth as he said, “The more the merrier.”

*Oh my god!* Lola mouthed at me, clearly engrossed in the drama unfolding before us.

I, on the other hand, was just wildly alarmed.

*And* now Elle was frowning. “You know what?” she told Greyson. “I will go home.”

Greyson’s lips twitched, as if he wanted to smile. He suppressed it, but it was obvious he was pleased. He nodded while Lucian frowned, appearing indecisive all over again, and the entire Redwood pack looked either confused or intrigued.

I eyed Ava. Despite our baggage and the fact that she was probably the most cunning person I knew, I didn’t think her staying at Lucian’s was a good idea. I spotted some of the other Samaras still mingling, though, and I reminded myself that they were her pack. The Redwoods weren’t responsible for her. *Xavier* wasn’t responsible for her.

At least that was what he’d told me over and over again.

“Well, then, take care,” I told Ava awkwardly. What? I couldn’t exactly tell her,“Good luck with Lucian—he’s a manipulative asshole, but you’re also very manipulative, so you’ll be fine!”

Ava nodded, but her gaze flickered to my side. She’d glanced at Xavier. He was giving her an odd look, and I frowned, instantly moving toward him.

Taking his hand, I said, “You okay?”

He seemed to snap out of whatever thoughts he’d been having. “Yeah, let’s go.”

Xavier took me to pick up my coat, and then we all headed to the exit. Once we were outside and the valets had brought around the cars, I realized that we hadn’t discussed whether the car assignments would be the same as when we’d arrived. I looked over my shoulder and spotted Greyson with Elle. He was leading her to his car.

*Hey, that’s my seat!* I thought when Elle sat in the front of Greyson’s SUV. Rishika and Artemis were already climbing into the back seat. I thought about going over to sit in the back with them when I noticed Marta, Violet, and Charlie walking up to me.

They all seemed to be in a weirdly awful mood, and I was immediately distracted.

“Hey,” I said, looking between the three of them. “What’s up?”

They all just shrugged awkwardly, and I shook my head. This wouldn’t do. It was New Year’s, for god’s sake!

Taking the lead, I took Marta’s and Violet’s hands in mine. “You two should drive with me in my parents’ car. Let’s go.”

“You sure you don’t want to ride with me?” Xavier asked, climbing onto his motorcycle.

I glanced at the scowling girls and shook my head. “It’s fine. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Xavier smiled, nodding. “See you at home.”

Meanwhile, Violet and Marta had literally not said a word. That continued when we climbed into the back seat of my dad’s car.

“Buckle up!” he called cheerfully.

The ride was painfully awkward. While Dad remained entirely oblivious to the energy in the back seat and kept trying to get us all to sing along to Mariah Carey on the radio, my mom clearly knew something was going on.

She shot me a puzzled look through the rearview mirror, then glanced at Violet and Marta. I was sitting between the two girls, a barrier for their weird tense vibes. My gaze locked with my mom’s, and I gave her a tiny nod.

She instantly took charge. To my dad’s confusion, she lowered the music and twisted to look at the back seat. “Are you girls okay? Did something happen at the party? You’re not usually so quiet.”

Marta shrugged. Violet fiddled with the hem of her sleeve. I wondered if this had anything to do with Lilac’s outburst, earlier. I had to investigate. And also ensure that these two went back to being BFFs again.

“Oh, come on,” I said, nudging them both. “You two shouldn’t be like this. It’s the new year—you can’t start a new year with a fight. What would Lilac think, to see his two favorite people fighting?”

“Lilac and I broke up,” Marta said simply. “And he has a mate.”

I stood there, gaping. “What?” I spluttered. “I didn’t know about any of that!”

Violet’s voice cracked. “I’m really sorry, Marta… I had no idea that my brother kissed Perrie.”

*Oh my god, WHAT?*

My mom looked equally stunned, but we both kept our mouths shut now that the girls had started talking.

“It’s okay,” Marta muttered. “I’m not mad at you.”

Violet sniffled. “Really? Because I’m *so sorry*.”

Marta reached over my lap to take Violet’s hand. Suddenly, I found myself in a tight, soggy hug sandwich as the two girls sniffled and tried to lean over me to hug each other. Mom smiled at me, clearly pleased that our prodding had brought the two of them back together. Even my dad had finally caught on.

*Wow*, Dad mouthed, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

*I know!* I thought. *The last five minutes have been VERY revealing!*

He shook his head, looking sheepish, and took the turn to the house. “Well, I’m glad everything—”

Dad didn’t finish his sentence. There was a sudden blinding burst of light, and he slammed on the brakes.

# Episode 3437

We all jerked forward, shouting as the car screeched to a halt. Violet and Marta had squeezed me into a hug all over again, and even though I appreciated the sentiment, it did nothing to ease the screaming inside my head.

*What is it this time? CAN’T WE CATCH A BREAK?*

“Is everyone okay?” Dad asked frantically, turning to look at every one of us.

Everybody in the car was okay, but that couldn’t be the case for the pack house.

“What’s going on?” I repeated. “Is the house under attack? What was that light?”

Just then, there was another burst of light.

I turned to Violet. “We can’t let the pack house burn down!”

Violet nodded sharply and opened the door. A moment later, Marta, Violet, and I were piling out of the car while my dad shouted at us, fighting to remove his jammed seat belt. “Girls, no, stop! Stay in the car!”

“This can’t be safe, Cali, you should wait for Greyson!” Mom said, but I barely paid attention. My thoughts were going a mile a minute, my breaths coming out sharp as I ran down the dirt road that led to the pack house. The noise coming from that direction sounded like small explosions. I fought to reach for my Fae magic, forcing myself to focus.

*Come on, come on, come on! Don’t fail me now!*

I was too far away to see clearly in the darkness, but there was a figure in the front yard—with a huge bucket or box before them that was setting off bolts of fire and light.

*Wait… Is someone trying to blow up the house?*

I couldn’t *believe* we had to deal with this, not an hour into the new year. My fear was overcome by anger, and I raised my hands to send out a burst of magic—

I heard Torin’s voice behind me, echoing in the night. “*Kevin?*”

I gaped, watching as the figure stepped out of the shadows and into the light of the front porch. Oh my god, it *was* Kevin!

“Gods, that’s amazing!” Torin gasped, pointing up at the sky. “Look at all those fireworks!”

I blinked many, many times, looking up at the sky. There were indeed fireworks up there, and the bolts of light coming out of the box were… more fireworks. Just going off in the air.

“Surprise!” Kevin opened his arms with a huge grin. “Happy New Year!”

“Kevin!” Torin squealed in delight, racing past me and throwing himself into Kevin’s arms. Raining kisses all over his boyfriend’s face, he said, “I can’t believe you did this for me!”

I stood there for a moment, breathing heavily. There was a big banner on the lawn that said,“Happy New Year, Torin!”My heart was still racing so hard that I turned my hand into a fist and pressed it to my chest, fighting to wrap my head around my extreme reaction.

“Cali!” Xavier’s bike revved up to my side, and he took off his helmet. “Are you okay?”

I nodded dumbly.

“Damn, I thought someone was attacking,” Xavier said.

I let out a relieved, sheepish laugh. “Me too. We’re way too attuned to fighting and attacks, right?”

“We’ve kind of learned to expect them,” Xavier said, laughing too as he looked up at the fireworks. “Well, I guess this is as good a time as any.”

“For what?” I asked.

With a smirk, Xavier looped an arm around my waist, pulling me closer. Against my lips, he said, “To make up for that missed midnight kiss…”

His mouth was on mine, then, the feeling absolutely breathtaking with the fireworks going off over our heads. He wrapped his arms around me tight, and I did the same, gluing myself against hm. He kissed me like he couldn’t get enough, and I felt his passion in every inch of my skin.

“I love you more than anything,” he muttered breathlessly when we broke apart.

I grinned, stroking his cheek. “Love you too.”

I heard tires arriving, and I turned to see that everybody else had arrived. I reluctantly pulled out of Xavier’s arms when Greyson’s car pulled into the driveway. Greyson got out immediately, so fast I knew he was ready to shift and attack. But then he looked up the sky, saw the banner on the front lawn—and Kevin and Torin enthusiastically making out—and his shoulders relaxed.

“Kevin wanted to surprise Torin,” I explained, rushing up to him.

Greyson sighed deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Thank god.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “I guess we can’t blame him. It’s not like Kevin knows we’re supernatural beings who’ve fought a bunch of evil monsters recently and are easily spooked by loud noises.”

“Right,” Greyson said wryly. “Perhaps we shouldn’t all jump in to kill Kevin’s fireworks display.”

“That might be for the best. Torin would be furious if we scared off his boyfriend.”

Greyson laughed, looking over my shoulder at the two men. “It seems like he’s a keeper, too, if he put in all this effort for Torin.”

Linking arms, Greyson and I went over to greet Kevin. Everybody else followed, and the pack surrounded Kevin and asked all kinds of questions about fireworks.

Now that the adrenaline was wearing off, though, I realized I was absolutely exhausted. The group was hanging out on the lawn with drinks and snacks for an informal after-party, but I was ready to tap out.

“Time for bed for me,” I told Greyson and Xavier.

“I’ll be right up,” Greyson said, while Xavier said, “I’m coming with you.”

Then they both glared at each other. It probably would’ve been funny under other circumstances—a.k.a. if the *due destini* hadn’t been such a pain in my ass.

“I’ll take the bed by myself tonight, thank you both,” I said, then leaned down to kiss both Greyson and Xavier on the cheek. At least that seemed to appease them.

When I got up to my room, I closed the door behind me and took off my clothes. I was exhausted. I flopped down on the bed after putting on an oversized T-shirt. My headache from earlier had come back with a vengeance, and I was feeling a little dizzy. When had I had my last drink? Was my head meant to be spinning, still? Or was this just the exhaustion and stress of the past few weeks catching up to me?

I didn’t have the energy to figure out the answer, so I yawned and hugged my pillow close. I knew I should brush my teeth, shower, remove my makeup, and do my skincare, but the pillow was so wonderfully soft, and the bed felt so amazingly good…

I promptly fell asleep.

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I woke up the next morning with an *awful* hangover. Groaning, I cursed myself for drinking last night after a week of non-stop moving and running around in NOLA. I would never do that again—my constitution didn’t like running around, and it definitely didn’t like alcohol. My whole body was aching, my mouth was dry, my headache was worse than ever, and I felt like needles were pricking into my muscles.

*Ugh, this is bad!*

Feeling like a miserable wreck, I zombie-slumped downstairs to get some water or make myself some tea. I found Lola in the kitchen, looking equally haggard. She was standing at the counter, staring at an array of ingredients.

“You hungover too?” I mumbled.

Lola grunted. “Pftsmesseadsobad…”

I nodded, understanding every word. “I know. That’s how I feel.”

Yawning, Lola cracked four raw eggs into a blender with hot sauce and other ingredients.

I grimaced. “What the hell are you making?”

“Hangover cure,” she replied with a sigh.

I gagged a little and made a beeline for the coffee maker. After scooping an indeterminate amount of coffee inside, I turned on the machine. Really, I didn’t care what it tasted like, as long as it was strong and helped me out.

“Where’s the ibuprofen?” I asked Lola.

Her response was to turn on the blender and torture my poor head. I groaned, covering my ears to save myself. It didn’t work. Finally, Lola poured a giant glass of goo for herself, and another for me.

“You have to do this with me,” Lola pleaded.

“I’d rather die.”

Lola whined. “Cali, please! I’m not brave enough to drink it without you!”

I sighed and accepted my fate as a pushover. I took a deep sniff of the glass to steel myself and immediately regretted it. The scent of sewage filled my nose.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” I asked my friend. “Because it looks *very* questionable to me.”

Lola nodded vividly. “Promise.”

“Bottoms up…” I trailed off, plugging my nose and downing the glass at the same time as Lola.

*Oh, no! It’s even WORSE THAN I THOUGHT!*

I forced myself to swallow, but it felt like it was going to come back up. Slapping a hand over my mouth, I fought to keep it down, but it was no use. In the end, I simply ran to the bathroom to rid myself of the horrid potion of doom.

“If you throw it up, you’ll just have to drink another glass!” Lola called after me.

My best friend was a sadistic monster.

I ignored her and slammed the bathroom door shut, throwing up the contents of my stomach into the bowl. Flushing the toilet, I groaned. I felt weak but maybe a little better? I couldn’t tell. I went to the sink and rinsed out my mouth, washing my face before looking directly into the mirror.

My oversized T-shirt had slipped, revealing the top of my shoulder. There was an angry red welt there. I frowned and lowered the shirt, turning to look over my shoulder.

*What the hell is that? It wasn’t there before… What did—*

I let out a gasp at the sight of the Seluna handprint.

Except it wasn’t just a handprint anymore.

The mark had grown.

# Episode 3438

**Xavier**

The early morning air was crisp and damp as it filled my lungs. The clouds were low and clung to the ground as I sprinted through the woods. They obscured the trees and the turns of the path, but I knew the woods too well to be bothered by the morning fog. I liked it. It made me feel even more alone—it made me feel like I was the only wolf on the planet.

I’d woken up early—even before the sky had started to turn that slate grey of early morning—and I hadn’t been able to go back to sleep. I’d just had way too much on my mind. Last night had been weird, and not because of the mission to return the ashes—hell, not even because of the Vanguard party.

It was all Ava’s damn fault. She shouldn’t have kissed me. She’d surprised me, and I’d been so caught off-guard that I hadn’t thought to shut it down. I hated the fact that I might even have responded, though it would only have been on an instinctive level. And now I was freaked out that I’d given her the wrong idea about us.

That was why I’d pulled her aside to set the record straight. And—of course—*that* was when Cali had to walk in on us. I just prayed Cali hadn’t heard what we were actually talking about.

It hadn’t seemed like she had. And she would have said something if she’d been bothered. Cali wasn’t one for playing games in relationships. She was too straightforward. If she’d heard about the kiss, she would have said something to me about it.

But what that meant was that *I* was going to have to tell her about it myself. As much as I hated that it had happened, it had, and I couldn’t keep it to myself. Besides, keeping it a secret made it seem like it meant something. It gave the damn thing a meaning it really didn’t have. The kiss had *happened* to me, and it had been an annoyance more than anything else.

It didn’t mean anything. Not a damn thing.

I had to keep telling myself this, because there might have been a part of me—a deep, deep, dark part of me—that had liked the kiss. A little bit.

Frustrated with myself all over again, I dropped my head and sped up. I was almost at the house, and I looked up as I broke through the trees, taking in the view of the lawn and the massive house beyond.

Part of me wanted to do another loop of the property—I still had some energy to burn—but people would probably be awake by now. And I really wanted to see Cali. I wanted to hold her in my arms and remind myself what it felt like to be with my mate—my *true* mate. Plus, now that the ashes were finally gone, we could really celebrate. The party last night hadn’t felt like a celebration—it had felt like a fucking chore. We’d gone to make an appearance, to avoid upsetting Lucian and the Vanguard pack. The party had been about politics, but today was for personal celebrations.

I smiled, thinking that I’d like to start those personal celebrations by convincing Cali to jump into my post-run shower with me.

I headed inside and right up the stairs, but when I knocked on her door, there was no answer. I pushed the door open gently, not wanting to wake her if she was still asleep, but the bed was empty.

I frowned for a moment. It was still so early. Where the hell was she?

Glancing down the hallway, I thought about going to look for her, but figured I’d shower first. I headed to my own room and got the shower going.

A solo shower wasn’t quite as much fun as having Cali for company, but it was still nice, and I took my time. When I was done, I changed into fresh clothes and jogged downstairs. I peeked into the living room and paused in the doorway, smiling at Cali, who was sprawled on the couch. She was leaning her head against the back of the couch, her eyes closed.

I stepped quietly into the room and sat down beside her, then leaned forward to kiss her cheek, but my weight on the couch must have startled her, because her head jerked up at the same moment, and we knocked our heads together.

I winced and put my hand to my forehead as Cali did the same.

“Ow,” she hissed. “Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” I said, half-laughing. “I shouldn’t have snuck up on you.”

Cali nodded and almost smiled, but it came out as more of a grimace. Then she leaned her head back again.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked, frowning at her.

“We have mega-hangovers,” someone rasped from the doorway.

I looked over to see Lola walking into the room, looking at bit like she’d just crawled out of a grave. But I kept that to myself.

“You’re hungover?” I asked Cali, confused. “I didn’t see you drinking last night. Are you sure that’s what it is?”

“Yeah,” she said in a small voice. “It’s a hangover.”

My frown deepened. She didn’t sound like herself. But maybe that was because she wasn’t feeling well. Lola looked like she was going to throw up or pass out at any moment. Maybe both.

“Do you want me to get you some water?” I asked.

“No, thanks. I tried some of Lola’s hangover cure, and it made me sick,” she said with a sigh. “So now I’m taking a break from drinking anything for a while.”

I felt like I should be doing more to help my mate, but she was lying so still and only moving when absolutely necessary. I couldn’t think of anything that would make her feel better. I was just about to ask if a shower or a bath might help when Torin walked into the room.

“There you are! And you’re awake! Good! We need to start getting ready!” he said, every sentence punctuated with an exclamation mark.

I shot a look at Cali, but her eyes were still closed. “Getting ready for what?” I asked, looking back at Torin. “What are we doing?”

Torin looked disappointed. “You don’t remember?”

“I don’t,” I admitted. “What’s going on?”

“Oh! That’s right. You arrived to the party late last night, so you don’t know. Greyson promised me that we could do a make-up New Year’s party today. Here at the pack house. Since we had to go the Vanguard party last night and we couldn’t celebrate here like I’d been planning. And I’m really excited to start cooking,” he said, clapping his hands. “But I need a crew of people to decorate!”

I groaned. Torin had to be kidding. He wanted to have another party? *Tonight?* The last thing I wanted to do right now was decorate the pack house.

I let myself think of all my plans to whisk Cali away somewhere private to celebrate her newfound freedom. Maybe find a frozen waterfall. Maybe have a picnic. Maybe find a lobster shack right on the water, somewhere up the coast. Just celebrate in our own private, special way.

But when I glanced over at her, I could see that she was wincing at Torin’s every word. So, unless Torin was prepared to heal Cali’s and Lola’s hangovers before he started cooking, Cali wasn’t going to be up for going out anywhere.

I sighed and got to my feet. “I’ll help you find some of our old New Year’s decorations.”

“Oh yay!” Torin squealed, clapping his hands.

“But that’s it,” I said sternly. “I’m not putting anything up. You’re on your own.”

Torin nodded. “Got it,” he said, apparently clear that assistance in finding the decorations was all he was going to get out of me.

I heard the sound of approaching footsteps and glanced at the door, hoping it was someone who knew where I kept the decorations and could take Torin to them. Now that I’d volunteered, I was kind of regretting it.

Greyson and Jay passed in front of the living room doorway. They looked like they were on their way out.

“—I just think we should change up the routines a little,” Jay was staying. “We haven’t seen so much as a badger out there. I think things have just quieted down for the winter.”

“I don’t think we want to let up on security,” Greyson said. “Not right now.”

He stopped in the doorway, frowning when he saw Cali. “Cali? Are you okay?”

She opened her eyes and focused on Greyson. I could almost feel her gathering her strength as she sat up straight. “Oh good, it’s you,” she said. “I need to talk to you and Xavier. Right now.”

# Episode 3439

It was more of a struggle than I’d been expecting, but I managed to get myself off the couch and to my feet. Xavier and Greyson looked a little confused by my pronouncement, but they followed me into the small study near the front door. Inside, I shut the door and took a moment to compose myself. I took a deep breath. I needed to think about how I was going to say this—how I was going to tell them about the mark.

I’d thought about just not saying anything about it at all, but I knew that was the coward’s way out. I couldn’t keep it a secret. They needed to know, and, besides, I knew I couldn’t hide it forever. But I felt awful. Guilty, even. Xavier had just given up a year of his life and risked his safety to return Seluna’s ashes to the demon realm. That had been a huge deal. And he’d done all of that—taken on all that risk—because he’d thought it would keep me safe. Release me from the hold Seluna had over me. But the mark hadn’t disappeared. It had just grown. What the hell did that mean?

My anxiety must have been apparent on my face, because Greyson stepped to my side and took my hand.

“Love,” he said quietly. “Whatever it is, you can tell us. We’ll handle it. Together.”

I nodded. “Okay.” I swallowed hard. “I’ll just show you.”

I started to untie the robe I’d thrown on to hide my shoulder, and both Greyson and Xavier went wide-eyed, obviously surprised that I was stripping down in front of both of them. But before they could say anything, I turned and pulled the robe off my shoulder, showing them the mark.

“*Fuck!*” Xavier spat angrily. “What is that? Fuck this fucking shit!”

This reaction didn’t surprise me, but it did make my stomach churn.

Greyson stayed silent, but he stepped forward, his eyes on the mark. He reached out a hand to touch it, but then he stopped himself, seeming to think better of it. That hurt, too. Like he was afraid to touch me.

“Maybe it’s not what we think,” he said, but his tone was grim.

“What else could it be?” I asked desperately. “Returning the ashes didn’t work! It didn’t sever the connection to Seluna, and it didn’t make the mark go away. How is that even *possible*? What did we do wrong?”

Hot, angry tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as fear and anger coursed through me like poison.

His jaw clenched, Greyson stared hard at the mark. “Well, it’s not red,” he pointed out. “It’s gone white, like a scar. Maybe that’s all it is now. A scar.”

I was glad to hear that the aggressive redness from earlier was gone. That was a relief, at the very least. “But what about this?” I asked. “What about the ring around it?” I jabbed at the mark that now surrounded the handprint.

Greyson and Xavier exchanged a dark look.

Greyson cleared his throat. “We should talk to Big Mac and Kira. Let them know that this happened,” he said. “They might have some insight. At the very least, we should keep them updated on this. They’ll want to know.”

I sighed. I knew he was right. It was a good idea to get another expert opinion, but I was just tired. I was sick of being magic-diagnosed over and over again. It felt like I had some sort of chronic magical illness that defied explanation. Every time we thought we had a handle on it or knew what we were going to do to fix it, the problem morphed and changed, turning into something worse and more complicated. I was exhausted.

But I nodded as I pulled my robe back on. “Yeah, okay. Let’s go talk to Big Mac.”

Greyson opened the door, and the three of us headed upstairs. The house was still quiet. Most of the pack was still sleeping off the night before, and only Torin was moving around in the kitchen as we passed through the hallway. Upstairs, we headed for Big Mac’s room, and Xavier knocked on the door. Inside, there was a shuffling noise.

The three of us exchanged a look.

“*Ow!*” came a muffled voice from inside the room.

“*MacKenzie!*” came another hushed voice. Then a giggle.

“I’ll get it,” someone grumbled.

“Maybe we should come back later,” I whispered. “They might be… um… busy.”

There were more sounds of frantic shuffling, then the door was flung open. Big Mac stood in the doorway dressed in a robe, and when she saw us, she scowled.

“Really? You three? This is *really* how we’re starting the morning of the first day of the new year?” She rolled her eyes. “Is it really too much to ask that this year you don’t bother me every five seconds?”

“I’m sorry,” I said apologetically. “I really wish we didn’t need to, but we really need your help. Again. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, stop being such a grouch, MacKenzie,” a voice said.

I looked into the room and saw Mrs. Smith sitting on the bed, tying a robe closed. She smiled, stood, and walked over to Greyson.

“Happy New Year, my son,” she said, giving him a light kiss on the cheek.

Greyson looked a little awkward, but he managed to smile back at his mother. “Yeah, same to you.”

I felt myself blushing. “I’m so sorry for bothering you both, but we—”

“Let’s just get this over with quickly, then,” Big Mac snapped. “You’re here about the *due destini* curse, right?”

On either side of me, I felt Xavier and Greyson react to this, and I squirmed. Crap. I hadn’t told either of them that I’d spoken to Big Mac about the curse. And when I looked up at them, I could see that they looked surprised by this information.

I bit my lip. Should I tell Big Mac to hold off? I’d talked to her about the curse before the mark had gotten bigger. I’d been thinking that with the ashes gone, the Seluna issue had been settled. I was still worried about the *due destini* curse, of course, but maybe now that the mark had become an issue again, I just needed to focus on that. Maybe we had too much on our plates now to worry about the *due destini* thing right now.

I’d just opened my mouth to say, *Actually no, that’s now what we came here for*, but Big Mac spoke before I could.

“I thought you were going to do something like this.” She turned on her heel and walked over to the desk inside the room. The room was astonishingly tidy, and the desk was nearly clear. There were only a couple of jars and a large pink crystal on the surface.

Big Mac opened a drawer and pulled out a sealed envelope. She turned back to us with an annoyed expression. “You three are all back and forth about this curse. Wanting to know about it, not wanting to know about it.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s like watching a tennis match. So, I solved the problem. Well, my problem.” She held up the envelope triumphantly.

“What’s that?” I asked warily, eyeing the envelope.

“I wrote it down,” she announced. “The answers you’re looking for. They’re here. Now it’s on you. You can open it whenever you think you’re ready. Or not open it. Either way. I don’t care. The only thing I care about is that this will allow you to leave me in relative peace with my fiancée.”

She held out the envelope, and I accepted it carefully. I looked down at it reverently, like it held the answers to all my problems. Maybe it did.

The envelope was pristine white, with nothing written on it. The paper was good quality—thick and heavy. I could feel the weight of it. I wondered if I should just rip it open now and get it over with, once and for all.

Glancing up at Xavier and Greyson, I saw that they were looking at the envelope as well. Staring at it.

Greyson looked at me and raised an eyebrow. “It’s your choice, Cali.”

Xavier nodded in agreement, though he was still staring at the envelope. His eyes blazed like he wanted to rip it open himself.

My fingers tingled. Was this really it? All my questions answered? The information I was after—was it all right here?

I flipped the envelope over and slid my finger beneath the flap. It was closed with a seal of crimson wax, but it cracked easily. I took a deep breath and was just about to rip it all the way—ready to just get it over with—when there was an earsplitting crack, and I flinched and froze.

I looked around wildly and immediately found the source of the noise. There, standing in the middle of Big Mac’s bed, was Vander.

# Episode 3440

**Greyson**

The sound had been so loud and so sudden, I’d instinctively shifted when I heard it. I’d already managed to half-shift by the time I finally looked around and recognized Vander, standing in the middle of the bed.

My mom let out a squeal—first of surprise, then of dismay when she saw that Vander was tracking dirt across the snow-white duvet.

“Um, excuse me!” she burst out. “Would you mind not getting dirt all over my bed? I *sleep* here, thank you very much.”

Vander looked down at their feet. “Oh, apologies,” they said and stepped calmly off the bed onto the floor.

My mom frowned as she tried to brush the dead leaves and mud off the bedclothes.

“Vander?” Cali exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“And why do you never think to *not* appear in the middle of someone’s bedroom? Someone’s *private* bedroom?” Big Mac asked, giving the Keeper of All Nature a dirty look.

Vander bowed their head. “Apologies,” they repeated. “Again.” Then they turned to Cali. “But I came to give you an update.”

I shifted back to human, anxious to hear what Vander had to say.

“An update on what?” Cali asked nervously.

“On the balance of magical nature.”

I tensed. I thought about the mark on Cali’s shoulder and how it had changed since we’d gotten rid of the ashes. Was Vander here to tell us that we’d failed? That everything we’d tried to do had been a waste of time? That the ring around the Seluna mark was a bad omen of some kind? Cali had looked so upset downstairs when she’d shown us the mark, and I’d tried to calm her. I’d tried to explain away the new mark on her shoulder, but I wasn’t sure how effective I’d been, considering I didn’t even know how to explain it myself. Even the reasons I’d given her felt so false and flimsy. It was like grasping at straws. But what else was there to do? It wasn’t like there was a manual for this kind of thing. There were witches we could talk to, but even they never seemed sure. And we had no idea what the ring around the Seluna mark could mean.

I ran a worried hand through my hair. One thing was for sure, though—if Vander had shown up in their muddy boots to tell us that the balance of magical nature was still out of whack, then that meant we could make some pretty big assumptions. And none of them would be good. I didn’t want that.

I could only hope Vander had brought us good news. I really needed some good news right now. I glanced at Cali, who was looking at Vander with a terrified expression. She needed some good news, too. Especially with this handprint development.

Then Vander’s face broke into a sudden smile, like the sun breaking through clouds. “You did it!” they proclaimed excitedly.

“*What?*” Cali gasped.

Vander nodded. “Yep. I can feel the balance restoring!”

Cali let out a relieved breath. “Really? It worked?” She turned to me with a grin. “Can you believe it?”

I returned her smile and wrapped my arms around her, pulling her into a hug. A few moments later, I felt her break away from my embrace and saw Xavier pulling her into a hug of their own.

I turned to Vander. “So, that’s it, then? It’s done?”

Vander nodded. “I think so. I can feel the magic righting itself. It *is* happening more slowly than I’d hoped, though. And it’s only partially balanced—”

“Oh,” Cali said, sounding disappointed.

“But it *is* happening,” Vander went on. “And if it keeps going, I’m sure we’ll be back to normal soon.”

“How soon?” Xavier asked.

Vander shrugged. “A week or so.”

“Wow.” Cali smiled, looking encouraged again. “A *week*. Thank you so much, Vander. Thanks for coming out here to tell me. This is amazing news!”

It was good news, but I couldn’t shake the dark feeling I had.

“But what about the mark?” I asked.

Cali turned to me. “Didn’t you say it might just be a scar?”

“What mark?” Big Mac asked quickly.

Cali shot me a look.

“*What* *mark?*” the witch asked again, more pointedly.

“You’d better just show her,” I said quietly.

Cali pulled down the sleeve of her robe to show the mark to Big Mac and Vander. They both leaned in close to examine it.

“Hmm,” Vander said thoughtfully. “The demon mark shouldn’t be active anymore.”

“What does that mean?” Cali asked.

Vander scratched their head thoughtfully. “It means Greyson’s right. It’s just a scar. It’s likely it will never go away.”

“Really?” Cali asked, clearly surprised. “Never? Why not?”

“Because it was born of magic. When magic has a physical manifestation, it can be extremely powerful, and extremely permanent.”

“Okay, but why’d it get bigger if it’s just a scar?” Cali asked.

Vander eyed her apprehensively, as if they weren’t certain whether she was joking. “Don’t you watch *Dr. Pimple Popper*? Sometimes scars are bigger than the wounds that made them.”

Cali thought this over, then she nodded. “Okay. I mean, as long as it doesn’t mean that Seluna is going to keep haunting me in my dreams or anything, I guess I can live with a scar.”

“I believe that as the magic rights itself, so will your health, Caliana. Any residual dreams will be like echoes from the trauma you received. You may experience them, but they won’t be as intense.”

“Wait,” I said quickly. “Hang on right there. Are you saying that she could still have dreams?”

Vander shrugged. “It’s certainly possible.”

“That’s not acceptable,” I said flatly. “How do we stop that completely?”

“That might not actually be possible,” Big Mac said, piping in.

“What do you mean?” I snapped. “Why not?”

“Because we’re not talking about magic anymore, and there’s nothing any of us can do about it,” she said pointedly. “We’re talking about straight-up normal psychology. While we may be great at magic, we’re not experts on the human brain. No one really is. And there’s not much that can be done to soothe the effects of traumatic events.”

Cali looked shaken at the shift in conversation to her psychological state. Between all the pain and fear and hallucinations she’d been suffering from, Cali really had been through a lot these past weeks. She always tried to be brave and strong about it, but she shouldn’t have to bear it all alone. While time would heal her physically, she’d need support to heal emotionally. I would be there for her in whatever ways she needed, always.

Looking at Cali, Big Mac’s expression softened. “But at least now we know that Seluna can’t hurt you anymore, right? You’re safe now.”

Cali nodded. “Right. That is good to know, at least.”

My hands closed into fists. I didn’t feel the same. I wished I could completely erase all the bad memories of Seluna from Cali’s mind. But I knew that wasn’t possible. At least not without magic, and any magic that powerful was bound to have bad consequences of its own.

Out of nowhere, I found myself thinking about the three sister witches and their cryptic offer to reset time.

*No*. I gave my head a hard shake. No, I was just going to be there for Cali and support her through this, like I’d just resolved to do.

“Well!” Vander declared, looking around. “Now that I’ve delivered the good news, I have to go.”

“Wait!” Cali called. “You should stay for New Year’s!”

Vander frowned. “New Year’s? It’s not a new year yet. What do you mean?”  
 “What do *you* mean?” I asked, confused. “It’s January first.”

The confusion cleared from Vander’s face. “*Oh*, yes, you’re talking about your arbitrary human calendar. I go by nature’s calendar. Today is neither the lunar nor the solar new year, therefore I see no reason to celebrate.”

I rolled my eyes. A second later, Vander popped away.

“Well,” I said, looking around, “this is incredible news. We should celebrate. Even if it is neither the lunar nor the solar new year.”

Cali gave me the ghost of a smile.

“That’s a great idea,” Big Mac said. “A celebration. How about outside? Away from my room? Let’s start it right now,” she said, waving the three of us into the hallway. Once we were out of her room, she slammed the door behind us.

Vander’s departure had been slightly annoying, but their visit had brought extremely good news. Cali was free. The delivery of the ashes had been successful. The connection between Cali and Seluna had been severed.

I turned to Cali, wanting to suggest she and I slip away to celebrate, but I noticed that Xavier had just opened his mouth to speak as well. We caught each other’s eye, and there was a strange, weighted moment when we just stared at each other in silence. I was pretty sure we’d both realized simultaneously that we both wanted to ask Cali to slip away.

Cali had backed herself against the wall of the hallway and was looking between us in silence, her eyes wide. But before anyone could say anything, there was the sound of running feet on the stairs, and we all turned to see Torin sprinting down the hall toward us.

“There you are!” he yelled. “Come on!”

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

He waved frantically. “Everyone in the living room! *Now!*”

# Episode 3441

I was frankly kind of grateful for the distraction Torin had provided. I wasn’t sure what was going down in the hall, but that moment between Greyson and Xavier had been almost unbearably tense, and I’d been glad Torin had shown up to defuse it. I’d been grateful for an excuse to get away from it.

But, as we headed downstairs, I started to worry about what kind of holiday shenanigans Torin was up to this time. I loved the guy, but for someone who’d spent his whole life in the Fae world and had just found out about human holidays, he was so *extra* about them. Though maybe that was good, too. Maybe that was the distraction I needed from thinking about what Vander and Big Mac had said about the residual effects I’d be experiencing from the Seluna mark scar.

I thought about what they’d said as I headed down the stairs. I had considered briefly before that what I’d been through with Seluna was trauma. That beyond the supernatural element, there was very real, very *human* pain and fear that wouldn’t just be forgotten in a single moment. And it only reaffirmed that to hear other people say the same thing out loud. I could handle whatever came my way next, of course. After going through the actual Seluna dreams—along with all the horror and pain they’d caused—I knew I’d be able to handle any faded echoes. But there was still fear. And it was like the anticipation of what could come was worse than the event itself.

So I was going to need something to distract myself from that anxiety—and maybe Torin’s over-the-top party planning would do the trick.

When we reached the living room, I saw that Torin had gathered the whole pack. He’d even rounded up Adair, Tabitha, Mikah, and Gabriel, who were loitering in the doorway when we walked through. Though, as I looked around, I noticed that neither Big Mac nor Mrs. Smith had shown up.

Torin must have noticed that, too.

“Where are Mrs. Smith and Big Mac?” he demanded when we walked in.

Greyson waved the question away. “Just start without them.”

I nodded in agreement. Fending off Torin for them was the least we could do after invading their privacy.

“Okay,” Torin said with a sigh. “I kind of wanted this to be an entire pack thing, but I guess we can just get started.” He looked around. To start off the new year right, we should all go around and say what our New Year’s resolutions are!”

He paused, as if he was expecting a cheer.

Only Elle clapped, and Torin frowned.

“You don’t like the idea?” he asked.

“Oh, Torin, honey, it’s a great idea,” my mom said kindly. She looked around with a pointed look. “*Right*, everyone? We’re all doing Torin’s celebration? Just like we promised?”

This seemed to jog everyone’s memory, and everyone started to nod.

“For sure,” Sage said.

Ravi grinned. “I love a resolution.”

“Sounds great,” Zainab agreed enthusiastically.

Torin beamed with happiness. “Great,” he said, taking a seat on the floor near the fire, next to Rishika. “I’ll start, and we’ll just go around the circle in the order we’re seated in.” He looked around as everyone nodded. “My New Year’s resolution is to up my cooking game.”  
 “My stomach and I fully support this resolution,” Jay piped in.

Everyone laughed and cheered at this.

“Great.” Torin grinned. “Rishika, it’s your turn!”

Rishika thought for a moment. Then she glanced at Artemis, who was sitting next to her. “My New Year’s resolution is to spend more time with my girlfriend.”

“*Aw*,” Sage said quietly.

Artemis groaned. “That is *so* much better than mine.”

“What’s yours?” Rishika asked.

Artemis shook her head. “No way.”

“Come on.”

“No, I don’t want to say,” she said, blushing. “It’s nowhere as sweet as yours.”

Rishika gave her a gentle poke in the ribs with her elbow. “Come on, you have to say yours. It’s your turn, and those are the rules.”

Artemis sighed. “Fine. My resolution is to get better at my magic again.” Her gaze slid to Adair as she spoke.

I smiled at my sister. “That’s a really good resolution.”

“Elle, you’re next,” Torin said. “What do you want to do in the new year?”

Elle sat up straight. “Get more bones,” she said loudly, clearly, and with a smile.

The room was silent as we all stared at her, baffled, each of us trying to piece together what the hell she meant.

“What does that mean?” Torin finally asked.

Elle frowned. “It means what I said. *Get more bones*.”

No one spoke.

After a moment, Lola leaned over and whispered to Jay in a not so quiet voice. “Is that supposed to be sexual?”

That made everyone laugh.

“Okay, okay,” Torin said, trying to get control of the group again. “Ravi, you’re next.”

“My resolution is to get shredded,” Ravi said. “Six pack, Adonis belt, the works. Oh, and to, like, meditate and stuff.”

As we continued around the room, I thought about what I was going to say when it was my turn. What did I want to resolve to do this year? What did I want to accomplish?

I shifted on my feet and as I did, I felt the envelope Big Mac had given me in the pocket of my robe. I’d shoved it in there at Vander’s sudden appearance. If I was being honest, I knew my resolution should be to get the courage to open the envelope and learn about the *due destini* curse. I wanted to know the answer, and whether choosing was going to kill one of my mates. But… I also didn’t feel like I was ready to make a decision. I also knew if I didn’t make a decision, I might lose my mind. I felt stress tensing my shoulders again, descending on me like a weight. I’d foolishly thought that this feeling would leave me after we’d gotten rid of Seluna’s ashes, and now I knew how wrong I’d been.

Now that I’d remembered it, I couldn’t stop thinking about the letter in my pocket. It was like a ticking time bomb. I was going to have to open it at some point, right? But I couldn’t do it right now, not in front of everyone.

I was standing by the door, and while everyone was helping Jay decide if he should travel to Vietnam or Taiwan as part of his New Year’s resolution, I slipped out into the hallway. I hurried toward the small study and pulled out the envelope.

*It’s just an envelope*, I told myself. I could open it. It was just information. It was just data. It couldn’t hurt me. I could do this.

I just wanted to know if we were still cursed.

Oh god, what if we were still cursed?

It felt like my mates and I never got a break from curses and dark magic and evil energy.

I had to pull myself together. That was fear talking. I couldn’t think in that hopeless way. It was completely possible that the curse was fully gone. And that would be a good thing, right? We would be free from all the dark threats hanging over our heads. We could move forward. *I* could move forward. But… Who would I move forward *with*?

I looked down at the envelope, flipping it around in my hands. Would knowing that the curse was gone mean that I would have to make a choice, for sure?

Just the thought of making that choice—curse or no curse—made me feel like I was going into shock. The numbness started at my fingertips, then moved up into my arms. My heart started beating fast, and my stomach clenched like I was going to throw up. My breathing slowed, then accelerated, and I felt like I was about to hyperventilate.

God, I couldn’t do this. I doubled over, trying—and failing—to catch my breath.

Behind me, the door burst open, and Greyson and Xavier hurtled into the room. They rushed to my side.

“Cali! What’s going on?” Greyson asked.

“Why are you in here?” Xavier demanded. “Did something happen with the mark?”

I shook my head, but I couldn’t answer them. I was too busy trying to draw in a desperate breath.

“Cali, love, just say something—” Greyson started, then his gaze fell on the envelope clutched in my hand. “Were you going to open that?” he asked, a strange edge to his voice.

I nodded and finally dragged in a breath. “Yeah.” I swallowed hard. “Shouldn’t we know?”

Greyson gave me a long, steady look. “Is that what you want?”

I went deep inside myself, where the bravest part of me lived, and gathered up all the bravado I could find.

“Yes,” I said with more certainty than I felt. “I do. I’m doing it.”

And I started to open the envelope.

# Episode 3442

**Greyson**

I held my breath as Cali started opening the envelope, knowing that a lot could change when she got that piece of paper out. But as she worked, her hands shook, and she’d barely opened the flap before she started to hyperventilate again.

“Oh god,” she murmured, swaying on her feet. Her face flushed and she put her hand to her chest, sucking in one tortured breath after another.

“Okay,” I said firmly, taking the envelope from her hands. “That’s it.”

“Greyson—” she gasped out, trying to grab it back.

I held the envelope out of her reach. “You’re obviously not ready for this, Cali.”

“No, we need to know,” she managed to say, still stubborn despite being barely able to breathe.

I shook my head. “Forget it. Come on. I’m not going to stand here and watch you have a panic attack at just the *thought* of opening this damn thing.”

“I’m fine,” she wheezed.

I rolled my eyes. “Cali, think about what you’ve been through in the past week. In the past month. It’s been less than a day since we fixed the Seluna situation. We just got back from New Orleans. You’re tired and stressed, and you haven’t slept well in weeks. This is just too much.” I held the envelope up. “This isn’t going anywhere. You can recover a little more before we read what’s inside. Nothing’s going to change if we wait.”

“I agree,” Xavier said. “We can wait, Cali. I know you want to know, but it isn’t worth your peace of mind.”

Xavier’s support surprised me a bit. I knew he’d been really anxious to know what information the envelope contained. But I should’ve known he’d be more concerned about Cali’s well-being than about satisfying his own curiosity.

Still breathing hard, Cali looked at him for a moment, her expression conflicted. But something in his face finally seemed to convince her, and she nodded.

“Okay. It can wait.” She stepped over to the armchair next to the bookcase and flopped down with a shuddering sigh. “I really thought I could do it, you know. I thought I could read it without panicking.”

“It’s okay,” I said soothingly. I walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “You know, you don’t have to be strong all the time. That’s not a requirement. No one expects that of you, least of all me.”

She looked up at me in surprise. Then her face cracked into a smile. “Um, isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black?”

That surprised a wry smile out of me, and she gave my arm a squeeze.

There was a soft knock on the study door, and we all looked up as Orla poked her head inside.

“There you are. I was wondering where the three of you had snuck off to. Did you come in here to avoid telling everyone your resolutions?” she asked with a teasing smile so much like her daughter’s.

“No, we came in here—” I looked down at the envelope in my hand and stopped myself. “Cali wasn’t feeling well,” I said. It didn’t feel like the moment to get into what the envelope might or might not contain.

Orla’s smile disappeared in an instant, and her worried gaze shot to her daughter. “Cali?”

Cali shook her head. “I’m okay, Mom. I think I’m just tired from last night. I probably just need some water or something.”

“You’re worn down, sweetheart. You’re probably depleted. Come on,” Orla said, holding out her hand. “I’ll make you some fresh-squeezed orange juice. You need some vitamin C.”

Cali nodded and, getting to her feet, let her mom put her arm around her and lead her out of the room.

The second Cali was gone, I turned to Xavier, the envelope still in my hand. “Did you really mean what you said? Do you really not care about knowing the answer?” I asked.

Xavier gave me a hard look. “I meant it when I said that I don’t think Cali should freak herself out over it. But, if I’m being honest, yeah, I’m dying to know the answer.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Me too.”

We both looked down at the thin envelope in my hand. It was so small, but so weighty, like the thing held our entire future. Which it kind of did. A future with Cali and a family and everything else I’d ever dreamed about—all of that could be inside.

“You’re not thinking of reading it without Cali, are you?” Xavier asked.

I looked up quickly. “What? No. Of course not. And clearly I need to remind you that I already know what this says.”

Xavier looked incredulous. “What are you talking about?”

“When I came back from the spell those witch sisters did on me, they told me the curse was broken,” I said.

I remembered that Cali hadn’t been sure about my report on this, and neither had Xavier. That was where this had all begun, and then Seluna had arrived and commanded all our attention. But even after all this time, I still felt confident that the witches had told me the truth, and the threat of the non-chosen mate being killed was over. Even if Cali and Xavier still weren’t sure, I could feel it in my bones. I’d gone through hell with the three witches to undo that part of the curse.

I looked down at the envelope. If the note inside somehow said otherwise, then I’d be crushed, of course. Betrayed, even.

I looked up at Xavier. “Let’s put it in the desk drawer. The top one locks.”

Xavier nodded. “Yeah. That’s probably for the best.”

I walked around to the back of the desk. It wasn’t used much—just for writing the occasional check for the people who did the yard work—and when I opened it, the locking drawer was empty. I tossed the letter inside and turned the key, then pulled it out and put it in my pocket.

Now that the envelope—and its contents—were sealed away, I actually felt a lot better. I ran a hand through my hair and turned to my brother.

“Now, what are we going to do for Cali?”

Xavier looked thoughtful. “I think she’s freaking out about what Vander and Big Mac told her. All that stuff about trauma and the echoes of the Seluna mark.”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “All that talk definitely freaked her out.” I could read my mate well, and I knew she’d been tense ever since Big Mac and Vander had told her that she could still expect to have dreams. Her fear of sleep had been a huge issue for her lately, so I understood where the fear was coming from. “I mean, it worked. We got the ashes back into the demon realm, and it actually worked. She should be happy right now, and relieved. Vander came all the way here to report that nature is balancing again, but Cali’s still just a ball of nerves.”

Xavier nodded gravely. “I know.”

“I think we need to distract her.”

“Okay,” Xavier said, a smirk curling his lip. “I had some ideas about that.”

I gave my brother a cold look. “Yeah? Well, so did I.”

It was like that moment in the hallway all over again, and the air between us was suddenly charged with an angry, competitive tension. We were silent for a moment, glaring at each other, but in the end, I shook my head, annoyed.

“Listen, I know we both want what’s best for Cali, right?”

Because he hated to agree with me on anything, Xavier hesitated for just a moment, but then he nodded. “Yeah, of course.”

“Then I think we need to cut the pissing contest and join forces.”

He narrowed his eyes. “What? You mean like a group date?” he asked, clearly disgusted.

“*What?* No! I mean split our time with her,” I said. “And not make a big deal about it, this time around. Just do what’s best for Cali without making it into a competition. You know, *not* do what we normally do.”

Xavier considered this. “Like taking shifts with her?”

I glowered at him. “I suppose so, though I definitely wouldn’t have phrased it like that, like we’re deciding who’s going to work lunch at a diner. But yeah, essentially taking shifts with her.”

Xavier nodded slowly. “That sounds like a good plan, actually. We both get access to her, without fighting about it. We’ve matured since the last time we tried that. We should be able to do this.”

“Right. Exactly. We absolutely have and should.” I held out my hand for Xavier to shake.

He rolled his eyes, but he put his hand in mine all the same. His grip was a little too hard, but he did the thing, which I appreciated.

“So,” I said. “Who gets Cali first?”

# Episode 3443

My mom had propped me up at the kitchen counter and was now standing in front of me, eyeing me as I gulped down my second glass of freshly squeezed orange juice.

“Are you feeling a bit better now?” she asked, but I recognized her tone. It was the one she used when she’d already decided what my answer was going to be.

I nodded. “I actually am, thanks.”

She looked grimly satisfied. “I thought you might. You just needed some calories in you, Caliana. I don’t know why you’re not taking better care of yourself.”

“I know, I know,” I said, sipping my juice. I looked down into the glass. I knew she was right. I did need to take better care of myself. And I also knew I should’ve been boundlessly happy today. There was no reason not to be. Seluna’s ashes were in the demon realm. Nature’s magic was balancing again. Everyone I knew and loved was safe. This was what I had been wanting and working toward for so long. But despite all that, I just felt… nothing.

“I’m just going to have to keep a closer eye on you,” my mom said. The two slices of toast she’d put in for me popped out of the toaster, and she grabbed them, slathered them with butter, and pushed them across the counter to me. “Eat these. I’m going to go find your father.”

When she left, I couldn’t find the heart, or the energy, to eat the toast. I tried to find my happy zen place, but it was proving elusive. I was a positive person. A happy person. So why was this so hard for me? That question felt dangerous to answer, so when I heard approaching footsteps, I was grateful for the distraction. And I was even more grateful when I looked up to see Greyson and Xavier walking into the kitchen.

The way they walked in, however, reminded me of two kids about to ask their mom for permission to do something they knew they shouldn’t be doing.

My stomach dropped. “Oh no. What did you two do?”

They glanced at each other, clearly confused.

“No, nothing. Nothing’s wrong,” Greyson said. “We actually wanted your opinion on something.”

“Something good,” Xavier added hastily. “We think.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. It was hard to know what to think at this point, but I couldn’t help but feel a little anxious.

“We want to give you a fun, relaxing day with us,” Greyson said.

I looked between them, totally baffled. “Both of you?”  
 Xavier nodded.

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s the catch?”

Greyson answered. “You have to choose the order.”

I let out a surprised laugh, but when I looked back at them, I realized they weren’t smiling, which meant it probably wasn’t a joke. “Oh. You’re not kidding.”

“No,” Greyson said.

“What, like I’m a timeshare mate?” I asked incredulously.

“No.” Greyson looked frustrated, and for some reason he shot an annoyed look at Xavier. “You can’t think of it like that. It’s something we want to do. To make sure you have a good day today.”

“I don’t know,” I said uncertainly. “Do I have to remind you of the very unfortunate *Bachelorette* fiasco? I don’t think any of us want a repeat of that.”

Xavier scowled, like he didn’t appreciate the reminder. “This is different.”

“How?” I asked.

“Because we *want* to do this,” he said.

I looked at them for a long moment, and I realized that both my mates were really trying to do something nice for me. That realization made me feel really happy, and it filled me with more sunshine than all the orange juice in the world.

“Okay,” I said with a smile. “I mean, I can’t pass up two amazing dates.” But then my smile faded to a frown. “But I don’t want to pick the order. That feels too much like choosing between you.”

Greyson’s and Xavier’s eyes both widened as I said that.

“I didn’t think of that,” Greyson said.

Xavier shoved his shoulder. “I told you we should have just picked ourselves.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Oh my god, Xavier, I’m not doing rock-paper-scissors to decide on a date.”

“What about a date?” my mom said, walking back into the kitchen. “Do you boys want some juice?”

“Mom!” I yelled. “Great timing! You can choose!”

My mom frowned, confused. “Choose what? No one wants juice?”

“No juice! You get to choose who I should go on a date with first—Xavier or Greyson.”

My mom looked surprised, but she thought about the proposition for a moment. “Well, what’s the date?”

Both guys looked perplexed by the question.

“You *have* planned your dates, right?” my mom asked pointedly.

Greyson cleared his throat. “I have the outline of a date.”

“Yeah, me too,” Xavier said quickly. “I have ideas.”

“And what are your ideas?” my mom asked, leaning her hip against the counter. She looked like she was enjoying herself.

“I thought we could start with a relaxing beginner’s hike,” said Xavier. “Somewhere quiet and secluded. Just the two of us. Then a winter picnic.”

I smiled at Xavier. “Oh, that sounds nice.”

“It does sound nice.” My mom smiled. “What about you, Greyson?”

“What about a traditional date?” he asked, giving Xavier the side eye. “Getting dressed up and going to a nice restaurant. Having a nice meal, maybe a glass of wine, and just relaxing.”

“Oh, that sounds really nice, too,” I said.

“Okay! So the decision is made,” my mom said, throwing up her hands.

We all looked at her.

“What do you mean? What decision?” I asked, baffled.

“A hike and a picnic are daytime activities,” she explained. “And a fancy restaurant is a nighttime date. It’s obvious. You’ve basically made your own decision.”

I looked at my mates, and they both looked relieved by the easy answer.

“Fine with me,” Xavier said.

“Me, too,” Greyson added.

I grinned at my mom. “You’re a genius. You know that, right?”

She winked at me. “I had an inkling. Well, I guess you should go get ready for your dates. Finish your juice and toast first. Oh, and be sure to make it back well before midnight tonight for Torin’s New Year’s Eve Redo Party.” She leaned toward us and lowered her voice. “He’s very excited about it, and if you’re not back by then, I know he’ll be really upset.”

I nodded. “We won’t be late.” I threw back the last of my juice and grinned at Xavier. “Meet you in the foyer in an hour?”

“Make it an hour and a half. I have to get ready,” Xavier said, grinning back.

“You got it.”

“Hey, Cali, wait a sec.” It was Greyson. “Before I forget, I have something for you.”

“Huh?” Was it something for the date tonight? “What is it?”

He reached into his pocket. “Hold out your hand.”

I did, and he placed a key into my palm.

“This is the key that opens the drawer in the study that has the letter,” he said. “I’m giving this to you so you have it and can do whatever you want with it when you’re comfortable.”

My heart swelled. It was still difficult to think about the letter, but knowing that it was locked away and that I had the option of seeking it out when I was ready? That… That felt like something I could navigate in time. And the fact that Greyson wasn’t pressuring me to figure it out.

“Thank you, Greyson,” I said, feeling a little teary. “That really means a lot.”

He smiled and kissed my cheek. “Of course, love.”

I took the key and headed upstairs, feeling a bit of mixed emotions thinking about the letter, but excited all the same about the date. I hadn’t gone on a normal date in ages. In my room, I started searching through my dresser for something appropriate to wear on a cold weather hike.

“What’s all this?” Lola asked, appearing at my door just as I tossed a sweater onto my bed.

“Oh, I’m going on a date,” I said casually, trying to suppress a smile.

Lola’s eyes widened. “With Xavier or Greyson?”

“Both,” I announced.

Lola gasped. “Group date?”

“No.” I shook my head. “One during the day and one tonight.”

Lola leaned against the doorframe and crossed her arms over her chest. “Get it, girl.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes.

She stepped in and threw herself onto my bed, right on top of the piled-up sweaters. “Did you talk to that weird couple last night? Paige and Duke?”

“Oh my god, *yes*!” I said, whipping around. “And she asked me to carry their wolf baby or something.”

“*What?*” Lola shrieked, popping up into a sitting position. “What did she say?”  
 “Okay, not exactly that she wanted *me* to carry their baby,” I said, halfway buried in my drawer as I looked for a pair of wool socks. “But it was all super confusing. Something about needing a surrogate and assuming that the *due destini* thing means I’m some kind of super-werewolf-baby-vessel or something, and she asked if I knew anyone like me who could help them out. Who the hell even knows?”

Lola shivered. “That sounds so creepy.”

“Trust me,” I said, emerging with the socks, “I felt exactly the same.” I shook my head. “Just don’t tell anyone. They do seem pretty shaken up about it.”

Lola nodded. “I won’t. I promise.”

“Thanks,” I said. But I was still annoyed. “Ugh. I just hate that just being a *due destini* mate means that I’m the target of so many people who want to use my power—scratch that, my literal *curse*—to do something for them. Just let me live my damn life.”

Lola winced. “Yeah, that sounds pretty rough.”

“*Ugh*,” I said, yanking open a drawer in search of waterproof snowboarding pants. “Rough isn’t the half of it.”

Lola dropped back onto the bed. “I’ll bet you can’t wait until the day the *due destini* thing is behind you, once and for all.”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “Sure.” My thoughts went to the envelope. Could it be over already?

Lola sat up again and gave me a piercing look. “Wait. Does that mean you know who you’re going to choose?”

# Episode 3444

**Xavier**

I stood in the foyer, peering up the stairs, anxious for Cali to join me.

“Xavier!”

I looked over as Torin jogged toward me, holding a padded cooler bag.

“For the picnic,” he said with a grin.

“Thanks, man,” I said, taking the cooler. “That was really nice of you. I appreciate it.”

“Have fun,” he said.

Curious, I was just about to open the cooler to see if he’d packed the pineapple I’d asked for when Cali appeared at the top of the stairs. She looked beautiful, and I smiled at her as she descended.

She laughed. “Why are you looking at me like I’m dressed for prom, Xavier?”

I laughed, too. It was true. She was wearing thick snow pants, boots, and a parka, and her hair was tied up in a ponytail. It wasn’t exactly a glamorous outfit, but she did look gorgeous.

I reached out for her hand. “Because you look beautiful.”

She rolled her eyes. “These pants are three years old. And I’m a rectangle.”

“Beautiful,” I repeated.

She smiled, and her cheeks flushed with happiness. That was just what I’d wanted to see today.

“So,” she said, “where are we off to today?”

I slipped my hand around hers. “I mapped out a really easy trail. I want this to be relaxing. And we’ll end up at this little lake I used to go to as a kid. It’s really pretty this time of year.”

Cali grinned. “That sounds great. I can’t wait to see it.”

We headed out the door and into the trees.

“It’s nice that the snow has melted,” Cali commented as we walked. “Should make for an easier hike.”

I nodded. I knew these woods like the back of my hand, so I’d only half-checked the trail before we’d headed out. I knew it was going to be pretty easy to navigate. Cali was tired and worn out from the exertions of the past few days—hell, the past few *weeks*—and I didn’t want anything that was going to be too exhausting for her. This was supposed to be relaxing.

I laced my fingers through Cali’s as we walked along the trail and drew in a lungful of cold, damp air. “I used to love exploring these woods when I was a kid.”

“Did you?” Cali asked, looking over at me. Her eyes sparkled. I didn’t often talk about my childhood, but I knew she loved to hear stories.

I nodded. “Colton and I would come out together. We’d pretend to be explorers, discovering new land.”

She smiled. “How is Colton doing?”

The question made me realize that I hadn’t called my brother yet today. “We should call him later to wish him a Happy New Year.”

“That would be fun. I’d like to say hi. And I’d love to talk to Maya, see how she’s doing.”

I shook my head. “It’s still so weird to think of my brother as a dad.”

“I know,” Cali said. “But I think it’s always like that at first. I think being a dad is the kind of thing you have to grow into.”

I thought about that for a moment, and about the idea of Colton with a baby of his own. It was such a hard thing for me to picture. Colton and I were twins, and we’d grown up side by side and been together our entire lives. We turned a year older together, hit major milestones together, and this felt like the first huge thing one of us was doing before the other. I’d never really thought about who between us would become a parent first because it had seemed so far off for both of us—until now. Now there would be a tiny Colton running around, relying on my brother—and Maya—for everything. As odd as the thought was, it brought a smile to my face.

And then the image shifted, and it was *me* with a baby. *My* baby. Cali’s and my baby.

This gave me a jolt of shock. It just wasn’t a dream I would’ve even imagined having a year ago, but now it was all I wanted. I wanted to be with Cali and settle down. Start a family. I wanted to live my life with her, free of threats and curses and worries about *due destini*.

I looked over at Cali, who walked along, her hand in mine, looking for all the world like the most content woman on the planet. In my heart of hearts, I felt certain that when the time came, once the answer to the *due destini* curse was revealed, Cali was going to pick me.

It only made sense. We’d been mates first. We’d made our connection first. I knew our mate bond was strong—and I had my old mate bond with Ava to compare it to. I knew the bond I had with Cali was stronger. More true. I knew she was going to pick me.

But I also knew that Cali had a tender heart. She would hate to hurt Greyson. When the time came, I knew I was going to have to be understanding and make sure I was supportive of her decision. It wouldn’t be a time to gloat, but rather to make sure I was doing whatever I had to do to help her let Greyson down gently.

Besides, it wasn’t like my brother was going to be alone forever. The guy was good-looking enough. The rejection would sting, but he’d find someone else.

“What are you thinking about?”

Blinking in surprise, I looked over at Cali. “What?”

“I just wondered what you were thinking about that’s making you frown like that. You look so serious. What is it?” she asked.

I could hear the beginnings of anxiety in her voice, and I felt frustrated at myself for letting the mood drop while I disappeared into my own head.

I forced a smile. “I’m just hoping that the lunch will still be fresh by the time we get to our picnic spot.”

The worry cleared from Cali’s face in an instant, and she smiled. “I’m sure it will be amazing.”

The path I’d chosen was level, though there was more snow beneath the cover of the trees. I was glad Cali had worn her boots. She was just starting to look a little tired when the trees started to thin and I smelled the damp, mossy scent of water.

I squeezed Cali’s hand. “Almost there.”

She smiled up at me and picked up the pace. “I can’t wait to see the lake.”

When we reached the point where the trees opened up completely, Cali stopped in her tracks.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

I stopped next to her, and when I looked around, I had to agree. The clouds had cleared as we walked, and now the sky was clear and bright blue. The lake sparkled in the crisp winter sunshine, reflecting the evergreen trees like a mirror. I smiled. This was just what I’d wanted when I’d planned this. A perfect setting for our date.

Then Cali’s smile changed to a frown. “Oh no!”

“What?” I asked, looking around, my senses on high alert.

Cali pointed down to the ground. “There’s snow everywhere, Xavier. It’s half-melted and all slushy and muddy. Where are we going to sit?”

“Oh.” I smiled in relief. “Don’t worry. I thought of that.”

Cali looked confused. “What?”

I pulled off my backpack and pulled out a small lantern. Cali’s frown deepened.

“It’s not dark, Xavier. What good is a lantern?”

I grinned. “Oh, it’s not just any lantern. Watch.” I clicked the lantern on in the way that Kira had shown me, back at the pack house. I set it down on a patch of soggy, slushy snow and stepped back, pulling Cali along with me.

“What’s going on—” she started, but she stopped speaking with a gasp when the lantern started doing its thing.

The lantern sent out a wave of heat that melted all the snow around it in a perfect circle. After a moment, I stepped forward and touched the bare ground.

“Come feel it,” I said, grinning at Cali over my shoulder.

She stepped forward and crouched down, putting her hand to the ground. “Oh my god. It’s completely dry. And warm? But how?”

“Magic,” I said simply.

She laughed. “What?”

I shrugged. “I had an idea and asked Kira to rig it up for us.”

Cali laughed again as I pulled a checkered blanket out of my backpack and spread it out over the now-dry ground. I sat down and reached a hand up for Cali. She settled next to me, snuggling close and leaning her head on my shoulder.

She hummed softly as she melted into me. “This is perfect,” she said, her voice quiet and dreamy.

I gave her a squeeze and sat up. “It’s about to get even more perfect.”

I reached for the cooler bag and pulled it over.

Cali had sat up as well and clapped her hands. “Oh great. I’m starving!”

I opened the bag, but when I looked inside, I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Xavier?” Cali asked. “What is it?”

I stared into the bag. “What the hell is this?”

# Episode 3445

I looked into the bag. It was empty, except for a bottle of wine. I was confused, but even more confused by Xavier’s confusion.

“Why are you confused?” I asked, looking up at him. “Didn’t you bring this?”

Xavier shook his head. “This isn’t what I asked Torin to pack! What is this? This isn’t *lunch*!”

“Maybe he got confused?” I guessed.

Xavier dug into the cooler, apparently looking for sandwiches, chips—anything hidden inside that might make up a picnic. But there was nothing. All he found was a folded note.

“Dammit,” he swore, reading it. “This is supposed to be for Greyson.”

I took the note and read: *Greyson, don’t forget to aerate the wine first!*

“How did they get switched?” I wondered.

“We must have both asked Torin to pack our date bags for us, and he must have accidentally switched them,” Xavier said, sounding a little sheepish at the admission.

He looked so upset and confused that I had to laugh.

“It’s really fine,” I said. “It’s not a picnic, but I’m sure we can make do with this.”

But my stomach apparently disagreed, because it took that opportunity to growl menacingly. I put my hand over my belly, even as I felt my face flush.

Xavier shook his head. “Nope. No way. I’m not going to let this ruin our date.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

Xavier got to his feet. “I’m going to shift and run back to the house real quick and grab our food.”

“That’s really not necessary. I just want to be here with you—” I started, but stopped speaking when I heard a familiar popping sound.

It was the unmistakable sound of someone blipping, and I looked around for the source. Kira appeared a few feet away, and much to my surprise, she was holding an identical cooler bag.

She smiled at us. “Special delivery for Xavier Evers.”

Xavier looked shocked. “Oh my god, Kira! You’re a lifesaver!”

“No worries,” she said with a grin. “Torin made the food. I just transported it. I had the easy job.”

“He found out about the mix-up?” Xavier asked.

She nodded. “He was freaking out, as you can imagine—just running around trying to figure out if he could learn to cross-country ski really quickly to get this out to you—so I offered to blip it over.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling up at her. I appreciated Kira, but I felt a bit awkward, too. After all, Kira had admitted to having a crush on Xavier not too long ago. She’d even kissed him, though she hadn’t known what she was doing at the time. And now she was helping him pull off a romantic date for me? It just felt a bit… strange.

As if she could tell what I was thinking, Kira shot me a warm, reassuring smile. “Hey, that’s what friends are for. Have fun!”

And a second later, she was gone.

When Xavier turned back to me, the relief was apparent on his face. “Okay.” He sighed. “Now that’s fixed, and you’re not going to starve.”

I laughed. “I don’t think I was in any immediate danger.”

Xavier opened the cooler and started to unpack the lunch Torin had made for us. There were ham sandwiches with brie and green apples on crunchy baguettes, glass containers filled with strawberries, blueberries, and pineapple—my favorite. There was also a glass container filled with sliced carrots and peppers, and another filled with hummus, a bag of pita chips, and a thermos filled with hot coffee.

Everything tasted especially good after the hike, and I closed my eyes with satisfaction as I bit into the sandwich.

“Thank goodness for Torin,” Xavier said, loading up a slice of pepper with spicy hummus.

“Thank goodness for Kira,” I added, wrapping my hands around the thermos top filled with coffee.

Once we’d eaten our fill and packed away the leftovers, I snuggled up against Xavier again. I looked up at the bright blue bowl of a sky above us and took a deep, cleansing breath.

“This is *exactly* what I needed,” I murmured.

He bent and kissed the top of my head. “I’m glad.”

Looking out at the lake, I grinned to myself. “I wish this could be how we spent every day.”

“If that’s what you want, then I could make that happen,” Xavier promised.

That made me laugh. “Sure. Is there a magic time-stopper that can freeze the world and everyone in it? So there’s no one around who tries to hurt or threaten us ever again?”

Xavier was sitting cross-legged behind me, and I was leaning against him, so I felt it when he stiffened.

I twisted around to look at him. “Crap, Xavier, I’m sorry. That was… I was trying to make a joke.”

He nodded stiffly. “I know. I just hate that something I did in the past caused you to be targeted. Caused you to be hurt. That just eats me up inside.”

I turned to face him, cupping his face in my hands. “You listen to me, Xavier Evers. It was *not* your fault.”

He nodded at my words, but it was pretty clear he wasn’t convinced by them.

“I mean it,” I said, leaning closer. “You cannot take the blame for the actions of bad actors. You were a victim, too. And I hate that you were hurt.”

Xavier’s smile was sad. “Yeah. Anyway, I’m glad it’s over now.”

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “I’m glad, too.”

The space between us was already small, so I closed the gap and pressed my lips to his.

Xavier tensed for just a moment, but then he slipped his hand around the back of my neck to cradle my head and deepened the kiss. He slid his tongue along mine, tangling them together, and it felt like I was falling through the blanket, through the ground beneath, down, down, down. I felt weightless as he slid his other arm around my waist, pulling my body closer to his.

It was strange, to be here with him like this. We weren’t very far from the pack house and all our problems, but somehow this place felt so remote. We were alone, and I didn’t have a care in the world. Well, except for the handprint scar and the dreams that would come with it and the *due destini* question that seemed to loom over everything—but I did my best to push all that way and just enjoy the moment with my mate.

We were oddly positioned, and as I shifted to get a better angle for kissing, I lost my balance and went toppling down. Panicking, I reached out and dragged Xavier down with me onto the blanket.

He looked surprised for a moment, but then he laughed and, with a playful growl, rolled on top of me. “Now you’re in for it.”

That made me laugh harder, and I threw my head back. He took that as an opportunity to kiss my neck, which stilled the laugh in my throat as my whole body flooded with heat.

“*Oh god*,” I breathed, closing my eyes as he slid his kisses down to the base of my throat.

“Cali,” he murmured. “I’ve been wanting you for so long…”

“I know what you mean,” I whispered back. It had been a long time since we’d had a chance to be together, what with one threat or another. The heat between us now was powerful. But at the same time, I wasn’t in a hurry. I was happy just to be in his arms, and to take my time.

I slipped my hands under his shirt and pressed my palms against his chest. I could feel his heartbeat, and he shivered at my touch.

“Are my hands cold?” I asked with a laugh.

He shook his head. “I just love your touch.”

He unzipped my parka and threw it off to the side, then pulled off my sweater, so all I had on was my long-sleeved shirt. He drew his hands down my shoulders, down the length of my arms, and up again, until he cupped my breasts through my shirt. I could feel heat pooling between my legs, and I arched toward him, wanting more contact.

I grabbed the hem of my shirt to pull it off, but Xavier put his hand over mine.

“Cali,” he said with a laugh. “You’re going to freeze.”

But I didn’t care. I sat up and pulled my shirt off, flinging it boldly to the side. Xavier looked at me for a long moment, his eyes ranging over my bare skin.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

I reached for his shirt, and he didn’t object when I pulled it off. He sat up and kissed me, hard, pulling me close, his skin fiery hot. He pushed me down to the blanket again, and he had just reached for the button of my pants when I pulled back with a gasp.

“Wait! We should stop!”

# Episode 3446

**Artemis**

Predictably, the pack had pretty much scattered after New Year’s brunch, so Rishika and I had stuck around to help clean up. We’d already cleared the table and put away what little food had remained. Now Rishika was washing everything that we hadn’t been able to fit into the dishwasher and handing it to me to dry and put away.

She handed me a saucepan, then bumped her shoulder against mine with a sly smile. I took the pan, grinned, and bumped her back.

Rishika pulled the sprayer attachment away from the faucet and used it to clean some food out of the sink, then suddenly she turned it on me, spraying the warm water at my face.

My reflexes were too fast for her, though, and I used the saucepan as a shield. “Hey!”

Rishika laughed. “Sorry, sorry. I won’t do it again.”

I lowered the pan experimentally, but Rishika was waiting for me and sprayed me again, this time getting me right in the face.

I sputtered and wiped my eyes, spitting water out of my mouth. “I cannot *believe* you just did that!”

“I’m sorry!” Rishika said. “I really am! I kind of can’t believe I did it either. It was an honest mistake!”

I narrowed my eyes. “Yeah, I’ll bet. I’ll show you a mistake!”

I lunged and grabbed for the sprayer, wrestling it out of her hands and aiming it at her. Rishika giggled and ducked, but she was too slow, and I got her, soaking the front of her shirt. She lunged toward me, wrapping her arms around my waist to stop me. Caught off-guard, I dropped the sprayer in the sink as Rishika pushed me against the kitchen counter, her arms on either side of me, caging me in place. Both of us were wet, out of breath, and laughing. Our faces were only inches apart.

Rishika shook her wet hair out of her eyes. “You look pretty hot when you’re wet.”

I felt my face heat up as I grinned back. “You’re pretty sexy yourself.”

I slid my hand around the back of her neck and pulled her close, pressing my lips hard to hers.

But we both froze when we heard the sound of someone clearing their throat.

Awkwardly.

We looked over to see Adair standing in the doorway.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” he said, clearly interrupting.

I let go of Rishika, feeling like I was about to crawl out of my skin. I just felt so strange and so… *caught*. Like I was doing something I wasn’t meant to be doing. I reached over to shut off the water so I’d have something to do, but that only made the room more quiet.

Rishika didn’t seem bothered, though. She leaned back and looked over at Adair. “No worries. What can we do for you, Adair?”

Adair shot a glance at me. “I thought we could start working on your magic issues.”

I blinked in shock. “What? Now?”

He raised an eyebrow. “If you don’t want to—”

“No, no, I do!” I said quickly. “Yes! Let’s do it!” I slid out from between Rishika’s arms and looked down at my wet sweatshirt. “Just let me get changed.”

Adair hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll meet you outside in ten minutes.”

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Nine minutes later, I was dressed in a dry sweater and heading outside into the cold, damp air of the January morning. As I stepped out the front door, I was surprised to find my mom standing with Adair on the frosty lawn, speaking quietly with him.

“Mom?” I said, walking down the steps. “What are you doing here?”

She looked up. “Hi, honey. I’m here for your magic lesson. I thought I could help out.”

I frowned at that. “I appreciate that, but I don’t know if that’s safe. You know how uncontrollable my magic has been lately.”

“She knows your magic better than I do,” Adair pointed out. “I asked if she could be here to assist me if needed.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Rishika, who had come out with me. Rishika caught my glance and shrugged, as if to say, *It’s your call*.

I looked back at Adair and nodded. “Okay, that’s fine. What’s first?”

“First, I want to see what I can sense of your magic,” Adair said.

He held out his hands, but I hesitated. I glanced at my mom, wondering what I was supposed to do.

She smiled encouragingly. “It’s okay, sweetie. Go ahead.”

I nodded and took a deep breath, then placed my hands over Adair’s. His hands felt dry and warm, despite the freezing temperature.

“Now,” he said, “focus on your magic. Pay attention to it. Center it within yourself. Are you doing that?”

I nodded. I was trying to do it, anyway.

“Good. Now try to draw it forward. Bring it to the forefront of your mind and your body.”

He closed his eyes, so I did the same. I used my mind’s eye to search for my magic, but it was like a game of hide and seek. I knew the magic was there, somewhere inside me. I knew it was. I could feel it—I just couldn’t always find it. And sometimes, even when I did find it, just as I was about to reach out and access it, it darted away.

But I could feel eyes watching me, and I knew Adair was waiting, so I looked for it, straining hard, and then—finally—I felt a tug. My magic was *there*, and I reached out with my mind and grabbed hold of it. I pulled, trying to bring it forward, but it was resisting me.

Adair hummed low in his throat. I could feel his hands, warm against mine. And then it was like another set of hands appeared within me, reaching out and helping me to pull my magic to the forefront. The magic was suddenly *there*—not just at the edges, as it had been for so long, but flooding through me.

My hands suddenly grew so hot they began to burn, and I opened my eyes with a gasp, yanking them away from Adair’s grip. There was a spike of energy in them that had to be released *immediately*, so I turned, thrusting my hands out and sending the magic shooting toward a nearby pine. The tree trunk exploded into a million tiny splinters of wood.

“*See!*” I said, looking angrily down at my hands. “That’s what I’m talking about. I just can’t control it.”

“It’s okay,” my mom said soothingly, stepping toward me. “You just need to breathe, Artemis.”

As though I was unclear on the concept, she demonstrated the method for me, drawing air in through her nose and letting it out through her mouth.

“In and out. And let it take all the bad stuff out with it. Releasing that tension in your muscles lets you handle the magic better,” she went on, smoothing her hands down my tense shoulders.

“Just like Kadmos used to say,” Adair said.

Both my mom and I turned to him in shock.

“Yes,” my mom said, her voice slightly choked, “that is what he used to tell me when we practiced together.”

Adair gave her a curious look. “He always said you were a quick learner.” His voice sounded strange, too. Like there was something caught in his throat.

My mom reached for him. “Oh, Adair, I didn’t mean to bring up these memories for you—”

But Adair held up his hand to stop her and shook his head. “No, I just need a moment.”

And without another word, he turned and strode back to the house without looking back.

I watched him go, feeling hopelessness sink into me again. “I never should have asked him to help me with my magic. This is just hurting him, making him remember Kadmos.”

“That isn’t your fault,” my mom said quickly.

“Isn’t it?” I asked, looking over at her. “I really don’t think Adair would be so frequently reminded of his dead brother if it wasn’t for me, constantly reminding him of his dead brother.”

I rubbed my hand across my head. I could feel a headache building, and I hated it. I hated the feeling of guilt that was washing over me. It was new, and very, very uncomfortable. I’d lived my whole life without caring about anyone else’s feelings. I mean, yeah, I’d been lonely as hell, but right now all I could think about was how much easier it had been. Part of me wished I could go back to that.

My mom reached for me and pulled me into a hug. “Oh, honey.”

“Um, what’s that smell?” Rishika asked.

As soon as she said the words, I smelled it too. It was smoke, thick and acrid and heavy in the air. I turned toward the house—just as the fire alarm went off, and clouds of black smoke started pouring out of the living room windows.

# Episode 3447

Xavier looked understandably confused as he sat up. “Wait, what? What’s going on, Cali? Are you okay? Is it the scar?”

“No, no,” I said quickly. I pushed a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “Xavier, you and Greyson are being so sweet, making this day for me. But my head is all over the place. I can’t stop thinking about the *due destini*. It’s always there, in the back of my mind, and this?” I gestured between us, then to the blanket where we’d just been making out. “It just feels like…”

“Like making a choice.” Xavier finished my sentence for me. He ran a hand through his hair with a gusty sigh.

“I know that might seem silly,” I went on. “I mean, it’s not like we haven’t been together. It’s not like I haven’t been with both of you—”

I stopped speaking, my face hot as lava when Xavier looked at me.

I swallowed hard. “Today just feels different. Wrong, somehow. I think especially with that envelope just hanging over our heads.”

Xavier gave me a long look, then he nodded. “That’s okay.”

“Really?” I asked in a small voice.

“Yeah, really. Whatever you need, Cali. Today is your day.”

I felt tears pooling in the corners of my eyes. “Thank you,” I said, and I leaned over to kiss his cheek.

“Now please put your shirt back on,” he said, handing it to me. “You’re driving me crazy, and I’m certain you’re going to get hypothermia.”

I *had* started to shiver, so I gratefully accepted my shirt, then my sweater and my parka. Xavier got his clothes back on as well, and then he dug out a small box of chocolate truffles that Torin had packed in the bottom of the cooler.

He offered them to me, and I took one, then got to my feet.

“Why don’t we take a walk around the lake? Work off these calories,” I said, popping the truffle into my mouth.

Xavier looked down and put his hand on his washboard stomach, complete with perfectly defined six-pack—the kind Ravi had resolved to get this year. “I think I’m okay,” he said with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes. “Come on. It’s *my* day, remember? And *I* want to walk around the lake with my mate.”

Xavier stood with a smile and took my hand. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”

We started around the curve of the lake, and I tipped my face up toward the sun. I loved the feeling of the warmth in the cold, winter air. I breathed in deeply.

“It’s nice out here, isn’t it?” Xavier said quietly.

I nodded. “It’s incredible. So calming. Do you think that things are so peaceful because we’re out here, away from the pack house and reality?”

Xavier frowned slightly. “What do you mean?”

I looked down as we stepped into a shadow cast by a tall pine. “Just that it feels so nice to be out here together—calm and relaxing. But don’t you worry that as soon as we’re back at the house, all the bad things we’re dealing with will hit us again?”

Xavier stopped and stepped in front of me, putting his hands firmly on my shoulders and looking into my eyes. “Cali, listen to me. Everything is going to be fine now. Even when we’re back at the pack house. The ashes are gone. Your connection to the demon has been severed. We never need to speak her name again. You’re healing. There’s no more demon curse. We’re all home, and we’re all safe.”

I nodded. “What about the council meeting?” I asked. “The one that’s coming up?”

Xavier huffed. “Do you get paid to worry like this, Cali? You don’t even need to think about that, okay? You can relax. I promise. The council stuff is just normal werewolf business. It’s just a bunch of drama queen Alphas preening around, pissing each other off. Business as usual. We can go back to our normal lives now. I promise.”

I nodded. I really wanted to believe him.

“You joked that you wanted every day to be like this, and maybe that’s not completely possible,” Xavier added, “but we can definitely have *more* days like this.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean that you have a chance now to think about what you want, Cali. In the near and distant future,” Xavier said, his eyes blazing.

I blinked, shocked by his words. I hadn’t thought of that. It had been a long time since I’d really thought about what I wanted, beyond surviving into the next day. For months, it had been just one thing after another. But Xavier was right. And now that I’d stopped to think about what I really—*really*—wanted out of life, I was drawing a blank.

But that couldn’t be right. There had to be something that I’d been thinking about—something I’d pushed to the back burner. But what?

Xavier smiled at me, taking my hands in his. “Come on, Cali. Don’t overthink this.”

“I’m not!” I protested.

That made him grin. “Just tell me the first thing that pops into your head. Cali, what do you want to do?

“To go back to school!”

Xavier looked surprised, but it was nothing compared to how I felt, finally hearing the words coming out of my mouth.

“Okay,” he said. He thought about it for a moment, then nodded, let go of one of my hands, and started walking again.

I looked up at him. “Okay?” I repeated.

I felt weirdly anxious now that I’d confessed my very hidden secret. I’d never really stopped to think about taking a break from school, but I had to admit that when Lola’s dads had shown up and started pressuring her to continue online classes, I’d felt kind of jealous of the opportunity. And I’d wished there was someone in my life who was pushing me to get back to school like Lola’s dads were pushing her.

Not that my parents weren’t completely supportive. I just knew that they’d gotten used to skirting the topic of school, what with all the magic issues I’d had to deal with over the past few months. They were supernaturals, themselves, after all. They knew there were certain lifestyle and priority differences that came along with living in *this* world—something Lola’s dads had no idea even existed.

But the idea of going back to college—going to classes, working on papers, researching late into the night—made me feel almost normal again. And the happiness that accompanied that feeling made me realize normalcy was something I’d been desperately craving. I loved my life with the werewolf pack and my mates, but it would be nice to have one regular, boring, completely normal, *human* thing to hold onto.

“Why don’t you talk to Lola about how she’s doing her classes?” Xavier suggested. “You can kind of ease back into it. See how it goes.”

I peered up at him. “Do you really think that’s a good idea?”  
 “What do you mean?” he asked.

I shrugged. “With everything happening around us, I just wonder if it’s even possible.”

Xavier’s expression hardened. “You shouldn’t have to put your needs—and your education—on hold because you’re afraid that something bad *might* be around the corner.” A muscle in his jaw twitched as he shook his head. “I don’t want that life for you, Cali.”

I hated to see him so upset, so I gave his hand a squeeze. “Okay. Maybe I will talk to Lola. See how she’s doing it.”

Xavier looked appeased by that, and we kept walking. We were quiet, but the silence between us felt peaceful now, comfortable and familiar. My shoulders relaxed as we walked.

When we finally made it around the lake, I peered toward the spot where I knew we’d picnicked, figuring we should probably start packing up.

“That’s weird,” I said, looking into the distance.

“What’s up?” Xavier asked.

“I can’t see the picnic stuff anymore.” I frowned. “What’s going on? Did someone take it? What kind of neighborhood is this?”

I was laughing, but Xavier’s face froze.

“Shit!” he swore and sprinted toward the picnic spot.

I ran after him. “Xavier? What’s going on?”

“Shit, shit, shit,” he muttered, digging into a patch of dirty snow. He finally unearthed the top of the lantern and looked at me, his eyes wide. “The spell ran out!”

I shrugged, still not seeing what the tragedy was. “Okay, well, that sucks, but we can just carry the soggy stuff back to the house—”

“No, Cali, that’s not it!” Xavier said.

“What’s not it?”

“Kira said not to get the lantern wet!”

I’d just opened my mouth to ask why when a magical spark spun up from the base of the lantern. It swirled frenetically for a moment, then burst from the cage and shot toward me, hitting me squarely in the stomach.

# Episode 3448

The magic hit me square in the stomach, and I stumbled backward—and fell right on my ass.

“Cali!”

Xavier rushed up to me, his eyes wide. He ran his hands over my body, searching for any signs of damage. “Are you okay? Jesus Christ—that thing hit you so hard. I couldn’t stop it. I’m so sorry!”

His words took a beat to echo through my mind before I slowly sat up. Wiping a dusting of snow from my mouth, I took a moment to assess. My butt kind of ached from taking the brunt of my fall, but other than that, I felt okay. Which was pretty amazing, considering I’d just been floored by a burst of rogue magic. Things could have been a lot worse.

“When we get back, I’m going to give Kira an earful.” Xavier growled. “She should have warned me that the magic could lash out like that. She could have prepared us. At least then you wouldn’t have ended up hurt.”

“But I’m not hurt.” I smiled up at him. “I really am fine. It’s not a big deal—and didn’t you say that Kira warned you not to get the lantern wet? It’s kind of our fault, when you think about it.”

His nostrils flared, and I could tell that hardheaded, protective side of him didn’t agree. It probably wasn’t even fully listening. That part of Xavier was likely still reeling from seeing me get my ass handed to me by that lantern. My mate cared about me so much that sometimes it was hard for him to realize there was nothing to protect me from. That sometimes stuff just happened that wasn’t his responsibility.

“Still, I didn’t like seeing you get smacked like that.”

“It’s not a big deal, Xavier. I’m fine. I promise.”

At times like this, there was really only one way to break him out of his funk. I climbed to my knees, scooped up a handful of snow, and threw it at his chest.

Except my aim wasn’t so good, and instead of hitting his chest, it hit him in the face.

He stumbled back, his eyes widening in shock, and spat out the snow. “I… I can’t believe you just did that.”

“I’m so sorry! It was an accident. I just—” I couldn’t contain myself anymore. I snorted, then doubled over laughing.

His brows rose. “Something funny to you?”

I laughed even harder at that, borderline cackling. “Y-Your eyebrows! They’re coated in snow.”

He reached up to wipe his forehead, and I raised my hands to stop him.

“Wait! Don’t wipe it off! You…” I dissolved into laughter again and had to try to contain myself. “You look hilarious. Maybe I should call you Frosty?”

His eyes narrowed, and, faster than I could track, he grabbed some snow and threw it at me. It exploded on impact and absolutely covered me in a clumpy layer of powder.

I spat out the snow, which was icy cold against my face, but not altogether unpleasant, and wiped the crystals from my eyes. “You did *not* just do that.”

He grinned, not the least bit repentant, and gathered up another handful. “And I’m going to do it again.”

And then another puff of snow exploded around me, this time hitting my chest.

“That’s it!” I wiped it away with a growl and crouched down to scoop up some snow.

Within seconds, we were locked in a snowball fight, laughing and rolling around in the snow. Our clothes were getting soaked in icy water, but I didn’t mind. This was too much fun to stop, and besides, we were moving so fast I didn’t even feel cold.

Almost instantly, it struck me just how much I’d missed this. The chance for us to act like a normal couple, to just have fun without the stress of fighting demons or witches or whatever else the universe decided to throw at us. I couldn’t even remember the last time Xavier and I had had a chance to do something like this.

And even more than that, I couldn’t remember the last time *I’d* done anything like this. Set aside all my concerns and fears to just have some mindless, impulsive fun. I hadn’t always been a stranger to this kind of fun, but lately all I’d been able to focus on was the next threat, the next fire to be put out. I’d forgotten how to just exist without anxiety. To enjoy the moment without worrying when the other shoe was going to drop. This feeling was almost intoxicating, and now that I’d finally gotten it back, I didn’t ever want to let it go.

I dropped down to scoop up a handful of snow, and when I straightened, I saw Xavier was doing the same. It was a face-off, which didn’t bode well for me.

I was scrappy and having the time of my life, but Xavier was a werewolf. No matter what, he was going to be faster than me. The moment I began to throw the snowball, he would nail me before my arm moved so much as an inch.

Strength and speed weren’t on my side, so I’d have to rely on my smarts to outplay him. Fortunately, I had plenty of those.

I lowered my arm, the snowball still locked tight in my grip. “I don’t want to fight.” I dared to move closer to him.

“Cali, whatever you’re planning, stop right now,” Xavier warned.

My mate knew me too well.

“I’m not planning anything.” I kept moving toward him.

“Stop.”

I ignored him and didn’t stop until I was standing right in front of him, mere centimeters separating us. I tilted my head up to kiss him—and waited.

When Xavier’s eyes slipped shut, I took my shot. I reached for him—slowly, so he wouldn’t think anything was amiss—and dropped the snowball down inside his shirt.

He jolted at the icy sensation and let out a yelp, his eyes snapping open. He looked at me, his eyes flashing with a mix of surprise and betrayal, and then he looked down at his shirt.

I smiled as he stared at me. I wasn’t even a little bit sorry. There was something intoxicating about the wonder in his gaze, the fact that I’d bested him and he didn’t even look mad about it, just astounded. God, I loved his eyes. I dreamed about those eyes.

I leaned in, suddenly overcome by the desire for a kiss. A real one this time. I was out of ammunition, anyway.

Xavier seemed to welcome my touch, pulling me in close. I leaned up to kiss him, my lips barely brushing over his, when I felt something cold and wet slide down my back. I screamed in shock and horror at the chill that slipped down my spine, but I couldn’t pull away. His arms locked around me, tight as a vise, refusing to let go.

His full lips curved up into a smirk. “Two can play at that game.”

Locked in his embrace, all I could do was shudder as the snow continued to slip down my back. Why the heck wasn’t it melted already?

“I c-c-can’t believe you did that,” I gasped, shivering.

Suddenly, his smile disappeared, and he jumped back. The snow I’d slipped into his shirt had left a wet trail that led down to his waist.

“Cold, cold, cold!” he shouted. He pulled off his shirt, revealing his snow- and sweat-slicked torso as he frantically tried to dig the remaining snow clumps from his pants. Knowing how hot his body ran, I was surprised the snow had lasted this long.

My gaze was riveted to his glistening abs. I didn’t know whether to laugh or bite my lip and enjoy the show.

“Do you want some help?” I reached for his pants, and the remaining snow on my back—which had to be considerably more than what I’d put down the front of his shirt, by the way—shifted and pulled a yelp from my throat.

I stumbled back, trying to shake the snow out from under my shirt.

We made quite a pair, both of us frantically jumping around. We glanced at each other and froze—then burst out laughing.

Xavier closed the distance between us. “I know a better way to melt the snow.”

He pulled me against his wet chest, and his lips crashed into mine. His kiss was hungry, but I was prepared for it because I was hungry too. The innocent snowball fight had turned to something simmering between us, but I felt just as free now as I had earlier. Only now, instead of trying to figure out how to beat Xavier in a game, all I wanted to do was lose myself in his touch and savor every kiss, every drag of his fingers across my skin.

We weren’t playing a game anymore, but that was okay. Because as his tongue swept into my mouth, tasting me, plundering me, I knew that no matter what, we were both going to win.

# Episode 3449

**Greyson**

In an attempt to not think about Xavier and Cali being out on a date—though I’d been the one to suggest this idea, I was definitely beginning to regret it—I searched my mother out for a friendly chat. We hadn’t had much time to talk since I’d gone out to New Orleans, but now that things seemed to finally be settling down, I hoped that could change. Funny, considering it wasn’t all that long ago that I’d resented the mere idea of having a mother.

I found my mom in one of the studies, curled up with a book and a cup of tea. She smiled when she saw me walk in.

“I’ve been looking for you.” I plopped down on the opposite end of the couch.

“What for?” she asked.

“When you and Big Mac got engaged, you said your wedding would be next year.”

She raised a brow. “And?”

“It’s next year. Are you going to set a date anytime soon?”

“MacKenzie and I have talked about it. We’re leaning toward a spring wedding. You’ll be the first to know when we’ve set an official date.”

I nodded. “I appreciate that. Now that I’ve gotten used to the idea, I’m looking forward to it.”

Her expression softened. “It means the world to me to have such a supportive son. Big Mac appreciates it too.”

A smile tugged at my lips. I honestly could never tell how Big Mac felt about anything. She was almost impossible to read, and even when she was speaking plainly with me, I never knew whether or not I could take her at her word. But she loved my mother, and—more importantly—she treated her well. I couldn’t ask for more than that.

“I’m glad you and Big Mac found each other,” I said simply. “You both deserve all the happiness in the world.”

Plus, the pack was gonna love the shit out of throwing a wedding. It was one more thing that could bring us closer together—something that didn’t involve demons, ghosts, feuding packs, or any of the other wild bullshit we’d been dealing with pretty much nonstop for the past several months.

To say we were due for a break would’ve been a huge understatement.

“I’m curious,” I continued, “is the wedding going to be big, or are you planning something more intimate?”

My mother considered this. “Probably something in between. MacKenzie is planning on inviting a few friends.”

I snorted. “That can’t add up to many.”

“Oh, you.” She gently smacked my thigh with her paperback. “You’d be surprised. MacKenzie has more friends than she lets on. She’s well respected in the witch community, and she’s also considering inviting her sister. I’m trying to encourage her. Nothing brings family together quite like a wedding.”

“Wait, Big Mac has a sister?” I asked.

My mom shrugged. “MacKenzie never talks about her. They’ve been estranged for years, and the only reason *I* even know about her is because MacKenzie inadvertently let it slip years ago when we were younger. Their relationship hasn’t improved in the years since, but I’m hopeful that can change.”

I blinked, still processing this information. For some reason, I struggled to imagine Big Mac having a sister, or any family at all. I knew her mother was a witch too, but it had always been easier to picture Big Mac springing into the world as a snarky adult. But she did have living relatives. People she’d grown up with.

*This is going to take some getting used to…*

The scent of smoke hit my nose a millisecond before I heard someone shout, “PUT IT OUT! PUT IT OUT!”

“Duty calls,” I groaned as I hustled out of the room.

My mother made no move to follow. “Good luck, dear!”

*What the hell is going on now?* The air smelled like woodsmoke, which wasn’t comforting, considering most of the house was made of wood. I saw Artemis and Rishika up ahead, racing toward the living room, where smoke was pouring out of the open doorway. There was no mistaking the source of our problem.

I followed them in and found a coughing Elle and Torin rushing around the room, opening windows.

I bit back a groan. I didn’t have anything against either of them, but the combination of Elle and Torin didn’t bode well for the state of the house.

Smoke burned my throat, and I joined in on the coughing, swatting away the thick clouds. Fortunately, it was easy to see the problem: the fireplace was overloaded with wood, and smoke was billowing out into the room.

*Why isn’t it going up the chimney?*

“The flue must be shut!” Rishika called. She hurried over to the roaring fireplace and pulled the handle. Sure enough, the smoke was sucked upward into the chimney, and the room slowly began to clear.

I coughed, then cleared my throat. “How the hell did this happen?”

Torin and Elle exchanged guilty looks.

“We, um, we started the fire,” Torin confessed. “We thought that with the cold weather, a nice roaring fire would be just the thing.”

As if on cue, the over-fueled fire split a log down the center. The wood cracked and popped, sending sparks onto the living room floor. Rishika stamped them out with her foot.

*Great. Just what we need—burn marks on the floor.*

I turned my gaze back to Elle and Torin, who were wearing matching “oh shit” expressions. I sighed. “It was a nice thought, but we obviously don’t want to burn the house down. Next time, make sure the flue is open, and don’t put so much wood in at once.”

Several other pack members rushed in. Jay’s eye widened at the sight of the fireplace. “Damn! That’s a lot of wood.”

Lola elbowed his side. “That’s what she said.”

Jay rolled his eye at his mate, and she shrugged.

“Come on,” she said. “It was low-hanging fruit!”

As I looked over the gathering crowd, I realized that two important people were missing from the throng: Xavier and Cali.

*Right. Their date.*

For a few seconds—which had just happened to be stressful as fuck—I’d forgotten all about where they were and what they were doing.

I glanced at the clock on the wall, my heart sinking. I’d been kind of hoping they’d be back by now. But I tried to shake it off. I didn’t want to let it bother me. Xavier and I had sorted everything out, and I’d have time with Cali later. I just had to be patient.

This was the bittersweet reality of going back to regular life at the pack house. Now that Seluna was behind us, I’d have to deal with the same problem as before—namely, sharing the woman I loved with my brother. That much hadn’t changed.

Elle tapped my shoulder, pulling me out of my pity party. “I am sorry about the fire. I hope you are not angry?”

Her brow was creased with worry, and I blew out a breath and shook my head. “I guess now you know not to play with fire, huh?”

It was a lame joke, but her smile told me she took it for the peace offering it was.

I knew Elle was still learning. She’d come a long way, so it was easy to take for granted just how much of the human world was still new to her. Hopefully now, she’d understand the danger of fireplaces a little better—and if Jacqueline held up her end of our deal, Elle would learn a lot more very soon. Hopefully without creating another fire hazard.

For a moment, I considered talking to Elle about her learning from Jacqueline, but then I set that thought aside. It could wait until after the holiday. Besides, there were still some details I needed to iron out with Jacqueline first.

Elle didn’t say anything more, but she still lingered at my side.

“Is something on your mind?” I asked.

“I know you do not like Lucian.”

*She’s not wrong there.*

“It’s not that I don’t like Lucian,” I said diplomatically. “It’s that I don’t trust him. Why do you ask?”

Dread began to unfurl in my stomach as I recalled Elle’s request to stay the night at the Vanguard palace after the party, and her earlier assertion that Lucian was her mate. At the time, we’d all assumed she was just infatuated with the idea of mates, and none of us had taken her seriously. Now, I had to wonder if there was something more going on there, especially since Lucian seemed to find her interesting, too.

“I want to help the Redwood pack,” Elle said. “I feel like I have not had a chance to be a useful pack member yet.”

“Okay? And what does that have to do with Lucian?” I was almost afraid to ask.

Elle straightened her shoulders. “Can I spy on him?”

# Episode 3450

**Xavier**

I broke away from Cali just long enough to spread my jacket on the ground. Then I pulled her against me once more, savoring the hitch in her breath when I kissed her. I wanted to keep her as warm and comfortable as possible in this no-longer-enchanted patch of forest, but I also wanted *her*. And judging by the way she pressed herself against me, the way she dragged her fingers through my snow-slick hair, and the breathy sighs that slipped out of her chest when I kissed her, Cali wanted me too.

The mere thought set my blood on fire, made me want her even more. We’d barely started kissing, and already my cock was hard and begging to be released from my jeans.

I’d wanted her spread out beneath me just like this on New Year’s Eve too, but we’d been stuck making nice with the Vanguard pack at the palace and the opportunity hadn’t really presented itself. Plus, it hadn’t seemed practical at the time—not that being here surrounded by snow was all that practical either, but there was something magical about this moment. About the quiet of the forest, the heat building between Cali and me. Like we’d willed this moment into being through our love and desire; this quiet, private moment away from all our worries and distractions.

This was much better than anything we could have done at the party last night. Not to mention that Ava kissing me had left a bitter taste in my mouth. I wouldn’t have wanted to seek out Cali after that. Even now, I was desperate to lose myself in Cali, to erase every memory of Ava’s lips moving against mine.

That kiss last night should have been Cali. She was my mate, my heart, my soul, my future. She was the one I’d wanted to start the year off with, and she was the one I planned to finish it with.

I broke away from her mouth again and blew heated air into my hands, a smirk tugging at my lips. Cali stared up at me, her hair mussed, her lips swollen, her pupils blown wide. Christ, she’d never looked sexier.

I’d wanted a New Year’s kiss with Cali, but this was one way to make up for it. A way to ring in the new year with the woman I loved. Ava and I might have kissed last night, but my heart was with Cali. It always would be. No matter how much Ava tried.

Cali reached up and wiped the snow from my hair, and I caught her hand, blowing on it to keep her a little bit warmer.

“Should we go back to the house?” she asked, her voice husky and barely above a whisper.

I shrugged. “Are you cold?”

She shook her head. “Not when you’re holding me.”

I cupped her face between my newly warmed hands. “Then I won’t let you go.”

My lips descended on hers again, hot and hungry, and she gave as good as she got. Her fingers wound into my hair, and, with a little shifting, her thighs wrapped around my hips, canting upward with just enough pressure to make my breath stutter.

I shuddered, desire rising to a boil, low in my belly. “I need you, Cali.”

“Me too.” She pulled me back down for another kiss, like every brush of our lips was a drug. “I need you too.”

My fingers, already getting chilled again in the cold air, slipped beneath the fabric of her shirt. She squeaked at the cold touch on her skin, but she didn’t stop kissing me. Still, I broke away. If we were going to do this out here in the woods, with nothing more than my jacket to separate us from the cold ground, we were going to need to be a little more deliberate.

I backed off and tossed her her coat. “Put this on. Can’t have you freezing on me.”

She sat up and pulled it on without complaint, then I pulled her back down into my lap so she had a nice warm body separating her from the ground. My jacket was cool and getting damp, but I couldn’t have cared less.

When my hands slipped under her shirt again, she shivered, but the cold seemed less shocking. Already, her body felt warmer with her coat wrapped around her, though she hadn’t zipped it up. My thumb brushed against her hard nipple through the thin material of her bra, and the breathy little moan she let out went straight to my cock.

I pinched her nipple, and she cried out against my mouth.

“*Xavier*.” She whined my name in broken syllables. “Please.” Her hands fumbled with the button on my jeans.

With one hand teasing her breast, I slipped the other hand down, down, down, undoing the button on her pants and tugging down the zipper. Moments later, my fingertips dragged against her hot, slick flesh.

Fuck. She was ready for me.

It took some fumbling and troubleshooting with the angles and the amount of skin we were comfortable exposing to the elements—though that was a significantly bigger concern for Cali than for me. And I had to catch her hands and breathe hot air on them before she released me from my pants—I wasn’t sure that even my werewolf body could withstand the shock of her icy fingers—but soon she was straddling my waist, her hot, slick folds slipping down onto my hard, aching cock.

I let out a growl once I was inside her. Fuck, she was warm. Even warmer now, with the contrast of the wintery air.

“You feel so fucking amazing.” I rolled my hips, and she threw her head back with a moan.

“You too.” She rocked her hips into mine, harder and faster, signaling that she was ready for more.

I twined my fingers into the thick locks of hair at the back of her head, holding her mouth in place for mine to plunder as I thrust up into her. Cali met me for every thrust. Soon—too soon—her cries grew pitchy, her walls tightened, and I knew she didn’t have long.

I didn’t have long, either.

I slipped two fingers into my mouth, getting them warm and slick, then reached down between us to rub circles on her swollen clit. “Come with me, tiger.”

And she did. The look on her face, the breathy cries, and the way her walls rippled around me… It was too much for me to bear. White-hot pleasure overwhelmed my senses, and I lost myself inside her.

In the aftermath, when our clothes were back in place and I was holding Cali close, my arms wrapped around her as I held her on my lap, I pressed a kiss to her jaw. “That was amazing.”

“Mm. Definitely the highlight of my day so far. Though the snowball fight was fun too.”

My male pride roared at that. *Let’s see Greyson try to outdo this.* Chances were, by the time the day was over, my time with Cali would still be a highlight. I’d win this round. Because there was no denying that this was a competition, even though we’d set aside our differences for Cali’s sake.

I could hear the smile in my own voice. “I can’t think of a better way to start off the year.”

“Have you thought of any New Year’s resolutions?”

I toyed with her hair. “I mean, I’m perfect just the way I am. I don’t see any room for improvement.”

She laughed, then craned her neck to look up at me. “I’m serious. There must be at least one thing you want to change. Something you want to do better this year?”

A pretty obvious answer rested on the tip of my tongue, but I shoved it down. There were plenty of things I could do. One of them was to finally rid myself of Ava, once and for all. The other was to take the pack back from Greyson and become the rightful Alpha.

But I didn’t want to get into that with Cali.

“I’ve thought about it,” I finally said. “I’m determined to be the best mate I can possibly be, to fully devote myself to you.”

“Well, that’s not fair. You already do all that. Look at everything you did to help me escape from Seluna’s wrath. Xavier, you traveled to the outskirts of the demon world with the creepy Courier to deliver those ashes. How could you possibly be more devoted than that?”

I couldn’t argue with that, but there was no denying how much it pleased me that she was aware of everything I’d done for her.

“Nope, I’m not taking it back.” I pressed another kiss to her hairline. “I guess you’ll just have to see for yourself how awesome I’m going to be.”

She laughed again. “I’m not sure I can handle that—haven’t you ever heard that too much of a good thing can be bad for you?”

“Nothing I do will ever be bad for you.”

She tilted her head up in silent invitation, and I dropped my head to kiss her. When we broke away, a question nagged at my mind.

“What about you?” I asked. “You never really decided—what’s your resolution?”

# Episode 3451

Xavier’s question sent a wave of dread crashing into me.

It wasn’t his fault. Since I’d asked him about his New Year’s resolutions, it was only reasonable for him to ask me about mine. I should have seen this coming. I was so stupid—if I hadn’t brought up New Year’s resolutions in the first place, I wouldn’t be here, wrapped in Xavier’s arms, feeling like a complete asshole.

Tension coiled in my shoulders, and I felt more and more awkward about this whole thing as the silence dragged between us.

*This is a nightmare.*

A nightmare Xavier was completely oblivious to.

He kissed my neck. “I’m waiting,” he whispered. A shiver slipped down my spine at the sensation of his hot breath on the cool shell of my ear. “I can’t imagine it’s going to be a very intense resolution. After all, in my eyes, you’re perfect.”

My stomach tightened. “Maybe you should have those sexy eyes looked at,” I joked. My laugh fell flat, even to my ears.

He humored me with a laugh, then twined our hands together, his arms still around me. “The suspense is killing me. I want to know—what’s your resolution?”

I gulped. “Well, I’ve been considering that… I make a resolution every year, and it’s usually pretty easy to do. But, um, this year it’s been particularly hard. I know how difficult the *due destini* has been for everyone, the toll it’s taken, and not just on the three of us. There’s so many things about the new year that I’d like to be different from last year.”

“Hopefully not too many things,” he teased. “I think some pretty damn good things happened last year, especially between you and me.”

My cheeks heated, and this time, the smile that stretched my lips felt real. “Yeah, that’s true. I just mean I’d like this year to not include being possessed by demons, or having any more spells cast on me. But those are things I can’t really control. It wasn’t like I ever planned for Seluna, or Adéluce, or Letifer, or Silas, or anyone else to come along and shake things up.”

“Cali, don’t worry about all that. Because no matter what happens, I’ll protect you. Greyson and I both will. We’d never let anything happen to you.”

“I know you wouldn’t.” I squeezed his hand.

I was careful not to mention the fact that all of those things outside my control were outside their control too. And, as hard as they’d tried, they hadn’t been able to protect me every time. I loved that Xavier was trying to comfort me, but there was only so much even he and Greyson were capable of.

“My point is,” I continued, “I think a resolution should be something you choose to do.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew what my resolution was. I pulled in a deep breath. “And this year, my resolution is to choose. I know I’ve put it off, but if I’m being honest, I know I need to open Big Mac’s letter and find out if I can choose without killing one of you.” I pulled in a shuddering breath, my emotions going haywire at the prospect. “Even without the killing curse in play, I still don’t know how I could ever choose between you two—I love you both. But if I don’t choose soon, I’ll lose my mind.”

Xavier released my hands to wrap his arms more tightly around me. “That’s a very brave resolution. I can only imagine how scary all of this must be for you. But… I’m proud of you for facing your fears and prioritizing this choice. I think it’s the best thing you can do for yourself this year.”

Relief loosened the muscles in my shoulders. “I appreciate your understanding.”

“Besides,” he added, “I’m not worried.”

I pulled back to look up at him. “Are you really *that* self-confident?”

“I thought you knew me better than that—of course I am. Self-confidence is kind of my thing.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Yeah, I can’t really argue with that.”

His smile faded. “The decision to read what’s in the envelope or not is solely up to you. I’m not going to force you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with, and I can’t imagine Greyson would, either.”

“I know. And I appreciate that. You two have been so patient with me.”

“We know how much this has been weighing on you,” he said. “We’d have to be total dicks not to be sensitive to that. Though, for the record, Greyson isn’t totally out of the woods where I’m concerned.”

He winked at me, and I rolled my eyes.

“But,” he continued, “allow me to offer you a redo. If you want to make a different resolution, that’s fine by me.”

I appreciated that—and his support—more than he’d ever know. But I also knew I couldn’t put the truth off forever, no matter how much that might make things seem easier in the short term. I could either choose one mate and hurt the other, or lose my mind.

I thought back to the conversation Xavier and I had had earlier, about me going back to college.

“Maybe going back to school should be my resolution,” I said. “Or at least figuring all that out.”

He nodded. “That’s a good start.”

“My parents would be thrilled about it. They haven’t pressured me or anything, but I know dropping out of college is something they never wanted for me.”

“If you want, I could drive you to school, pick you up after your classes,” he said. “I could be your personal chauffeur.”

A grin tugged at my lips, but I shook my head. “All the other students would be jealous that I had such a hot driver. Can’t have that.”

“We should probably start heading back, huh?” He eased me off his lap and then offered me a hand to help me to my feet.

“Probably.” I shivered as a cold burst of air hit me. I didn’t know if I was quite ready to go back to the real world, but I did need to warm up—fast.

He zipped my coat shut and blew hot air onto my chilled fingers again. “I’d better get you back to the house and put a mug of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha in your hands, huh?” His eyes twinkled. “Unless you can think of another way for me to warm you up?”

I smacked his chest playfully. “Stop, or I might be tempted.”

“That’s not much of a reason to stop.”

The truth was, I was more than tempted, but I was also *cold*. If I’d been a werewolf, I probably could’ve stayed out a while longer, but I was a half-Fae, and it was January. I wasn’t built for this.

Xavier gathered up all the picnic stuff—excluding the lantern—and then, without warning, he scooped me up with one arm and threw me over his shoulder.

“Xavier! What are you doing?”

“Auditioning for the chauffeur position, of course.” He broke into a run, heading toward the house.

I laughed, the breath knocking around in my lungs with each of his footfalls. All I could do was hold on tight and try to enjoy the ride. He was moving a lot faster than I would’ve been capable of, and within minutes, we were back at the pack house.

He set me down on the porch, and we walked inside together.

I frowned at the scent that hit my nose. “Why does it smell smoky in here?”

Xavier kissed me. “I’m going to get cleaned up. I’ll see you later.”

I immediately headed upstairs to shower, too. The hot water of the shower felt divine, but I couldn’t linger for too long. A nagging sense of urgency pushed me through my ablutions. I couldn’t put this off any longer—it wasn’t fair to my mates.

I needed to open that letter.

Except… knowing that I needed to do it and *actually* doingitwere two very different things. Could I really force myself to open that letter and find out what was inside? Find out if the killing curse was still intact, or…

Or if the only thing standing in the way of my decision was me.

As I dried my hair, I noticed my hands were shaking—and not from the cold. I was absolutely terrified of what the letter would reveal. I dressed quickly and headed down to the study, shutting the door behind me. If I didn’t do this now, I might never do it.

I stared at the locked drawer. *Can I really go through with this?*

*I have to—it’s my resolution.*

I took out the key that Greyson had given me and, with trembling hands, I unlocked the drawer. The letter was right there inside.

I picked it up and pulled in a deep breath.

Whatever happened next, my life would be forever changed by the words I was about to read.

I closed my eyes and reached into the envelope. I fumbled with the paper to unfold it and opened my eyes, bracing myself.

A gasp slipped out of my throat.

The paper was blank.