**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 29**

**Episodes 3687–3757**

# Episode 3687

Lance’s rage was palpable, and I jerked away from him, not sure what he might do next. Greyson and Xavier quickly stepped in front of me. I could tell by the look in their eyes that they wouldn’t hesitate to tear Lance apart if he stepped out of line.

“You’ve lost, Lance,” Greyson said. “And we’re not going to allow you to harm anyone else. Leave now, while we’re still in the mood to let you.”

Lance cursed and bared his teeth at my mates. “Fuck you! I will not go back empty-handed!”

He shifted and started clawing at the thorn wall. I watched in horror as he literally began to climb over it, totally disregarding the thorns pricking him. He’d almost made it over the top when I lifted my hands and gathered my power. Steadying my aim, I fired a blast that knocked Lance off the wall and sent him falling backward into his soldiers. They quickly gathered around him, as if to protect him in case I sent any more volleys his way.

Spent, I slumped into Xavier’s arms. Like the witches and my mother, using even that small amount of magic had completely drained me. *But at least I took that asshole down.*

Lance was stunned, lying sprawled on the ground with blood dripping from a gash in his shoulder. It took him a while to finally get to his feet, but when he did, it looked like he was still revving to come at us.

Greyson laughed at him. “Give it a rest, Lance. You’re outnumbered and outgunned; can’t you see that? Or are you too blinded by *honor* to know when you’re beaten? Go back to your Alpha—and be sure to tell him what happens to anyone who tries to go up against our packs.”

Lance hesitated for only a moment before he turned and limped away. The rest of his pack fell into step behind him. We all stood and watched in weighty silence as the Bitterfangs disappeared into the forest.

“They’re gone,” Greyson said. “Their scent is fading.”

His words seemed to activate everyone, and I could feel everyone’s relief, but there were no victory howls or cheers, not after what we saw today.

“Well, I’d say that was neatly done,” Lucian said, as if he’d actually done something. “The Vanguards never lose. Am I right?” He turned to look over at Mace, but the Blue Blood Alpha rolled his eyes and ignored the princeling.

I turned back to Russell and Julia, my worry for them growing. I knew time was of the essence, and we would need to move fast to pull them back from the spirit world before the effects of the potion became permanent.

Russell’s moms were already hovering over him, stroking his cheeks and whispering in his ear. My heart went out to them. Fake or not, it had to be hard for them to see him lying there looking very much like he was truly dead. Marta pushed through the crowd and knelt down beside the teenagers, her face set in concentration as she looked them over.

I moved to go join them, but Xavier put a hand on my arm to stop me. “Cali, no. You’re too weak right now. You should go inside and rest,” he said. “They’re in Marta’s hands. They’re going to be okay.”

I put my hand over his. “I will, later. Right now, Russel and Julia need us. Julia drank way more than she was supposed to. How do we know she isn’t really dead? I want to see them wake up.”

*At least Julia didn’t drink the entire bottle, since Russell drank some, too. Who knows what would’ve happened if she drank even more? Hopefully that works out in her favor.*

Xavier sighed, obviously reluctant to agree. His worry for me was written all over his handsome face.

“Come on,” I said, giving him a hard, reluctant stare. “How much energy does it take to go over there and check on them? I’ll be fine. I promise.”

“Fine,” Xavier grumbled. He wrapped his arm around my waist and helped me over to where Marta, Greyson, and the others were buzzing around the teenagers.

“Can you help me carry them inside?” Marta asked.

“Sure thing,” Greyson said.

He wasted no time picking Russell up, and Rishika lifted Julia into her arms. We all followed them back into the pack house, the mood suddenly a lot more somber than it had been a few moments ago.

“Is he going to be okay? And what about the girl?” Joan asked as she jogged along behind us. She and Paris were wringing their hands, and I could see that they were holding back tears.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Marta is very good at what she does. She’ll be able to bring them back in no time.”

Rishika and Greyson laid the teenagers on the couches in the living room. Marta knelt at Russell’s side, probably since he’d taken the potion first.

Okorie joined us not long after. He knelt beside Marta and spoke to her in a low voice. It sounded like he was coaching her, encouraging her. I spotted Lilac standing in the corner with Violet, his mouth fixed in a frown as he watched Marta and Okorie. He looked sad, and I felt kind of bad for him, but he was going to have to table his jealousy long enough for Marta to help two possibly dying kids. Besides, I only had the mental bandwidth for one dramatic teen romance at a time.

I turned back to Marta. She was focusing really hard on Russell and had one hand over his heart and the other on his forehead.

“Where are you?” she murmured. “Where are you hiding?”

A burst of vapor rose from the hand hovering over Russell’s heart, and I let out a gasp as Marta’s entire hand literally plunged through Russell’s body and into his chest. I let out a little scream and tried to reach out to stop her, but Okorie stayed my hand.

“No, Cali. Do not interrupt her. She’s trying to pull his spirit back from the spirit world. If you interfere, he might get lost there forever,” he said grimly.

Nodding, I stepped back out of the way. I bit my nails as I took in the deeply unnatural image of Marta reaching directly into Russell’s chest like it was the most normal thing in the world.

“There you are,” Marta murmured. “I see you. Don’t be scared. Come back.”

A moment later, Marta let out a gasp. Her eyes flew open, and she quickly pulled her hand out of Russell’s body. Where I would’ve expected to see a bloody gaping hole, there was nothing but Russell’s unharmed chest.

Russell’s eyes shot open, and he gasped for air. His moms rushed to his side, sobbing over him—just as he caught sight of Julia’s limp body, lying on the couch next to him.

“What’s going on?” He bolted upright, still coughing. “Why is she lying there like that? What happened? Is she okay?”

“Yes, honey,” Paris said. “She’s fine. She saw what happened to you and got so worked up that she took the potion, too. But she’ll be fine. She’s not really dead…” The two women exchanged a look as if to silently add, *we hope*.

Marta, looking as sapped as I felt, fell into Okorie’s arms.

“Here, drink this,” the warlock said, taking a cup of tea from Kira and handing it to Marta.

Marta sipped it slowly, her eyes closing again as she lulled against Okorie.

“You should rest,” Violet said. “That seemed to take a lot out of you.”

“What?” Marta shook herself awake. “No. I can’t. Julia’s still under, and I have to bring her out. If we wait too long, we might not be able to get her back.”

Marta took one last long gulp from her cup of tea and handed the empty mug to Okorie, then she crawled to Julia’s side.

I was starting to worry. Marta looked like she was seconds from collapsing, but I knew she was right. She couldn’t rest. Time was of the essence.

I turned to Xavier, who looked as worried as I felt.

“What if Marta can’t bring her back?” I asked him. I couldn’t help but think the worst. I couldn’t get the image of Julia foaming at the mouth out of my head. She’d looked like she was in so much pain…

Xavier ran a hand up and down my arm. “Marta is strong, and she has Okorie helping her. She can do this.”

Comforted by my mate’s words, I nodded. I felt so useless, standing there. My legs felt like spaghetti, and I was grateful that Xavier was there to hold me up. Using my magic had taken a lot out of me, but I wouldn’t feel right heading upstairs to rest while Julia’s life was hanging in the balance.

Marta rested her hands in the same positions she’d used with Russell, and once again, a puff of vapor rose up as her hand plunged into Julia’s chest.

“She’s doing it,” I whispered to Xavier. “Her magic’s still working.”

He nodded. “Come on. You really should go lie down. You’re pale as a ghost.”

I nodded and finally gave in, letting him lead me out of the room. But we both stopped short at the cry of distress that rose up behind us. I spun back around to see Marta curled on the ground, gasping for air.

“What happened?” I asked, moving to Marta’s side as quickly as my tired legs could carry me.

Marta looked up at me. Her eyes were completely bloodshot. “Julia took too much of the potion. I can’t pull her back!”

# Episode 3688

**Greyson**

Russell screamed Julia’s name and fell on his knees beside her. The girl lay there, pale and immobile, as he grabbed her slight shoulders and shook her.

“No no no, this can’t be happening!” he shouted. He looked around wildly, then caught sight of Marta. “Please, do something! You HAVE TO DO SOMETHING!”

Shaking and pale, Marta didn’t respond.

Russell started sobbing, tears running down his cheeks as he hugged Julia. “Please, *please* come back to me.”

But Julia was still unmoving. Russell’s mothers tried to pull him away from her, to no avail.

“This is all their fault!” the kid wailed. I knew he was talking about the Bitterfangs. He sprang up, but his moms grabbed him before he could run for the front door.

Nobody spoke.

I felt sick to my stomach.

Could Big Mac do anything to help the girl? No, she’d needed my mother’s help just to stand. The witch was weaker than I’d ever seen her. Okorie also looked worse for wear, and now that Kira was back, I could see that she was affected as well.

Something was draining the witches’ strength, and I didn’t know what, or who, was responsible.

I didn’t know *anything*, which was the absolute fucking last thing a pack Alpha should’ve been able to say. I’d had doubts about Russell’s plan from the very beginning, but he’d pushed for it, and Cali had backed him up without any hesitation. I should’ve paid more attention to my instincts. In my mind’s eye, I could see all my many mistakes toppling one by one, causing a cascade of domino effects.

The others hadn’t known any better, but me? I was supposed to make sure everything ran smoothly, that everyone was safe. And yet here we were.

“NO!” Russell shouted, breaking free from his mothers’ grip. “This isn’t over!”

He ran for the door, but I caught up to him, catching him by the shoulders and spinning him around.

“Where are you going?” I demanded.

His voice was full of agony. “I’m going after Lance! The Bitterfangs are going to pay for what they’ve done.”

“You’re no match for the Bitterfangs,” I said bluntly. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re doing.”

“And you do?” he snarled. “*You* let them get away! And now my Julia is dead!”

He shifted, his wolf half the size of mine. My brain went blank for a second. I really did feel for the kid, and if Julia was truly dead, I would feel like shit. We needed to do all we could for her right now, and Russell—as justified as his anguish was—was a distraction. I could not be worried about him running off and rendering the whole plan we’d just carried out useless. The Bitterfangs thought he was dead, and it needed to stay that way.

I sent out a mind link to Rishika. *Please calm him down. Try to make him see how much worse him running after the Bitterfangs would make everything.*

Rishika was shifted in seconds. She grabbed Russell by the scruff, dragging him away like he was a misbehaving pup. When they were out of sight, I turned to his mothers. Paris and Joan were staring at me, panting and wide-eyed. Joan was crying.

“Make sure your son doesn’t do anything stupid while we try to bring Julia back,” I said.

I didn’t shout, but it sounded like an order, and the two women rushed to obey.

I felt sick to my stomach, and weirdly numb at the same time. But I was holding it together. I would deal with this, like I’d dealt with every other impossible problem I’d encountered lately.

Taking a deep breath, I turned away from the front door, preparing myself to head back into the room with the probably-dead girl and the weight of everyone’s expectation for me to *fix it.*

And then my brother stepped into my path.

“The kid is right,” he said with a huff. “You let Lance walk away!”

I didn’t think. I just grabbed Xavier by the scruff of the neck—right where Rishika had grabbed Russell. Right where the bones were tender and easy to break. I gripped and twisted and forced my brother into instinctive animal docility, then I hauled him out of the room and pushed him into one of the studies. It was easy. Like he weighed as much as a kitten and wasn’t two hundred pounds of pure muscle.

When I let go, he shoved me, clearly infuriated by my manhandling.

“Keep your fucking hands off me!” he spat. “You fucked up, Greyson, and you know it!”

“You’re only making the situation worse,” I said. I managed to sound calm, which was more than I’d expected. “Don’t fuel the kid’s—”

“Russell was *right*,” Xavier interrupted. “Lance threatened Cali, and you just stood there! You’re not fit to be Alpha.”

I slammed him against the wall.

When I spoke, it was through gritted teeth. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. Just because you’re filling in as Samara Alpha, that doesn’t mean you have the right to criticize me.”

Xavier punched my shoulder hard enough that I let him go. The muscle there throbbed, immediate pain coursing through me. I grabbed him by the shoulders, and he snarled, raising his fist—

“Stop!” Cali shouted, marching into the room. “How could you two do this right now? Can’t you see that the pack needs you?”

Xavier let go, glaring at me. He turned to her. “You shouldn’t be exerting yourself, Cali. If anything happened right now; if Lance—”

He cut himself off. Then he stormed out, back into the living room.

Cali stared after him, her eyes wide with shock, and then she looked at me. “What the *hell* was that about?”

“Xavier is questioning my decision to let Lance and the Bitterfangs walk away,” I said tightly.

*Deep breaths*,I told myself. *Don’t fucking lose it. You don’t have the luxury.*

“Oh my god,” Cali whispered, digging her fingers into her hair. “Xavier doesn’t know what he’s saying! He’s just upset about what’s going on with Julia—of course you’d never go after Lance, there’s no reason to—”

“Xavier is wrong, Cali,” I said, cutting her off. I sounded calm, but my whole body was tingling with pins and needles. “I have no intention of letting Lance get away.”

Cali frowned. “What? No! That’s not what we agreed! You never wanted to start a pack war—wasn’t that the point of agreeing to Russell’s plan?”

“Russell’s plan was bad from the beginning,” I said. “The Bitterfangs hate you for being *due destini*. This was never only about Russell and Julia—it was always about you as well. Lance has repeatedly threatened you. He said he was going to bring your head to Malakai.”

“Greyson, no! What are you talking about? What are you—”

“As soon as Lance threatened your life while standing on my land, he signed his own death warrant.” I felt distant. Cold. Like everything warm that helped make me who I was had gone into hibernation. “I made up my mind then to kill him, in that moment. Deep down, I’d already made up my mind, but I kept holding back. That was clearly the wrong move. I only didn’t act in that moment because I knew we needed to revive Russell and Julia quickly. A battle on our lawn would’ve risked us running out of time and losing them, and if not, it would’ve allowed the Bitterfangs to see that the kids were still alive.”

Cali looked shocked. “You can’t be serious, Greyson!” she burst out. “I’ve been threatened dozens of times—are you going to kill everyone who’s ever said a word against me?”

I wanted to walk up to Cali. I wanted to hold her, soothe her, tell her everything would be okay. I wanted to love her, always. But she looked so stunned and disappointed that I felt she’d reject any attempts from me to comfort her.

I was no longer numb, and everything was bad.

“This is different,” I said. “Lance’s threats—they weren’t just impulsive words. We all know what the Bitterfangs are capable of, and what they believe. They won’t stop until they eradicate all signs of the *due destini*. I’m not taking any chances. Not when it comes to your safety.”

Cali’s eyes glistened. She approached me, reaching out a hand. “It sounds like you’re not thinking about what’s best for the pack, Greyson,” she whispered. “You’re letting something personal influence your decision-making. This isn’t what—”

“This has always been personal,” I said, fighting to keep my voice down. I would never shout at my mate, but I had to be honest with her. “The moment we went to Three Devils Point and the Bitterfangs attacked, the moment you told me that I needed to protect those kids no matter what, I signed up for a war, Cali. *You* signed up for a war. That’s what this mess has been, all along—the start of a war against the Bitterfang pack—and I don’t know why you insist on calling it anything else. We’ve been lying to ourselves.”

My mate’s hand had fallen to her side. She no longer tried to touch me—she took a step back. Away from me. The sadness and hurt on her face would haunt me for a long time.

“Maybe it was stupid of me, but I had so much hope that it wouldn’t actually come to this,” she choked out.

“These are traditionalist werewolves,” I said. “Julia is the Alpha’s daughter—it was *always* going to come down to this.”

“Why, though?” she demanded. “Why are they so absolute and violent and—”

“Because they are,” I said flatly. “Because it is what it is. And I’m going to kill Lance, because that’s just what needs to happen.”

Cali stared at me for a long moment, her lips pressed together. She took another step away from me, shaking her head, still so disappointed it hurt to look at her.

“I’m… I’m going back to the living room to help with Julia,” she whispered. “Before we run out of time.”

I didn’t stop her.

Left alone in the study, I wanted to slam my fist through the wall. The pack had been so united, fighting the Bitterfangs, but now I felt like everything had been ruined, or was slipping out of my grasp. Cali was right—this *was* personal. This wasn’t just about the pack or Russell or Julia. I was going after Lance and the other Bitterfangs because Lance had repeatedly threatened my mate. He wouldn’t stop until he killed her.

It was that simple.

And if Cali stayed upset with me for going down that path, I wouldn’t let that hold me back. Not anymore. At least if I killed Lance and decimated the Bitterfangs, she would be safe. Over time, she would understand. She would see the truth of it all and realize that her own decisions had affected my own. She would forgive me.

And if she didn’t… Well, at least I’d have kept her safe.

I didn’t know if I’d be able to forgive myself, though. I hadn’t dealt with this situation well. Any of it. But maybe there was time to fix it.

Maybe now, I could do something *right.* Maybe I’d be able to keep the weight on my chest from spreading and swallowing me whole.

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When I returned to the living room, Russell was crying. Xavier glared at me from across the room. Very helpful. Cali, Okorie, Marta, and Torin were trying their best to revive Julia. It wasn’t working. As expected. Torin was a healer, but the issue was beyond the physical. That was why we needed Marta.

*Rishika, Ravi*, I mind linked, glancing at them both*. Come with me.*

All three of us stepped out of the living room, into the quiet of the hallway.

Rishika stared at me. “What’s going on?”

“I could make this an order,” I said, glancing at Ravi, “but I’m choosing to ask. Will you come with me to hunt down Lance and take him out?”

Rishika actually smiled. “You don’t have to ask. It’s the best call.”

“Obviously,” Ravi agreed. “When are we leaving?”

“Right now,” I said.

I turned back to the living room and locked eyes with Xavier.

“Keep an eye on things,” I told him. “I’m leaving.”

Xavier scoffed so loudly, everybody turned to stare. “You got somewhere important to be, Redwood Alpha?”

He was mocking me.

My fury was so toxic, I could taste it.

“I’m going to go put Lance’s head on a pike,” I snarled. “And you’re going to stay here and keep everyone safe.”

“No way!” he burst out. “I’m coming. Lance threatened *our* mate. No fucking way I’m sitting on the sidelines while you—”

“*Xavier*,” I interrupted. “You’re. Staying. Here. I need you here. The pack needs you here. *Cali* needs you *here*.” I hoped he would pick up on what I wasn’t saying: that Cali was already unhappy about this turn of events, and if both of her mates ran off to enact revenge on her behalf, there was no way she’d stay back without a fight.

My brother looked absolutely pissed, but he didn’t argue further.

Russell, however, shot up, wiping his tear-streaked cheeks. “Well, *I’m* coming with you! Lance has to pay for what happened to Julia!”

“This isn’t up for debate, kid,” I said bluntly. “You’re not going anywhere—you’re too weak from the potion’s effects, and even if you weren’t, the Bitterfangs would still tear you to ribbons the moment they saw you. We went to a lot of effort to make them believe you’d died—don’t waste that effort by being stupid.”

“You can’t do this to me!” Russell started shouting again, and his moms took him aside. I wasn’t listening.

I locked eyes with Cali, my heart torn at the sight of her. How disappointed she looked. She’d never, not once, looked at me like this. We’d never fought like this, and it felt worse than any physical wound I’d ever received.

And yet, like any soldier, I had to push on.

I turned to Rishika and Ravi. “Let’s go.”

# Episode 3689

**Marta**

I was afraid to look at the time. The clock ticked, the minutes slipping by, and I was still no closer to bringing Julia back.

If I failed, Julia would be lost to the spirit world.

She’d be dead, her soul slipping through my fingers when I was supposed to protect her.

I was in way over my head—I wished so damn badly that I’d never been asked to do this. I didn’t have Big Mac’s and Okorie’s experience or powers. They were supposed to be all-knowing, strong—they had to be able to do something!

I turned to look at them, and the truth slapped me in the face. As weak as I felt, Big Mac and Okorie looked worse. How could this be? Why were we so drained? I only had questions, no answers.

And no matter how badly I wanted to shake off the responsibility for Julia, it was mine.

I was the only bridge here. That was why Greyson had called me. I was practically designed for this. I didn’t know what to do, though, and with every tick of the clock, I felt more weight on my shoulders.

“Hold her hand,” I whispered to Cali.

My request was dumb, a lie—as if *that* would stop Julia from slipping away. But Cali did as I asked, staring at the girl with glistening eyes. Cali seemed lost as well, quieter than I’d ever seen her. She wasn’t even making jokes, or yelling at her mates to stop fighting.

Everything was wrong.

“What do I do?” I asked Big Mac helplessly.

The witch exchanged a glance with Okorie. I couldn’t look at him. Not right now.

“We’re running out of time,” Big Mac said. “If Julia is too far removed from our world for you to be able to pull her back, then the only alternative is to go into the spirit world and retrieve her.”

I shuddered at the thought. “But what if… What if I can’t find my way back?”

Big Mac’s voice was calm. “You’ll need a guide. Someone who’s spent time there, who knows their way around well enough to navigate.”

Her gaze shifted to the corner, but I didn’t dare look. I already knew who was standing there. Lilac, watching and probably listening from a distance.

*Lilac*.

How would he feel about working with me?

Things between us had been so awful, lately.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Big Mac spoke up. “This is bigger than you and Lilac, Marta. You know it is.”

I met Big Mac’s eyes and swallowed hard. She was right. I had to do this.

*We* had to do this.

Julia was just a child. To be stuck in a place like the spirit world… It would probably be even worse than the years I’d spent in Bert’s house.

“Thank you,” I told Big Mac, standing up. I wasn’t sure why I said that, but I felt it. It was more like, *thank you for reminding me what needs to be done.*

I walked over to Lilac, meeting his eyes. He was looking at me already, expectant.

He looked so young right now, his boyish features hard to ignore. The determined set of his jaw told another story, though.

My heart was pounding.

“What do you need me to do?” he asked the moment I paused in front of him.

“Julia needs your help,” I said. “*I* need your help to enter the spirit world and find her. Bring her back.”

Lilac’s eyes widened for the briefest of moments. But then he arranged his face into a neutral expression, which had to have taken a lot of effort. I knew Lilac, knew how intense and loud he was. For him to act like this, he understood what I was asking.

“I promised myself that I wouldn’t go back there till I got old and wrinkly,” he told me. His voice was a whisper. “But since Julia’s life is at stake, since you want to help her, I’ll go with you.”

“Thank you,” I said roughly.

He stared at me, his gaze boring into mine. “You don’t have to thank me. I’d never let you go there alone.”

*I’d never let you go there alone.*

I didn’t let myself linger on the meaning of Lilac’s words. There was no time, literally, for any of our baggage.

I returned to Big Mac. “Lilac’s agreed to help,” I told her. “But how do we get to the spirit world in the first place?”

The only surefire way I knew was to die. And I didn’t particularly want to do that today.

“Remember the mirror in my closet? It’s a portal,” Big Mac said, and I suddenly remembered it. “But once you pass through the mirror, make sure that you mark where it is, or you could be lost forever.”

My stomach dropped.

“Julia’s looking worse,” Xavier said loudly, interrupting us. I looked over at the girl—I hadn’t even thought it was *possible* for Julia to look closer to death than she had before.

“We have to go,” I said, my voice cracking. I looked over at Lilac. “We have to go right now.”

“Lilac and Marta are too young for this mission,” Xavier interjected. “They need someone more experienced to go with them.”

I frowned. “Who?”

“Ava,” Xavier said. “She was in the spirit world far longer than Lilac.”

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed at Xavier. “And you trust her?”

I looked over at Lilac.

“Wouldn’t hurt to have someone else there,” he told me with a half shrug.

Big Mac let out a huff. “Then you have to talk to Ava right now, Xavier. They have to get going.” She glanced at me and Lilac. “Go to the mirror and wait for Ava—you’re nearly out of time.”

Xavier nodded, running off to find Ava. Big Mac glared at Lilac and me and pointed upstairs. I was pretty sure that if she hadn’t felt so weak, she would’ve been ushering us along.   
Possibly pinching us if we weren’t quick enough.

On my way out of the living room, I felt Okorie’s gaze on me. It was like a physical thing, almost tangible. The moment our eyes locked, I swallowed down the lump in my throat and looked away. I couldn’t let our complicated relationship interfere with this.

I couldn’t let my history with Lilac interfere, either.

He stood so close to me as we headed for the staircase that I could feel his body heat.

“Where are you two going?” Violet asked, coming down the stairs.

“We’re going to help save Julia,” Lilac replied.

Violet froze. “*How?*”

The second I mentioned Big Mac’s mirror, Violet paled.

“No way!” She gripped Lilac’s arm, looking between us anxiously. “I already lost you to the spirit world once—I don’t want it to happen again!”

Lilac looked pained. “Violet—”

“I mean it,” Violet interrupted, sniffling. “Isn’t there some other way?”

I stared at Lilac. The way he looked at his sister, all the tenderness in his gaze, made my eyes burn. Their relationship and love had always been amazing to me. Something I’d never witnessed before.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I wish there was. But we have to do this to save Julia. I don’t know her, but she’s an innocent person, and I…” He swallowed roughly. “I don’t think I’d be able to live with myself if I knew I could help someone and just… didn’t. We can’t let her die, Violet.”

Violet’s eyes were glistening. Slowly, she let Lilac go. When she turned to face me, I knew she wanted to cry, and it hurt to see her like this.

“Promise me that you will bring my brother back,” she whispered.

“I can’t—I can’t promise. This is all far beyond my control,” I said. I didn’t say I was frightened. I couldn’t admit that right now. “But I will do everything I can to make sure everyone comes back.”

Violet looked between us for a second. Then, without another word, she pulled us both into a tight hug. I felt Lilac right next to me, and the urge to wrap my arm around him as well hit me hard. I shoved it back—along with all the confusing, lingering feelings—and allowed myself to feel comforted by Violet’s warmth.

“I’m sorry,” Lilac murmured to her. “We need to go.”

Walking up to Big Mac’s room with Lilac was quiet. And awkward. And full of a shared emotion that could only have been anxiety.

“Big Mac said it was in the closet,” Lilac said, making a beeline for it. “Might as well get this over with.”

I watched while he pulled out the mirror. It was hidden beneath a cover, and without any hesitation, Lilac whipped it off. He looked determined. Intense, almost.

“Ava should be here soon,” he said.

I stared at the surface of the mirror. It seemed to shimmer. Shadows passed through it.

“I thought I’d never see that thing again,” said Xavier gruffly.

I turned to see him walk through the door with Ava. The second Ava saw the mirror, she gasped, turning away. Xavier noticed. Lilac didn’t. He just stared at the mirror, frowning.

“What are we supposed to do with it?” He reached out to touch, and I shuddered.

“Stop, don’t touch it!” Ava shouted. Her gaze wild, she turned to Xavier. “I can’t do this, X.”

# Episode 3690

**Xavier**

I wasn’t surprised by Ava’s reaction. Even I got a bad feeling, seeing the mirror again. Cali had almost been pulled into it, and a demon had spilled out of it—and wasn’t all that why Big Mac kept it hidden in her closet? In retrospect, it shouldn’t have been here at all. This mirror was dangerous.

Right now, though, it was the only thing that could help us save Julia.

“Guys,” Marta said anxiously, looking between Ava and me. “We really need to go. I don’t know how much longer Julia has.”

Ava was still gripping my forearm, her nails digging into my skin. She was pale, scared. Ready to recoil as she stared at the mirror.

I needed to fix this.

“Give us a quick sec,” I said gruffly, pulling Ava out of the room. “Be right back.”

She gasped when I took her by the shoulders. I made her face me, and she looked so lost that my wolf howled. The urge to protect her was immediate, no matter how much I tried to ignore it.

“What’s happening right now?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, I—” She broke off, shaking her head. “I can’t go back in there. I still have nightmares of being trapped in the spirit world.”

The genuine look of terror in her eyes struck a chord within me. My wolf whined. He wanted me to comfort Ava. He wanted me to push her the fuck away from all this and keep her safe. But my rational mind knew that a girl’s life was hanging in the balance.

“This is a matter of honor, Ava,” I said. “Julia was under our protection. She came to us for help; we can’t fail her and let die like—”

“I know I’ve already failed her,” she whispered shakily, gripping my wrists. “But I just can’t, Xavier. I’m so sorry—I’m so fucking sorry, you have no idea…”

She apologized again and again, shaking. It looked like she was about to cry, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from telling her something I’d regret. My chest ached at the sight of her like this. I was reminded that, despite everything we’d said and done, Ava was still a person. Within her, there were elements of the young woman I’d once fallen in love with. The mate I’d once thought I would spend the rest of my life with.

She’d never looked more fragile and small than she did right now.

My wolf’s whines had turned into growls. Into outrage. I’d dared to suggest putting his mate in danger, and he wasn’t having it. Suddenly, I wished I’d never volunteered Ava to go on this expedition. I wished I could keep her from going, wished I could fucking *forbid* her from going. Anything to appease the animal inside me that recognized instinct only.

But this wasn’t my decision. This was something that Ava needed to figure out on her own. The best I could do was be supportive—as long as I wasn’t *too* supportive and gave her ideas that would fuck us both up.

I *never* wanted another incident like what had happened in the Airstream to unfold between us.

“This is up to you, Ava,” I finally managed to say. I let her shoulders go, because touching her was never a good idea. “Marta and Lilac are going to go. Julia is going to die if they don’t—they have to try. And she might still die anyway.”

Ava took in a shaky breath, looking over my shoulder.

“Going to the spirit world is a risk,” I said. “One that only you can decide to take. I’m not going to push you on this. But you have to decide *now*.”

Her chest was heaving. “I know. I don’t want Julia to die, but I’m so…”

She didn’t say “fucking terrified,” but I could see it all over her.

My wolf was fucking leaping inside me, urging me to go with her. He didn’t want to lose her to that place again. If I went with Ava, I’d be able to protect her, I’d be able to make sure she was okay, I’d be able to—

I shut my wolf the fuck up.

I wanted to help Julia, just like everybody else, but going to the spirit world? With Ava? My gut was telling me to keep my mouth shut. The way Ava was staring at me was a lot, though.

Ava rarely showed fear.

This situation was a whole mess, but with the kid dying on that couch downstairs and Ava acting like this, I couldn’t turn my back on it.

“If it will help, I’ll go with you,” I finally said.

“Why the hell are you two out here?” Big Mac’s bark startled me. “You should be getting the girl—you’ve only got a few minutes left!”

I knew that. It was the only reason why I didn’t argue. Ava and I followed the limping witch into the room, just as Mrs. Smith came down the hall.

“MacKenzie!” she called. “You’re supposed to be taking it easy, dammit!”

“It’s fine,” Big Mac said with a wave of her hand. “*I’m* fine.”

The witch was using the doorway to support herself. Call me a pessimist, but that didn’t seem like a good thing. I truly hoped she didn’t pass out—what if we needed her help once we were in the spirit world?

“Lilac, Xavier!” Big Mac snapped. “What are you standing there for? Bring the damn mirror to the center of the room!”

Lilac and I jumped into action. As we carried the thing, I made sure not to touch the surface. If I did, a ghost could try to grab me, and I didn’t have time for that. I’d go into the spirit world, yes, but on *my* terms, and with everybody else.

*With Ava*, my wolf said happily.

“Are you all ready?” Big Mac peered between Lilac, Marta, and Ava. Who then turned to stare at me.

Her gaze weighed on me, but her fear was even worse. I fucking hated it. And I knew the mate bond was to blame. As fucked-up as it was, my instincts were roaring. The only way to ignore them would’ve been to knock myself unconscious.

“I’m coming too,” I announced.

Lilac and Marta exchanged a shocked look.

Big Mac glared at me, looking skeptical. “Why? We already have a bridge and two navigators going. How are you going to help?”

I was ready to answer, but Ava interrupted me.

“With Lilac, Xavier, *and* me there, we can help defend Marta and Julia. There’s a lot to be afraid of in the spirit world, and we’ll have a better chance of getting out if we all have each other.”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow, scoffing. “God, this is just—”

“What’s the point in arguing?” I asked. “We’re wasting time here. I’m going, end of discussion.”

Big Mac bristled, but I didn't give a shit.

Sometimes a werewolf just had to do what a werewolf had to do. Maybe then, my wolf would shut the fuck up.

“Suit yourself,” Big Mac said. “But I’m not going to take the blame if you don’t make it back.”

Ava let out a choked noise. Before she could speak, I mind linked with her.

*Relax*, I said. *Big Mac’s just being her usual pain in the ass self. I have every intention of coming back.*

Ava’s eyes locked with mine. *I’m not worried just for your sake. What about my pack? The Samaras don’t have an Alpha, and if something happens to both me and you, who’s going to lead them? I don’t think we’ve heard the last of the Bitterfang pack. The Samaras trusted you earlier, and that doesn’t happen easily.*

I was impressed by Ava’s loyalty, and her concern for her pack. But we couldn’t back out. Not now.

*We will both make it back*, I said firmly. *We’ve been through worse.*

What I didn’t tell Ava was that I was determined to make it back so I could be with Cali. Even now, I felt the need to go downstairs, to tell Cali I was leaving, but I knew I couldn’t.

Cali wouldn’t want me to do this.

She’d freak out, we would waste more time, and then it could all be over for Julia.

No.

We’d go in, get Julia, then get out. Cali didn’t have to know what I was doing.

“Let’s just get a move on,” Big Mac said with a tired sigh. “Marta—as the bridge, you’ll have to step in first, and then Lilac and the others can follow you in.”

Marta looked genuinely terrified. Did she have the mental strength to do this? If she wasn’t able to get us back…

*No*. No doubts. I wouldn’t fucking do this if I had doubts. We had to succeed—there waws no other option.

“Okay,” Marta whispered.

She approached the mirror, taking a deep breath.

“I spelled the mirror so the shadow creature debacle from last time won’t happen again,” Big Mac said. Then she mumbled something, waving her hands in front of the glass. The mirror darkened and changed texture into something almost liquid.

Immediately, the temperature in the room dropped. A cold breeze stirred the curtains. When I glanced at Ava, I realized she was holding her breath.

Fuck.

“Go ahead.” Big Mac gestured Marta forward.

The girl took a hesitant step into the mirror, slipping through as if dipping into water. Soon, only her hand remained, reaching out toward Lilac. With a deep breath, he took it, following Marta through before he extended his hand for Ava.

She hesitated.

“You can do it,” I murmured. “I’ll be right behind you.”

She glanced at me, breathing deeply after I nodded in assurance. She took Lilac’s hand, stepping into the mirror, leaving her own hand behind for me. I stared at her fingers, long and elegant, then gripped them. The contact made my wolf stir. I ignored him and stepped toward the mirror.

Then Ava’s hand slipped from mine and disappeared. I stepped forward and came into contact with the now-hard, unyielding mirror.

I was blocked from entering.

# Episode 3691

**Greyson**

I was in wolf form, running with Ravi and Rishika, tracking Lance. I’d chosen well when I’d picked Ravi and Rishika to come with me. They were glad to be here. Always loyal, strong, and ready to defend the Redwood pack’s honor.

And at this point, it *was* a matter of honor.

My anger had been building for a while now, and the memory of Lance threatening Cali right on my doorstep made me want to roar. I would protect my mate, no matter what. I hadn’t brought an army with me, but I didn’t need one. I had two powerful wolves with me, and together, we would be enough to take Lance down.

My fury was always enough.

Every time that ferocious emotion reached its boiling point, I’d feel myself turn feral, crashing through bodies without a thought, the taste of blood acidic in my mouth. I’d done it time and time again in battle. But every time it happened, I felt like I was losing a bit of myself and turning into something I hated.

But if my berserker rage was what was needed right now, then so be it.

I wasn’t sure how many Bitterfangs were still with Lance—there had been casualties during the fight at Three Devils Point—but the remaining Bitterfangs weren’t my target. My goal was to take Lance out quietly—isolate and kill. By the time his pals realized what had happened, they could run back to Malakai and deliver the message that this was what happened when you threatened the Redwood pack.

I couldn’t help but feel that this mission should’ve happened earlier, that I shouldn’t have hesitated to kill Lance before. But still, it was never too late. The kids had had to take precedence in the moment.

The end result would be the same: I’d have his head on a fucking platter, and then I’d serve it to Xavier.

My little brother. He’d fucking dared to insinuate, time and time again, that I wasn’t fit to be Alpha, that I was weak. Less than him. He’d had, what, a *couple of hours* as temporary Alpha of the Samara pack and thought he was an expert already? What the fuck did he know about feeling the weight of an entire pack’s expectations, day in and day out? Especially since in order to do that little Alpha experiment, he’d directly disobeyed me?

I would have to deal with Xavier when I got back to the pack house. There was no question about it—his insolence and disobedience couldn’t stand. He’d gone from bad to worse today, starting with the moment when he’d blatantly disobeyed me and run off to the Samaras. There had to be consequences, because his lack of respect put the entire pack dynamic in jeopardy.

The pack needed Xavier, but if he kept challenging me like this, kept trying to humiliate me in front of the others… That was just unsustainable. My brother needed to do what was best for the pack—and that was what the Alpha decided. *Me.*

A twinge of guilt hit me, and then it turned into a wave.

I’d made mistakes with Russell and Julia. And right now, going after Lance… It was for the pack, sure. But first of all, it was for Cali. It had to be. I couldn’t keep ignoring such a massive threat to her safety. And if I had to be hard on my brother for the sake of her safety too, then so be it.

*Lance’s scent is too clear here*, Rishika mind linked, interrupting my thoughts.

She was right.

*Tracking him is almost too easy*, I realized.

Rishika’s wolf nodded, running ahead. I let her go, kept an eye on her. The last thing we needed was to be drawn into a trap. I was just about to tell her and Ravi to stop and reassess when Rishika slowed down. Her voice echoed in my head again.

*I found some of Lance’s blood*, she said.

Ravi and I shared a look, coming to a halt next to her.

*We have to be cautious*,Rishika said. *It’s possible this is a decoy, a way to divert our attention.*

Ravi’s wolf let out a low growl. *They knew we’d come after them.*

Lance had been wounded earlier. But we were far from the pack house, and his wounds should’ve healed by the time he’d reached this point.

*Rishika’s right*, I said. *This could be a trap.*

Ravi eyed Rishika, giving her a curt nod. *You’re really good at this. I’m impressed*.

*I learned some of my tracking skills from an old werewolf I encountered when I was a Rogue*, she explained. *He was a pain in the ass, but his lessons kept me alive*.

*What do you think we should do next?* I asked her.

*Don’t track too fast*, she replied. *If this* is *some kind of setup, let’s reverse things, slow down, and let Lance and his goons do the worrying—make them wonder what’s taking us so long.*

I nodded in agreement. I liked Rishika’s methods—I always had. It was one of the reasons why I’d asked her to come along today. She was smart, a skilled fighter, and undeniably loyal to the Redwood pack.

And to me.

Rishika had always believed in me as a leader—even now, when I knew I hadn’t handled Russell’s plan very well. She hadn’t judged me or given me any shit. She trusted me to fix things. She trusted that I knew how to play the game. I’d learned a few things as a Rogue, myself.

I’d also learned a lot from my monster of a father, including a lesson that Silas hadn’t intended to teach me. It was the same lesson that had helped to end his reign of chaos and terror. Don’t let the thirst for blood blind you to your faults.

I couldn’t let myself make my father’s mistakes. No matter the fury, no matter the rawness I felt inside, I couldn’t go down that road.

*That’s it, then*, I said. *Let’s slow down a bit and keep an eye on the path ahead.*

We pressed forward, our pace smoother. The moment we reached a small clearing, Rishika paused. Going forward, the path split, and I scented the air.

*Some of the Bitterfangs went to the left*, I mind linked. *But Lance and some others seem to have gone to the right.*

*That’s a classic move*, Rishika said*. Try to split us up, make it harder to track them. I wouldn’t be surprised if the paths split again farther up.*

*These motherfuckers…* Ravi grunted.

*What do you want to do, Greyson?* Rishika asked.

I thought about our choices. Either we all stuck to Lance, or we split up. I would’ve preferred to stick to Lance, but the idea that the other Bitterfangs could be circling back to trap us made me wary of that plan.

I knew both of these paths, though. We were still in Redwood territory. But it wouldn’t be long until we reached Three Devils Point, which would give the Bitterfangs a slight edge.

*I think we should split up*, Ravi said. *I can do a bit of sleuthing, follow the left path for a little bit and will report back to let you know what I’ve found*.

*What if you get caught?* I asked.

He shook his head*. I’ll be careful. I know these woods well enough. Certainly better than the Bitterfangs.*

That was a good point. Plus, Ravi was good at remaining quiet and hidden.

*Go ahead, then*, I said. *But circle back when you reach the creek.*

Ravi headed off, and I turned to Rishika. *Go check the other path. But don’t go too far*.

I watched Ravi until he vanished into the trees, and then I turned to Rishika. She’d remained within eyesight, as instructed. When she returned, she shook her head.

*I didn’t see any more blood*, she said, *but Lance’s scent is still strong. I don’t think they’re too far ahead.*

*We should—*

I never finished my sentence. There was a sharp sound from the left, the path that Ravi had taken. Both Rishika and I crouched automatically, senses trained in that direction.

I already regretted letting Ravi go.

It might have been the right thing to do, strategically speaking, but was it the safest thing?

No.

Fucking hell.

*We’re not leaving him behind*, I told Rishika.

She nodded, then followed as I led her silently along the path Ravi had taken. I picked up his scent, intertwined with the Bitterfangs’, and followed it. Neither Rishika nor I made any noise. Ravi had played it smart, here—he’d walked through the trees adjacent to the path, avoiding the path itself.

*The woods are getting thicker*, Rishika said. *Have you run through this area recently?*

*No, but I know it pretty well*, I replied.

Her nose was pressed to the ground, her movements quiet. All I could hear was the creek in the distance—no birds or deer or any other animals. They’d vanished at the sight of all these predators roaming around—Rishika and me, the Bitterfangs, Ravi…

But as thoroughly as we searched the surrounding woods, Ravi was nowhere to be found.

Where the fuck was he?

# Episode 3692

**Xavier**

“What the *hell*?” I pounded on the mirror, my heart racing, my wolf clawing frantically at my chest.

“Stop it, Xavier!” Big Mac snapped. “This is a sophisticated magical artifact, not a vending machine—you can’t just bang on it with your fist to make it work!”

I growled under my breath, my fists still raised. “What the fuck just happened?”

“*Stop. Touching. The mirror*,” Big Mac hissed. “If you break it, they’ll all be trapped—*forever*. Do you understand, Xavier?”

The thought was fucking horrifying. Lilac, the kid I saw as a little brother; Marta, the girl he loved despite everything; and Ava—

Ava.

My wolf howled on the inside.

“I promised to go with them,” I said between gritted teeth. “What the hell just happened?”

I didn’t even want to imagine how freaked out the others had to be, on the other side of that mirror. The thought of Ava being there without me when she hadn’t even wanted to go in the first place filled me with frustration.

My wolf clawed at my insides, and I felt so guilty I could taste it.

“I need to go with them,” I declared. “You have to do something! Anything!”

Big Mac snarled. “Gods, I *knew* this was a bad idea!”

I opened my mouth to argue or beg or anything fucking in between, but then Cali ran into the room. She looked alarmed when she spotted me.

“Xavier, I don’t want you to go!” she said, running over and latching onto my arm. “It’s too dangerous. I wish Marta and Lilac didn’t have to go, but I… I can’t lose you to the spirit world. What if you can’t come back?”

“Shh, baby,” I soothed, wrapping an arm around her and kissing her head. “It’ll be all right. I can do this.”

She stepped back and looked at me, looking so anxious it broke my heart. I couldn’t fold, though. I had to go.

My wolf felt torn in two directions. Cali or Ava. It was the first time I’d ever felt it so strongly. The pull toward both of them, the uncertainty of what to do. Usually it was so easy. Cali. But things had gotten so muddied, so fucked up that now… Now it wasn’t easy. *Fuck.* When had *that* crept up on me? Shouldn’t I have fucking *noticed*—

I shook my head. I had to act, I had to do something. Between Cali and Ava…

Right now, Ava was the one in danger.

“Well, when will you be back? How long does this kind of thing take?”

Big Mac huffed. “That depends on how quickly they find Julia. It will be up to Marta’s bridge magic to locate her, and then Lilac and Ava will have to lead everyone back after—”

“We don’t have time for this,” I interrupted. “Open that damn mirror or whatever it is you have to do—Ava needs me.”

I regretted the words the second they left my mouth.

Cali flinched at my words, and she seemed… wounded.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I have to go. I’ll be back soon.”

Big Mac grumbled, tiredly raising her hands toward the mirror as I took position again.

The temperature dropped once more. The wind blew, and the mirror’s surface shivered. Suddenly, Ava’s hand broke through. I grabbed hold and was immediately pulled into the mirror.

Cali’s hurt expression was the last thing I saw before everything went black.

I stumbled through the dark, my stomach dropping. It reminded me of blipping, only in some ways this was worse, because I could barely see anything. What the fuck?

“Xavier!” Ava’s voice sounded like it was echoing through a tunnel. But when I inhaled, I could smell her. When I focused, I realized that she was right there, next to me, clinging to me.

My wolf howled, but I pulled away.

“Where are we?” I glanced back as my eyes fought to adjust to the darkness. I could see the mirror shimmering in the distance, and the faint images of Cali and Big Mac on the other side. But I couldn’t hear them. As a werewolf, I was used to relying on all my senses, my hearing included, so seeing them so close without being able to hear them was fucking disturbing.

The only thing I *could* hear was Ava’s hard breathing.

I could feel her terror. My wolf begged to comfort her, kiss her.

“Why—why did you let go of my hand?” she whispered, shaking all over.

I couldn’t do this right now. I couldn’t hug her, tell her everything would be okay. My wolf was already restless, and I didn’t need any more of that when we were in such a dangerous situation. The stakes were so high—a kid’s life on the line.

“I was blocked, but I’m here now,” I said.

When Ava kept hold of my hand, still trembling, I found that I couldn’t tell her to let go.

I felt… sorry for her.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

“Where are Lilac and Marta?” I asked.

I looked around. We were definitely in the spirit world. That sort of dark, foggy place where it looked like back home, but it didn’t *feel* like home. We were inside the pack house—it looked like it had been lived in hundreds of years ago. Everything was full of dust, covered up, or broken.

“I don’t know,” Ava said. “Maybe they went outside?”

We hurried out, and it felt good to leave it behind. I didn’t want to spend too much time in this world if we didn’t have to. Outside, the forest was shrouded in fog. I knew what might linger in there. We had to be careful.

Ava gestured ahead. “Look, there they are.”

I looked past her and spotted them. Lilac was quiet—nothing like himself—and Marta looked pale. Still holding Ava’s hand, I led her toward them.

“We have to find Julia,” I called. “It’s been too long already.”

Marta shushed me. “Don’t draw attention to us!”

It was then that I realized we weren’t alone. Shadowy, ghost-like figures walked past us in the forest, eyeing us with curiosity—and perhaps something else.

*Hunger*.

Ava gasped when someone tapped me on the shoulder. Growling, I spun around, ready to attack and came face-to-face with a man. A spirit, obviously. His eyes were wide, watery.

“Please, oh please!” he begged in a raspy, chilling voice. “Bring me back; I don’t belong here… My cat has to be fed! Who’s taking care of my cat?”

I didn’t speak—didn’t fucking want to, just in case this dude thought he could dive into my mouth and take over or something. You never knew.

I backed off, pulling Ava with me. Through clenched teeth, I said, “We can’t help you.”

The beggar drifted off.

Jesus fuck, he’d given me the creeps.

“This world is filled with lost souls like that, all pleading for help to return to the land of the living,” Ava said quietly. At the same time, more and more souls started drifting toward us. The way they moved—and seemed to have a nose for the living—reminded me a little too much of the revenants.

“Can they hurt us?” I asked. Then I followed this up with a more important question. “Can I hurt them back?”

Ava swallowed roughly. “They can hurt hurt us, yes. Attack us. Fighting them is difficult, from what I’ve seen. I always avoided them when I was stuck here. It’s easier as one person rather than being in a group.”

“We need to find Julia and get the fuck out of here,” I said, turning to the others.

“*Yep*,” Lilac declared, wide-eyed as he turned to face Marta.

“Do your thing,” I told the girl.

She looked shifty. Uh-oh. “I’ve—I’ve only done this once before, with Lilac.”

I scowled. “What about Russell?”

“That was different—I didn’t have to go anywhere. I could just feel Russell’s soul and pull him in. Here…” She looked around nervously. “This is like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

As the seconds passed, I found myself able to see more and more of the world around me. I looked ahead—the place was like a city that never ended, filled with human-like ghosts and creatures I’d hoped never to see again.

“I know you can do this, Marta,” Lilac said, then. “I believe in you. Try to reach out to Julia. Try to find her. This needs to work.”

I had to give it to the young wolf. Whatever his feelings were toward Marta—and there had to be a bunch of them, considering the scathing looks I’d seen him shoot Okorie—Lilac was putting that all aside and stepping up.

And it was working.

Marta looked up at him and nodded. She clearly took strength from his words, then closed her eyes, her face scrunching up in concentration.

Ava hadn’t moved an inch, stuck to my side.

There were more and more ghosts coming toward us, and I had to wonder if I’d eventually be forced to fight them off.

“Marta…” Lilac breathed the name, and my attention snapped back to him and the girl. Marta had started walking, her eyes still closed. Lilac reached out, like he was about to take her hand.

“No,” I said. “Let her go. Don’t interrupt the process. Just stay close to her.”

Lilac looked really fucking worried, but he nodded. He followed Marta, and Ava and I followed him. Ava was keeping close to me, acting like I was some kind of anchor. My head hurt at the thought of her being stuck in this horrible place. And she’d been trapped here for so long…

No wonder she was freaked out.

“I can’t,” Marta said, coming to a halt in front of us. Her eyes were still squeezed shut, but the frustration was obvious on her face. “I thought I heard Julia, but I’ve lost the trace again.”

What the fuck did that mean? Had Julia died?

I didn’t ask those questions out loud.

“You can try again,” Lilac said encouragingly. “I’m sure if you try again, it—”

A strange voice echoed through the thick air. “Ava? Have you come back for me?”

# Episode 3693

I stared at the mirror, fighting to process what the fuck had just happened. Had it really been Ava’s hand, pulling my mate through the mirror?

*He’s with her. He left me, and he’s with her, and I know he’s trying to save Julia, but why did it have to be with* her*? Why did it fucking have to be with Ava, of all people, who—*

“MacKenzie, I can’t keep chasing you around to make you lie down!” Mrs. Smith, who had come in just as Xavier left, was chastising her fiancée in the background of my hectic thoughts. “You need to rest—you’re taking on too much!”

Big Mac said something in response, but I was barely paying attention. What had Xavier meant when he’d said that Ava needed him? *Needed* him?

*What if he can’t get back? What if my last memory of him is of Ava’s hand linking up with his before he gets sucked into a terrifying magical mirror?*

Memories of the time I’d nearly been pulled into that mirror invaded my head. Big Mac had been so angry at Violet and me for trying to help Lilac.

“Do you really not know how long he’ll be gone?” I asked, cutting through Mrs. Smith and Big Mac’s argument. “Maybe I should go in after him. I could help too.”

The witch rolled her eyes, but Mrs. Smith smiled at me. “Cali, dear, why don’t you go relax for a while? There’s nothing else we can do but wait.”

“And we don’t need any more messes with this thing,” Big Mac grumbled, gesturing to the mirror.

I really didn’t want to let the mirror out of my sight, wanting to be close in case Xavier needed me. But I got the message loud and clear from Big Mac’s sharp gaze—time to get out of her room.

I left, feeling worn out. Just being near the ghost mirror had triggered all kinds of anxiety. I wished I felt stronger, wiser, more confident, but my recent magic expenditure had exhausted me. My head hurt at the thought that both my mates were out there, putting themselves in danger for reasons that I couldn’t—or simply refused to—comprehend.

With all the magical nonsense that was going on, I decided to go check on my mother. She was in the bedroom she shared with my dad, seated by the window. She was still looking tired.

“Honey, hi,” she murmured when I leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek. “Your father went downstairs to get me something to eat. Do you want anything?”

The care and love in her expression made me feel like crying.

“It’s fine,” I said, taking a seat next to her. “I lost my appetite.”

Mom frowned. “I hope you’re not still blaming yourself for what happened with the thorn wall.”

My gaze flickered to my mother’s arm, and its still-healing wound. I still couldn’t believe the wisp had stolen my mind like that, forced me to hurt my own mother.

*What the fuck is wrong with you, Cali?*

So many things, apparently.

“I failed my family by not being able to stand up to the wisp, Mom,” I whispered. I couldn’t just *not* acknowledge the elephant in the room. “Sometimes I wish…” I smiled bitterly, shaking my head. “Sometimes I wish I weren’t Fae at all.”

Mom gasped. “Don’t talk that way!”

My headache got worse, just like the pressure behind my eyes. *Of course* I was pathetic enough to start crying.

“There’s something wrong with me, Mom,” I whispered. “Look at what I did to you.” I gestured at her arm. “What if the wisp wants something even worse, next time?”

The guilt felt white-hot, pressing down onto my chest. I’d been through a lot of shit, but I’d never come so close to hating myself.

“I’ll admit, I was scared when you charged in, looking for my blood,” Mom said, squeezing my hand. “But I still saw the fight in your eyes, sweetheart. No matter what your body did.”

“But what if it’s worse next time?” My voice cracked, emotion pouring through it. “Who knows what will happen then? What if I can’t fight it?”

The tears had started falling, and I quickly wiped them away, ashamed. I’d hurt my mother, and here she was, trying to comfort me. I was such a joke.

“You’re not a joke,” Mom said. I’d said that last part out loud, apparently, and her expression grew intense as she stared at me. “You’re my daughter, and I know you’re strong. I believe in you—I believe that you will come out on top of whatever is going on with that wisp.”

It felt like I was grasping at straws, but my mom’s words made me feel a teensy bit better. Whether I deserved it was up for debate, but I couldn’t help but accept her comfort, just to ease the horrible sense of dread inside me.

*How did we all end up here?*

I left my mom to rest. She’d helped me so much with just a few words, and I could think of someone else who needed encouragement right now—time to pass it on.

I found Russell kneeling at Julia’s side, sobbing and softly pleading with her to come back to him. Her eyes were closed, every inch of her so still that it was obvious she wasn’t just sleeping. She seemed so fragile. Joan and Paris were standing off to the side, looking sad for their son and helpless to make him feel better.

“The Bitterfangs, they took her from me, and I did nothing to stop it. It’s all my fault, you know,” he whispered to me, jaw clenched. “My plan was so fucking stupid—I can’t believe you guys agreed to it.” He looked at his moms, then at me. “Why the *hell* did you all agree? This is your fault, too!”

Joan sighed. “Russell, please—”

“It’s true!” he burst out. “You *all* failed Julia and me—you were supposed to be the adults, you were supposed to help us, and look what happened!”

Paris shook her head, reaching out to touch him. He flinched back.

“I know you’re hurting,” she said, “but this isn’t the way to fix things—”

“I never wanted any of this!” He turned to me, sniffling. “Julia and I had the perfect plan to get away. But now she’s gone, and I wish I were dead too. I want everything to just…” His voice dropped to a devastated whisper. “*Stop*.”

He started crying again, and his anguish was crushing. I knew that grief was making him lash out, and I didn’t believe for a second that he truly blamed us for what had happened. But I didn’t want him to blame himself, either.

“Marta and her team will bring Julia back,” I said firmly. Russell let me touch his shoulder, which I took as a good sign. “I’m sorry it all came down to this. I’m sorry we didn’t handle things better, but I still think your plan can work. It hasn’t failed. Not yet, not truly. Okay?”

Russell’s gaze flicked up to me. He let me hug him, and his moms watched with matching sad expressions.

“I can’t bear seeing her like this. If she’s dead…”

“I’m no expert in how all these things work,” I said. “But I feel like if you let Julia know that you’re with her and urge her to come back, maybe that will motivate her to move closer, back to the edge of the spirit world. Maybe that’s the thing that will help the others find her.”

Russell used a tissue to wipe his face, clearly pondering my words. In the end, he nodded, and he looked back at Julia, taking her limp hand in his again. In a trembling voice, he told her he loved her, begged her to listen to his voice and let it guide her back.

“I can’t… I can’t live without you, Julia,” he whispered, and I knew he meant it.

It broke my heart. I couldn’t watch any more.

I stepped outside, away from all the pain. I hoped the cold evening air would revive me, but bad thoughts started twisting in my head all over again. I kept thinking about Xavier going into the spirit world with Ava. As much as I tried to justify it, to make sense of it, I couldn’t. But I needed to trust him. I knew he wanted to help Julia, too.

And then there was Greyson.

I understood where he was coming from, wanting to take care of Lance. Still, I hadn’t wanted him to go—Julia needed to be our top priority right now, not revenge. At least, that was how I felt—but when all was said and done, I didn’t know if I was right. Maybe Greyson was. Maybe we both were.

I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself. I felt almost naked without either of my mates nearby. I’d grown used to their comfort, their love and attention, and half of me felt pathetic for needing them so badly. But the other half, the louder half, still ached for them both.

*If there was ever a time I needed them, it’s right now.*

Xavier wasn’t going to be back any time soon, so I looked into the trees, searching for any sign of Greyson. Instead, I spotted a dim glow. Something was coming toward me, moving just above the tree line. I immediately knew what it was.

Another wisp.

*No no no! NOT AGAIN!*

I froze for a second.

*Should I go get my mom? But she said—she said she believes in me, that I can fight this. I can do it. Right?*

Besides, it was possible that this wasn’t *that* kind of wisp. The bad kind. Maybe it was a real one, coming to help me. How could I even tell the difference? How could I even—

“*Break the mirror*,” said a voice in my head.

And there was my answer.

The wisp hovered in the yard. “*Break the mirror. Pick up a rock, walk upstairs, and smash the mirror.*”

I covered my ears. I tried to shout, *STOP! Leave me alone!* But no words came out of my mouth.

“*Your mate betrayed you. He chose to go into the spirit world with Ava*,” the wisp said. “*Are you just going to stand by and let him humiliate you?*”

I had to fight this. I tried to conjure up the images of the hospital room, reminding myself of my mom, the moon buttercup, the look of the hospital room, the smell, the flowers by the window… I had to fight this, I had to fight this, I had to—

I couldn’t fight this.

As if it were attached to strings, my hand picked up a cold rock from the frozen ground.

# Episode 3694

**Xavier**

My first impulse was to punch the ghost-like man who was approaching us. The man’s eyes were fixed on Ava, in a way that suggested he hadn’t even noticed me standing next to her.

And Ava?

She *knew him.*

“Vaughn,” she breathed. “How did you find me?”

The ghost paused a few feet away, smiling. Creepily. “Oh, Ava. Ever since you escaped the spirit world, I’ve been keeping an eye on you. How could I ever forget you?”

A hint of a smile lifted Ava’s lips, and I scowled. Was I seriously feeling jealous of a ghost? Was that what my life had come to? I could’ve blamed the jealousy on my wolf, but that would’ve been a big fat lie.

I liked none of this.

I cleared my throat. “Are you going to introduce me to your ghost friend?” I asked Ava testily.

“Right!” She nodded. “Vaughn, this is Xavier. Xavier, Vaughn.”

Vaughn narrowed his eyes for a beat, peering at me. And then there was a flash of recognition. “Xavier! You’re the one who delivered Ava to the spirit world—and in such a gruesome fashion.” He raised an eyebrow. “And yet here you both are, together. Interesting bedfellows, wouldn’t you say?”

I growled, ready to throw that punch I’d been contemplating, but then Ava gripped my arm and pulled me back.

“Vaughn is a friend, Xavier,” she said evenly. “He was one of the first spirits I encountered when I came here. He helped me… adjust.”

What the fuck was with that pause before “adjust”?

“I did more than that, Ava,” Vaughn said in a leery way that made alarms go off in my head. He approached her, extending one ghostly hand and trailing it across her arm. “You needed someone to look after you. You were completely distraught after your so-called mate had murdered you, and you did all you could to fight the darkness. But fighting one’s fate is a senseless endeavor.” He turned to me, smiling again. Like he was enjoying this. “Don’t you agree, Xavier?”

I said nothing. Mainly because if I’d opened my mouth, it would’ve been to tell him to eat shit and die. Not the most brilliant retort, considering he was already dead.

Regardless, Vaughn didn’t even wait for an answer. He turned to Ava again, that same ghostly hand hovering over her shoulder. “You needed someone to watch your back, sweetheart. And I needed someone to watch mine.” Vaughn turned to me, eyebrows arched. “It was a symbiotic relationship.”

*I’ll bet it was…*

The way Vaughn kept touching Ava, even though he couldn’t actually fucking touch her, made me fume. She was letting him do it, too, without flinching away—not even when he’d pointed out that I was the one who’d murdered her.

“It was a hard time, Vaughn,” she said calmly. “But we were there for each other, it’s true.”

Clearly—judging by this conversation and the way they were interacting like it was totally fucking normal—Ava hadn’t been all that lonely while she was dead. Come to think of it, I didn’t actually know all that much about the time she’d spent here. Did I even want to know, though?

Still, when I got back to the real world, I was absolutely going to ask Big Mac if ghosts could fuck.

“How come you’re back, though?” Vaughn asked Ava. “Did you and Xavier decide that life was too much for the both of you?”

“We’re not alone.” Ava gestured behind us, at Marta. She’d been wandering around aimlessly, closing her eyes and opening them, fighting to concentrate. Lilac was by her, holding her hand. He was trying his best to comfort her.

“We’re here to find a teenage girl who accidentally overdosed on a death potion,” Ava continued. “It’s—”

I put an arm around Ava’s shoulders, subtly moving her away from Vaughn.

“It’s a long story, actually,” I cut in. “And we really have to go now. Time is of the essence.”

Also, the less we had to deal with Vaughn, the better. Of course, he didn’t take the fucking hint.

His hollow gaze was now fixed on Marta and Lilac. “Interesting…”

“What?” I snapped.

“I can tell that the young man and woman in your party have a complicated relationship,” he said, still staring at them. “And a history with this place.”

I scowled. Was this fucker serious?

“How do you know that about Marta and Lilac?” I asked. “Are you taking a wild guess here, or can you somehow detect this stuff because you’re a spirit?”

Vaughn eyed me, his lips pressed in a thin line. “Neither. I can infer a lot of things by watching how they interact.” He eyed my arm, still wrapped around Ava’s shoulders. “I’m doing the same by watching you and Ava.”

I bristled. “You know nothing about Marta and Lilac. Don’t assume otherwise.”

He shrugged. “I’m right more often than not, Xavier. It probably helps that I was an Alpha before I met my demise. You have to be sharp when you’re leading a large, successful pack.”

The dead werewolf asshole’s words only served to remind me that I *wasn’t* a real, pack-leading Alpha. My patience had run the fuck out.

“Why don’t you put that sharp mind to use and help us find Julia, then?” I snapped.

Vaughn actually gasped. In excitement.

I immediately regretted my suggestion.

“Ava, I did tell you that I’d always have your back, right?” he said. “Of course I’ll help you.”

Ava’s gaze flicked to me, then back to Vaughn. “We appreciate that, Vaughn. Did you happen to see Julia when she arrived? She’s fifteen or so.”

Vaughn smiled. “You know I’m always interested in meeting new arrivals. Yes, I did see her. I can still almost taste the fear that was coming off her…”

He licked his pale lips, and I clenched my fist.

Ava’s voice filled my head. *Play along, Xavier. He really might be able to help us.*

Fucking *shit*.

“Do you think you could lead us to her?” Ava asked Vaughn.

“I can’t make any promises,” he said, “but I can make some assumptions. I can put myself in Julia’s shoes and try to figure it out.”

I’d have preferred to walk into a pit of fire rather than keep listening to Vaughn as he rubbed his so-called sharpness in our faces. But since Julia’s life was on the line, I forced myself to be patient. Kind of.

“*And?*” I prompted when Vaughn didn’t elaborate.

“*And*, if I were a new arrival who’d died under such tragic circumstances,” Vaughn said, “I would seek relief at the River of Solitude.” He gestured ahead. “It’s not far.”

Ava looked up at me and nodded. I took a deep breath and beckoned to Lilac. Within seconds, he and Marta were in front of me. I told them about Vaughn and the river.

“Let’s find the river, then,” Marta said.

I was stewing as we started walking. Vaughn had pissed me off spectacularly. How well did he *really* know Ava? I’d gotten to know her in the flesh—literally. No matter what had happened between Ava and Vaughn while she’d been trapped here, what she and I had was something Vaughn would never fucking experience. He just couldn’t know her the way I did. It wasn’t possible.

I shot a glance at him, my fists still itching for violence, and reminded myself that I couldn’t actually punch a ghost. And if we could get this asshole to help us locate Julia, then it would be worth every annoying moment we were forced to spend in his company.

“Why *is* there fog?” I asked, looking around as we headed in the direction Vaughn had indicated. There was so much of it. *Constantly*.

“It just happens,” Vaughn replied vaguely.

“How long have we been here?” Marta asked anxiously. “What if we’re already too late?”

I glanced at my watch, then did a double take to make sure it was working.

“Something’s wrong with my watch,” I said. “It’s not working.”

“Time is fluid here,” Vaughn said. “It moves at its own pace.”

I wasn’t comforted by that. Still, there was nothing we could do but keep looking for the girl.

“Just get us to Julia,” I said through gritted teeth.

Vaughn snorted insolently, and Ava raised an eyebrow at me.

*You’re being so rude to Vaughn*, she said*. I think it’s weird.*

I scowled. *What do you mean? I’m always rude.*

*You’re being ruder than usual*, Ava amended. *If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were jealous of him. Need I remind you that Vaughn’s a ghost? He’s been dead for over a hundred years.*

I bristled, ready to reply, but then Marta suddenly stopped.

“What is it?” Lilac demanded.

“I can feel Julia. She’s close,” Marta whispered.

We all looked around, and then Lilac pointed at a spot somewhere in the distance.

“There!” he said. “That must be her!”

And then he took off, running toward the shadows.

# Episode 3695

I clutched the rock in my hands and stared at it. It was very shiny and very sharp and very nice, actually. A nice, heavy rock. It felt so heavy. Why was it so heavy? Why had I picked it up? I didn’t remember starting a rock collection, or deciding to adopt a pet rock.

This was… wrong.

The wisp hovered above me like a deranged, ecstatic bee, suddenly energized. It got brighter, moved closer. “*Yes, yes, take that back into the house!*”

Into the house?

“*Finish what you’ve started, Caliana. Break the mirror.*”

That didn’t sound right. But I had such a strong desire to please the voice. There was something familiar about it, something comforting… But was that feeling real? Was any of this real?

Was I dreaming?

I recalled my mom’s warning—that the wisp was not of the Fae world, and that something evil was controlling it.

The wisp glowed violently, the voice gasped. “*Me? Evil? Never!*”

Never.

Never. My mom had to be wrong. Of course.

“*Of course*,” the voice repeated.

But as I started to walk toward the house, the feeling that something was wrong returned tenfold. I didn’t want to carry this rock, no matter how shiny and nice it looked. It was heavy, and I didn’t want it.

But when it tried to drop it, I couldn’t.

I cradled the rock with one arm, reached for the front door. I didn’t want to open the door—*no no no!—*yet I watched in helpless amazement as my fingers wrapped around the doorknob and twisted. My entire hand seemed to be working independently.

This was terrifying, and so fucking wrong.

I forced myself to remember the moment when I’d kissed Greyson and defied Artemis’s compulsion. How had I done that?

I tried so hard, but my hand wouldn’t move from the doorknob. But *no*—I couldn’t just follow do what this fucked-up evil wisp wanted. I couldn’t throw the rock at the ghost mirror. That would mean trapping my mate, Marta, Lilac, and Ava in the spirit world for all eternity.

“*You failed when you tried to keep yourself from hurting your mother, though*,” the voice said. “*You can’t ignore the inevitable, Caliana. Finish what you started.*”

I was breathing hard. The wisp glowed with a burning kind of light, and then it faded away. I was hurting and numb at the same time, which should’ve been impossible. How was any of this even real? I paused, staring at the rock in my hand.

It felt so cold.

Suddenly, the image of Xavier clasping Ava’s hand and being pulled into the spirit world filled my mind. My grip on the rock tightened.

And then I walked across the threshold and into the house.

I could see some of the pack gathered around Julia’s prone body in the living room. She looked so frail and small. Russell wept over her, holding her hand while his moms tried to comfort him. It wasn’t working. None of it was working, and a teenage girl was dying.

And I was just standing here with a rock in my hand.

What was I doing?

*What is happening to me?*

I was supposed to be helping Russell and Julia. I was supposed to be a good person, a good sister and daughter and mate. I was supposed to be strong, but all I could do right now was hold that fucking rock and move toward the stairs.

I couldn’t stop myself. I wasn’t in control of myself.

And underneath the foggy feeling of compulsion, there was terror.

“Cali? Are you okay?”

Artemis’s voice. I looked up, and there she was, climbing down the stairs as I climbed up. She was very pretty. Much prettier than me. Even when she frowned, watching the rock in my hand.

“What are you doing with that rock?” she asked.

“*No*,” the voice said in my head. “*This doesn’t concern Artemis. It’s none of her business. Walk away from her.*”

“This isn’t for you to know,” I told her.

Artemis looked bewildered. “What are you talking about? And why do you have a rock?”

I paused. I looked at the rock again. It was shiny and sharp and nice, but also very strange. Very strange. Why did I have it? Why was I holding this rock?

“*Finish what you started*,” said the voice in my head. The wisp’s voice.“*Go to the mirror. Break it.*”

This was the wisp’s doing, and I had to listen.

*Or else.*

I made a move to walk past Artemis, but she blocked me. “Cali! Are you okay? This isn’t—”

“Get out of my way!” I hissed, glaring up at her.

Artemis didn’t move. “This isn’t you. You must be more affected by the magic weirdness than we thought. You should go lie down.”

She reached for my arm.

“*No! Don’t let her touch you! DON’T LET HER!*”

The voice shouted in my head, and the energy buildup inside me was immediate. I felt a sudden wild burstof magic, like an explosion, then it poured out of my free hand—

And slammed right into Artemis, who went crashing into the wall.

“Cali…” she choked out, looking up at me with wide eyes. There was blood at the corner of her mouth.

*That’s my sister. That’s my sister, my sister, my—*

No.

I had to move. The rock was cold and nice and sharp, and I had to move.

But when I walked past Artemis, my feet hesitated. My heart pounded, and it was the first time I’d felt it since the wisp had appeared.

That was my sister, dazed on the ground, groaning. I should help her.

“I should help you,” I breathed.

Artemis let out a sound like a sob.

I tried to let the rock go, but my hand only held onto it and shook.

“*Go on*,” the voice said. “*Finish what you started.*”

I moved past Artemis, determined to follow my orders. As I should.

“Cali, no!” Artemis groaned in pain, grabbing weakly at my legs. “Don’t do this!”

I easily broke away from my sister’s grip and kept walking up the stairs, rock in hand. The rock had started off cold, but now it felt hot. It got hotter when I passed by Xavier’s door.

Xavier. He’d left me for Ava.

He’d kissed Ava before. He’d wanted Ava before, wanted her hands on him, even while he kept saying that he loved me. While he kept LYING.

That wasn’t love.

He’d left me for the mate he was always supposed to have. He’d betrayed me, betrayed everything we’d fought for all this time, so he could be with another woman.

Greyson’s room was next, and I paused by his door, the rock growing hotter still. Greyson was gone as well. He’d left to get his revenge. There was a chance he would die trying, and then I’d be grief-stricken, broken beyond repair.

Greyson had betrayed me, too.

I reached Big Mac’s room. The witch wasn’t very nice, but she was very powerful. She wouldn’t like my rock. I paused in the doorway—the mirror was in the middle of her room, exposed.

But Big Mac was no longer powerful.

She lay on her bed, breathing heavily.

I sneered. Even the witch had failed at her magic. Mrs. Smith was tending to her, caressing her face. And when I entered the room, neither one of them saw me. I stopped in front of the mirror, saw my reflection as I stood there. Me, and the rock.

That was me.

I almost didn’t recognize myself.

My eyes were dark, and I looked angry.

I looked vicious.

That couldn’t be me…

“*It is you. Your true self.*”

I held the rock and looked past my reflection, beyond the light. I knew they were in there, all of them. And that was where they’d stay. Ava, Xavier, and… I couldn’t remember the rest. Xavier was the one who’d betrayed me. Now, they’d all have to pay.

This was what happened when men lied.

“*Finish what you started.*”

I raised the rock slowly, felt its weight. It was heavy. It could be deadly.

I could feel its potential.

“Cali,” Mrs. Smith called. “What are you doing?”

I ignored her, lifting the rock over my head.

“Cali…” Artemis’s raspy, broken voice. I saw her in the reflection—behind me, clutching the doorframe, causing a fuss as she fought to hold herself up. “Help,” she finally choked out. “You have to stop her!”

“What are you doing, child?” Big Mac hissed at me. She raised her hands to use magic, but she was too exhausted to keep them up. She was useless. “Cali, stop! You can fight this!”

I couldn’t fight.

My mates had betrayed me.

I’d hurt my mom, my sister.

I had nothing left.

I was nothing.

“Cali…” Mrs. Smith was walking slowly toward me. She wasn’t shouting. She stared at my rock—raised above my head, ready to strike. “You have to stop now, before it’s too late. Please stop. I promise, you can beat this.”

She was begging me.

“I can’t,” I whispered. Why did I sound like I was crying?

Why did my voice not sound like my own?

“*Finish what you started…*”

“I have to finish what I started,” I said.

And then I brought the rock down, aiming for the mirror.

# Episode 3696

**Greyson**

When we arrived at the creek and Ravi wasn’t there, I cursed my decision to let him go anywhere without us. I should’ve scouted the path myself, or sent Rishika. We were both more experienced than Ravi. Losing him—losing *any* pack member—in order to get rid of Lance was just unacceptable. I should’ve done this on my own, without endangering anyone from the pack.

A one-man mission, just like when I’d escaped Silas and lived as a Rogue.

*Ravi’s scent trail comes to an end right here*, Rishika said, nosing at a large wet rock by the creek.

*Check the opposite side*,I replied.

She leapt over the body of water and sniffed around, then shook her head. *Nothing. I can’t even detect the Bitterfangs anymore.*

*Me neither*,I replied.

*We should split up*, Rishika said. *Search upstream and downstream. Ravi might’ve realized the Bitterfangs used the water to hide their scents and followed them through the creek.*

But there was no way I was going to let Rishika out of my sight right now. I couldn’t lose her, too. Ravi had to be okay—he *had to* be*.* The Bitterfangs hadn’t caught him, and he was fine. Just lost. Even though he knew the territory.

I was in deep fucking denial.

*Let’s stick together to search*, I said*. It might take longer, but it’ll be safer. If this is some kind of trap, we should face it together.*

Rishika didn’t argue. She didn’t seem anxious over Ravi’s disappearance, either. I wondered if that was because she trusted my ability to find him, or because she trusted Ravi’s abilities *not* to be found by the Bitterfangs. Or perhaps she simply trusted *herself* to get through it all without any issues. This was routine to her. It should’ve been routine to me as well, after all the shit I’d been through in my life.

And yet, it wasn’t.

Guilt seeped through me, and it had so many reasons to exist. As we searched upstream, I kept thinking about the look on Cali’s face when I’d left her today—the hurt, the disappointment. I’d been so angry at Xavier for basically calling me a coward that I’d almost snapped. I wished I’d taken more time to explain things to Cali, to help her understand why Lance had to be dealt with, no matter what.

I’d only let Lance get away in the first place to protect Russell and Julia. But that hadn’t meant I intended to ignore the bastard’s threats. As soon as this was over, I would make things right with Cali. I never wanted her to look at me like that again. It might take a while for her to understand where I was coming from, but I could be patient.

I’d wait for her till the goddamn end of time.

But first, I had to find Ravi. Where the hell had he gone? Ravi was smart, and loyal to the pack—he would never run away. He just wouldn’t. The only reasonable scenario I could entertain was that he’d been captured, or even killed. The mere possibility made rage settle on my chest, pressing down hard.

*I can’t pick up any scents*, Rishika said, pausing. *You?*

*No*.

*Then we should head back, try searching downstream*, she said.

I agreed. Once we started moving in the other direction, Rishika’s earlier calm cracked. She was getting antsy, and I knew that staying silent and letting her stew would be a bad call.

*I’m worried, Greyson.*

*I know, me too.*

*Since we know he didn’t run off, he must’ve been attacked. But* where *was the noise? Why didn’t we hear it?* Rishika asked grimly. *What if they killed him before he could make any noise? Snapped his neck and—*

*I don’t think they killed him*, I interrupted, pausing by the creek to scent the air. *There’s no blood. Just his scent.* *They probably captured him so they could use him as leverage.*

That seemed to put Rishika’s mind at ease—but only for a moment. *That still doesn’t explain why there were no sounds of a struggle.* The moment she finished her sentence, Rishika froze. Her alert gaze flicked around. *Wait.*

*What?* I asked.

She gestured downstream with her paw. *Do you hear that?*

I concentrated—and then I heard it. The distinct splashing of feet in the water.

*Ravi’s scent is more potent downstream*, I said. *Either he’s found something or someone’s found him.*

Rishika nodded, and we scurried to take cover by some boulders at the creek edge.

*Whoever this is*, I said, *they’re trespassing on Redwood territory. When they approach, we attack.*

*I’ll take the lead*, Rishika said. It was our usual method, whenever we ended up fighting together—our enemy would see her first, then me, and my size would take them by surprise.

I heard approaching footsteps, and a dark, wolf-shaped shadow moved toward our hiding spot.

Rishika tensed, then leapt out over the boulders, snarling.

I followed, and it took me a second to realize that the enemy wolf was actually Ravi.

He stumbled back, letting out a yip.

*What the hell, Rishika?* he burst out. *You scared the shit out of me!*

Rishika was not amused.

*I’ll be asking the questions, here*, I said. *I told you to stop at the creek, not go off on a fucking field trip. Where the hell have you been?*

He huffed. *I followed the Bitterfang scent, but I lost it at the creek. I tried to mind link with you, but you were too far away for it to catch, so I finally gave up and returned downstream.*

*I guess that explains why his scent was more potent here*, Rishika said sheepishly.

*I think they used the creek to cover their tracks*, Ravi said. *They’re* *probably following it upstream to meet back up with Lance.*

That made sense. But it also meant we’d wasted so much fucking time.

*Should we go back to the fork in the path?* Rishika asked. *Or should we take a chance and keep going upstream?*

*We’ve taken too many chances already*, I replied. *Going upstream is a gamble. At least if we go back to the path, we’ll have a solid trail to follow.*

Neither of my companions argued, though Xavier absolutely would have, if he’d been here. I appreciated the change.

*From now on, we stick together*, I told the other two. *No more scouting trips. Don’t go off chasing butterflies.*

*I didn’t intend to lose you guys*, Ravi grumbled.

*Well, we were worried, so don’t do it again*, Rishika said irritably.

*She’s right*, I said.

I could’ve sworn that Ravi seemed pleased by our admission. When we finally made it back to the fork in the path, we picked up Lance’s scent. It was a bit weaker than before, but still plenty to go on.

*This could still be some kind of elaborate trap, so keep your wits about you*, Rishika reminded us.

She moved to take the lead as usual, since she was the best tracker, but I blocked her.

*I’ll take point*, I said. *You and Ravi cover the rear.*

Rishika tilted her head. *Why?*

*If there’s an attack, it’ll come from the front. I don’t want to put either of you in harm’s way*, I replied. My answer was a little too honest, too raw, but it was all I had.

*Seriously?* Ravi looked at me like I was being absurd. *That doesn’t matter!*

*We’re a pack—we look out for each other*, Rishika said.

I’ll *take the lead*,Ravi said.

*Yeah? Make sure not to wander off*, I told him testily. He rolled his eyes as I added, *I appreciate you both, but I’m still going to take the lead.*

I started off along the path, and the other two followed. I stopped every so often to take in our surroundings. It was getting darker, and even with my wolf’s eyesight, the shadows at this time of day made it difficult to see clearly.

*I’m picking up the scent of blood again*, I said.

*You think it’s Lance’s?* Rishika asked.

*Not sure yet.*

Could Lance actually have suffered a wound too serious to heal? Could he have died? The possibility didn’t sit well with me. I would’ve noticed if I’d ripped the guy’s throat out.

I wanted Lance to die by my hand, suffering for every threat he’d dared utter against Cali, for every horrid thing he’d done to Russell and Julia. I wanted to press down on his fucking throat until the last gasp of air was forced out of him.

I suspected that kind of feeling was something Cali would never understand.

*I’m smelling blood as well, now*, Ravi said.

All three of us moved cautiously forward, toward a rocky patch of earth. The smell of death hung in the breeze. For a moment, I was reminded of vampires.

*To your left*, Ravi said. His voice sounded hoarse.

When I turned, he gestured to a spot where something disrupted the natural curved outline of the rocks. Something that wasn’t moving. Something that glistened with blood.

A body.

# Episode 3697

**Xavier**

I caught up with Lilac and pulled him back.

“Hey, don’t go running off,” I said. “This place is dangerous!”

I felt a sense of responsibility toward Lilac. I always had—like I was his big brother.

The young wolf stared at me, huffing before he gestured ahead. “But I’m pretty sure that’s—”

Marta gasped. “Julia! I think it’s her too!” She pointed at the figure. It was hunched over, standing by a river of swirling grey and black.

“It really might be her,” Ava whispered, her grip on my arm tightening.

When had she even put her hand there? But it didn’t matter—I wasn’t about to shake her off. I had to keep control of the group, couldn’t afford to let any one of them slip out of my grasp and wander off. Except Vaughn. He could go to hell—literally—for all I cared.

Marta took a step forward.

“Julia?” she called out gently.

The figure turned slowly, and I heard Ava and Lilac gasp. I didn’t make a sound, but my shock was just as big as theirs. The figure… It was Julia, but it also wasn’t. It looked like a composite of living flesh and something else. Something ethereal. Her eyes were blank, her skin translucent enough that we could see the shadows of her bones.

It was fucking terrifying.

“Be careful,” I told everyone. “We don’t want to spook her.”

Vaughn nodded. “She looks like that because she’s on the cusp. One move in the wrong direction, and she could be lost forever.”

Ava released me, nodding with determination. “I’ll talk to her. I’ve got this.”

Marta and Lilac exchanged a look but didn’t raise any objections.

I watched as Ava slowly approached Julia. The rest of us followed, not making any sudden movements. Julia was staring at us with those eerie blank eyes.

“Julia?” Ava said gently. “Remember me? It’s Ava.”

Julia’s voice sounded frail. “Ava…”

“Yes, Ava. You stayed with me, remember?”

Julia paused. Then she nodded.

“We’re here for you,” Ava said, gesturing at herself, then at the rest of us. “We’ve come to take you back to Russell.”

Julia’s translucent skin flickered. “That’s weird,” she said, sounding confused. “I’ve been looking for Russell, but I haven’t been able to find him. Where is he?”

Ava shot me a look. *What the hell do I say to her?* she asked.

*The truth*, I replied.

Ava moved closer to Julia. “You haven’t been able to find Russell here because Russell isn’t dead,” she said calmly.

Julia’s dark, haunted eyes went wide. “But… But I saw him! He was dead!”

I tensed. Julia was getting worked up. What if she got so upset, she drifted away accidentally? Wasn’t that what Vaughn had warned us about?

“Julia, please listen to us; we’re trying to help you,” Marta said, moving to stand next to Ava. “Russell used a potion to fake his own death—”

“Why would he do that?” Julia asked, her voice cracking. Her ghostly form shivered.

“He had a plan for the two of you to be together, but it went wrong,” Marta said. “I helped bring him back to the world of the living, and I can do the same to you, if you let me.”

Marta extended her hand toward Julia.

For a second, nobody spoke, and I thought we’d convinced her.

But then Julia backed up in obvious fear. “No, no! This is a trick—Russell is here! He has to be!”

There was movement in the corner of my eye. Something stirred in the water, down by Julia’s feet. I couldn’t make it out, but it was real, and it was moving toward Julia, slithering across the water. What *was* that?

I didn’t want to stick around and find out.

“Julia,” I said, fighting to keep my voice smooth. “You have to come with us. We don’t have much time.”

She was shaking, her skin growing more translucent by the second. “Time for what?”

“Time to save you,” I said. “If you wait much longer, we won’t be able to get you out of here. You won’t be reunited with Russell. Listen to us, *please*.”

Julia stood there. She let out a quiet sob, shaking her head. “I’m so confused…”

My heart was hammering. While Ava and Marta kept working on Julia, I eyed the strange slimy strand that was slowly making its way toward the girl.

“What the fuck is that thing?” I whispered to Vaughn.

The ghost looked solemn. “That’s the Summoner.”

“It looks like a fucking tentacle arm to me.”

“Indeed. It takes you to a place worse than this,” Vaughn said grimly. “A place far below, beyond the reach of the magic that brought you here. And once a spirit is taken to that place, it remains there for eternity.”

For *eternity*? Julia was just a fucking kid, barely starting her life. I couldn’t let her be damned to such a dark, hopeless future. I kept my eyes on the slithering thing, cautiously approaching it. It kept stopping and starting as it headed in Julia’s direction, like it didn’t want to be noticed. I wanted to lunge for it, but I was worried that if I made a fuss and Julia spotted the thing, she’d panic.

“Julia, you have to trust us,” I said. “Russell is waiting for you. He’d never recover if we came back without you.”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” the girl whispered. She looked like she was crying, but there were no tears in her eyes.

“We are,” I said. “I promise.”

The Summoner was only half a foot away from Julia. That was far too close for comfort. I got even closer, ready to snatch Julia up and pull her away from the river, away from that creepy slithering tentacle, but then Julia whimpered.

As if emboldened by the sound of sorrow, the Summoner’s tentacle flew forward, wrapping around her ankle. Julia screamed, falling down as the thing pulled her toward the water. I lunged forward and grabbed her.

“Xavier!” Ava shouted.

Julia was crying, begging for help, and others were with me in seconds, grabbing hold of her. Ava had a good grip on the kid, firm.

*Hold on to Julia*, I told her. *I’m going for the monster!*

Ava held Julia’s hand, pulling harder as I released my grasp on the girl.

“Let go of her!” I growled, then attacked the tentacle that had suddenly grown larger, as if sensing the threat.

The moment my hand made contact with it—the moment I felt that textured cold skin that somehow burned—I was hit with a sucker punch of dark emotions. Dread, horror, despair—it all came at me at once, slamming into my chest.

In the blink of an eye, the tentacle released Julia and attacked me, wrapping around my calf like a whip.

I froze.

“We have to get the hell out of here!” Lilac shouted, pulling Julia away as she screamed in terror.

“Xavier, snap out of it!” Ava yelled at the same time, and I felt her voice course through my veins.

I pushed through the drowning emotions and gripped the tentacle with a snarl. My every muscle cried out as I fought in vain to release myself. And then the tentacle wrapped tighter around my leg and *pulled*.

Pulled me toward the water.

I dropped to the ground with a thud, felt the pain of impact for just a moment before I was dragged across the rough, skin-grating surface. Ava screamed, and my wolf howled, his fury and despair echoing through my body. I tried to shift, but the instinct was locked up, caged. No matter how hard my wolf urged me, how hard I tried, I couldn’t set him free. I clawed at the mud of the riverbank with my blunt human nails, kicking uselessly at the tentacle.

“You have to shift, Xavier!” Ava shouted. A second later, she was on the ground, reaching for my hand. She held me tight, put all her strength into it, and our eyes locked.

Suddenly, I was no longer in the spirit world.

I was in the Airstream with Ava.

The dark was gone, and there was only light.

There was only Ava, and I was kissing her, fighting the desire she had stirred within me. Only I didn’t want to fight. I wanted her like I’d never wanted her before. I wasn’t going to stop her when she begged to go down on me, when she looked at my cock and licked her lips.

This time, I was going to claim her, take her, just like I used to. Just like she wanted me to.

*This is what we both want*, my wolf growled.

I reached for Ava, but something pulled me back. Why?

I’d made up my mind, and I wasn’t going to resist her any longer. I fucking *couldn’t*—my wolf wouldn’t allow it. My skin was feverish, and everything around me was hot, and I needed Ava like I needed air.

But the more I tried to get to her, the further away she felt.

“Xavier!” That was Lilac’s voice. Why the hell was Lilac in the trailer? I snarled and tried to slap him the fuck away, but he kept grabbing at me, shouting my name. And then Ava looked at me again, her blue eyes gleaming as she reared back—

And slapped me in the face.

I choked and coughed, stunned and shuddering.

All the heat vanished.

I was left in the cold, and the illusion was gone. I was thrust back into the spirit world, back to the river bank, where a fucking *tentacle* was dragging me into the water.

“Ava!” I shouted.

It was the first time I’d managed to speak since the thing had caught me.

She responded with a growl, partially shifting so she could slash at the tentacle with her claws. It released its grip—finally, fucking *finally*—and I stumbled forward, into Ava. Her arms were strong around me, and she soothed me as I panted and shivered.

The desire I’d felt just moments ago had vanished, though. I knew where we were, and why. Where were the others? I couldn’t hear them.

“Fuck,” I choked out, pushing away from Ava as I looked around in alarm.

Marta, Vaughn, and Julia were gone.

# Episode 3698

As I brought the rock down toward the mirror, a hand shot out and caught mine, stopping me.

I looked over to find Mrs. Smith standing next to me. “Cali? What are you doing?”

I stared at her in shock. What *was* I doing? How had the wisp pushed me to *this*?

Mrs. Smith reached for the rock and tried to wrench it out of my grasp, but for some reason, I clung onto it. Then, in the corner of my eye, I saw that the wisp had reappeared in the mirror. I looked at it—*stared* at it—trying to figure out if it was real, or if I was just imagining it. Was *any* of this real?

“*Break the mirror. Do it now. Close the portal to the spirit world.*”

I looked back at Mrs. Smith, who was still trying to tug the rock from my hands. Why was she trying to stop me from doing what the wisp wanted me to do? I had to do *something*—I had to stop her from stopping me.

I felt my magic surging up inside me. I was going to have to blast Mrs. Smith.

I’d raised my free hand to do just that when something slammed into me from behind. Whatever it was had hit me like a charging bull, and I was thrown to the floor. I hit the ground with a thud and a groan, and when I twisted around, I saw that it was Artemis pinning me to the ground.

Using my distraction to her advantage, Mrs. Smith yanked the rock from my hand and threw it aside, out of reach.

When I looked up at Artemis, I could see that her mouth was moving. She was speaking to me—yelling, maybe. She looked angry, but I couldn’t hear her. I was only paying attention to the wisp, which was floating in the mirror behind Artemis’s head.

“*Fight, Caliana!*”it commanded.“*Fight back! Regain control. And smash the mirror!*”

I struggled to free myself, but it was no good. Artemis was just too strong, and finally, the urge to fight back began to fade. The voice of the wisp faded along with it.

“A wisp!” I told Artemis breathlessly. “There’s a wisp, in the mirror, just behind you. It’s there,” I said, shaking my head. “Can’t you see it—”

“Push through this, Cali!” Artemis commanded. “Remember who you are. Don’t let this thing control you. Don’t let *anything* control you. Resist it! I know you can do it. I’m sorry if I hurt you just now. I know you didn’t mean to attack me, and I know you don’t really want to break the mirror—”

I focused on the sound of my sister’s voice. I narrowed my world down to Artemis’s face and her voice.

Over her shoulder, the wisp in the mirror pulsed once, then began to fade. It grew fainter and fainter, until it finally vanished.

The helplessness I’d just been feeling dissipated. I saw the rock lying on the floor next to me, and tears welled up in my eyes as I realized what I’d just tried to do.

Artemis pulled me into a hug. “Hey, Cali, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

I shook my head against her shoulder, sobbing. “It’s *not* okay! I would never voluntarily do anything to hurt you, and I’m so sorry!”

“I know,” she said soothingly. “I know what it’s like to struggle with forces trying to make you do things that you know in your heart are wrong.”

I remembered how hard it had been for Artemis to break Letifer’s hold on her. She *did* know what I was going through. But unlike me, Artemis had known who to blame. I had no idea who or what was trying to make me act against my will, which made the already scary situation even worse.

“Cali!” My mom came running in. “What’s going on?” she demanded, seeing me on the floor with Artemis.

“Your daughter just tried to smash the mirror,” Big Mac said grimly.

“*What?*”

“You need to get her out of here,” the witch said. “*Now*. If the mirror breaks before Xavier and the others return from the spirit world, they could be trapped in there forever.”

My mom turned her terrified eyes on me. “Cali, is this true?”

I nodded, my heart thudding painfully in my chest.

“Was it the wisp again?”

Another nod.

“There was no wisp in here when I came in,” Artemis put in. “And there wasn’t one when Cali blasted me on the stairs, either.”

“There *was*!” I insisted. “It was here just a minute ago, in the mirror!”

I stared at the mirror, which only showed our reflections now. What did it mean? Was I going crazy? Was this the *due destini*? Was I finally beginning to lose my mind, because I couldn’t choose? Was I facing a rapid descent into madness?

It had to be something, because if I’d been in control of myself, I would *never* have done anything to hurt Xavier, or put him at any kind of risk—not in a million years. And the idea of trapping him forever in the world of the dead made my blood run cold.

My mom grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet.

“I think MacKenzie might be right,” Mrs. Smith said. “Maybe it would be best if you took Cali away from the mirror, for the moment. Just in case.”

I nodded. “I agree. I don’t want to take another chance.” What if another so-called wisp appeared? I looked over at Big Mac. “Can’t you do anything?”

The witch gave me a hard stare. “Like what, exactly?”

“Like cast a spell to protect me from the wisp? Or a spell to stop me from doing anything to damage the mirror? How about a barrier? Could you create one around the mirror?” I asked hopefully.

“No,” Mrs. Smith said quickly. “No, she can’t. MacKenzie is still recovering from the last barrier spell, Cali. She needs time to recuperate. Her magic is still weak and unpredictable.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call it *weak*,” Big Mac muttered, but she didn’t argue with Mrs. Smith’s magic ban.

“It’s fine,” my mom said. “Artemis and I will keep an eye on you, Cali. We’ll make sure you don’t do anything that could put Xavier and the others at risk.”

“Maybe you guys should lock me up?” I offered. *Unless I got out somehow again… Crap.*

Mom shook her head. “No, honey. That’s not necessary. We’ll figure this out.”

“How are you feeling?” Artemis asked, though I couldn’t tell if she was asking in general, or if she just felt bad because she’d tackled me.

I took a deep breath and tried to pull myself together before I answered my sister’s question. The voice that had been urging me to break the mirror had mercifully stopped, and I didn’t see the wisp anywhere in the room—if it had even been there in the first place, which I was beginning to doubt.

“I feel more like myself, I think,” I told Artemis. “But I’m tired.”

I was more than just tired—I felt completely drained.

“Maybe it would help if I made a round of white chocolate mochas,” Mrs. Smith suggested.

“That sounds great,” I said.

She smiled and headed for the kitchen.

My mom took my hand. “Cali, I want you to come to my room. That way, Artemis and I can keep an eye on you.”

I nodded and walked with them to the door, but then I paused in the doorway and glanced back at the mirror. Then I looked down at the rock, which still lay on the floor where Mrs. Smith had thrown it. I tried to make sense of what had just happened, and why in the world the wisp would have wanted me to smash the mirror.

I wished Greyson or Xavier could come back. I knew I’d feel a hell of a lot better if they were both safe and here to help me through this new nightmare. I knew I’d made a mistake not telling them about the whole situation sooner, but to be fair, I hadn’t really known what the hell was going on myself… Now that I did? I wanted them by my side to get through this. If getting through this was even *possible*.

I shook my head, shame washing over me. I couldn’t believe I’d let this get as far as it had. When would this end?

Looking back at my mother and sister, I took a shuddering breath. “Thank you both for your help.”

“Of course, sweetheart,” my mom said.

But as she reached to take my hand, the voice came back. And this time, it was an angry hiss.

“*FINISH WHAT YOU STARTED!*”

My mind gave in without a hint of a fight. I whipped around, lunged across the room, and grabbed the rock. And then, with a defiant scream, I hurled it at the mirror.

# Episode 3699

**Greyson**

I kept my distance, eyeing the body carefully. Who the hell was it?

Part of me hoped it was Lance, that he’d been killed by the Pit Bulls. It was what he deserved.

But there was another part of me—an angry, primal part—that wanted to be the one to kill him. I wanted to make him pay for threatening Cali.

*We need to be careful*, Rishika said. *This could be a trap.*

She was right, so we proceeded carefully, and the closer we got, the more pronounced the scent of the body grew. And then I recognized it.

It was Zeke, in his human form.

Shit.

As we drew closer, I saw that his lifeless eyes were staring up at the sky, and his blood saturated the ground around him—his throat had been ripped out.

*Killed by the Bitterfangs*, Rishika said, giving (mental) voice to what we’d all been thinking.

I shook my head. *I can’t say I feel sorry for the guy. He abandoned his pack during an extremely difficult time. As far as I’m concerned, the guy’s a traitor.*

*So what should we do about him?* Ravi snarled, glaring down at the body.

*Leave him to rot*, Rishika spat. *That’s what he deserves.*

I sighed. *I’m not going to argue with you, but—for all the guy’s shortcomings—he was the Samara Alpha. And there’s a sort of unspoken code of honor among Alphas, even when it comes to a disgraced Alpha like Zeke. We can’t just leave him here to get picked over by animals. We’re going to have to bring him back to the Samaras. Then he’ll be their problem. They can decide what to do with him.*

Rishika stared at me in shock. *I can’t believe you’re going to stick to that ridiculous code, Greyson. You said yourself—the guy was a traitor.*

*And what about Lance?* Ravi asked.

*What about him?* I snapped, feeling edgier by the moment.

*If Lance isn’t responsible for killing Zeke himself, he certainly approved it*, he pointed out*. Nothing the Bitterfangs do out here happens without Lance’s knowledge.*

*So?* I asked. I couldn’t see where Ravi was going with this.

Ravi rolled his eyes. *SO, if we take the time to bring Zeke back to the Samaras, we run the very real risk of losing track of Lance completely. Which means he’d get away with murder—among other things.*

I could hear the frustration in his mental voice—and in Rishika’s—and I understood it. Hell, I felt it, too.

*Listen, I’m not crazy about it either*, I told them, then I thought about it for a moment. *Ravi, Rishika—you two keep following Lance’s trail. But stay at a safe distance. This is only for tracking. You got me?*

They nodded.

*I’m going to take Zeke’s body back to the pack house. We’ll let the Samaras know, and they can come collect him if they want. I think that’ll come off as less antagonistic than me dropping the body of their dead Alpha on their land.*

*What do you mean by that?* Ravi asked. *They won’t think you killed him, will they?*

*Probably not if they really thought it through, but people get weird when they see dead Alphas. We might have an alliance with the Samara pack, but it’s shaky at best at the moment given their Alpha situation.* I sighed*. If you find Lance, I want one of you to keep an eye on him, and the other one to come back to the pack house and tell me. Got it?*

*Got it*, Rishika said.

*Understood, Alpha*, Ravi agreed.

The two of them helped me to heft Zeke’s deadweight onto my back, and then I started to make my way back to the pack house. I had to go slower than I’d have liked. I wanted to run, of course, but I didn’t want to risk dropping Zeke’s body.

The smell of death surrounded me, mixing with the lingering scent of the Bitterfang wolves. The effect was rancid and turned my stomach, but it also fueled my desire for revenge. Maybe Zeke had been a traitor—maybe he’d deserved what he’d gotten—but that didn’t change anything. Not for me. We were still going to find Lance and make him pay for the part he’d played in his death. *And* for his threats toward Cali.

I made my way through the snowy woods, but I froze when I heard a noise. I looked around, listening hard. This was Redwood territory—who could be out on our land *now*?

I peered into the trees, then hunched down, trying to disappear into the scrub—but that was easier said than done.

I listened hard, trying to identify what I was hearing. Was it feet? A wolf snarling?

My mind went back to what Rishika had said—that Zeke’s body could be part of some Bitterfang trap. Shit.

I looked around frantically. Was that what this was? Had I just walked into a trap?

My pulse had ticked up considerably by the time I spotted a group of wolves moving through the woods, and a familiar scent cut through Zeke’s pungent stench.

I looked around. *Mace?*

*Greyson?* Mace stepped toward me, but he stopped in his tracks when he caught sight of Zeke on my back.

Mace shifted to human. “I was looking for where you’d gone off to.”

I dropped Zeke’s body and shifted back to human too. “The Bitterfangs strike again.”

Mace stepped forward to take a closer look at Zeke. “That’s a shame. I’m not going to pretend I’m real broken up about this,” he said. “I heard what Zeke did to his pack. This seems like a pretty fitting end, all things considered. What are you going to do with him?”

“I’m going to drop the body off at my pack house and get ahold of the Samaras so they know to come collect him if they want him,” I said. “Better than just leaving him out here in the woods. I don’t know if I can do that.”

Mace nodded. “I’d do the same,” he said. “Since the Bitterfangs have retreated, I’ll return the Blue Bloods home. But I want to go thank Kira one more time for the barrier. I know it was draining. I hope she knows how much we appreciate what she did. The Blue Blood pack will not forget it.”

“I’m sure she’ll appreciate that,” I said. Especially after I’d basically forced her to go try to put a barrier up for them, not yet having known how draining it was going to be for the witches.

It worried me, and I wondered again what was causing the witches to be so badly affected. It hadn’t always been like this. Using their magic wasn’t always a walk in the park, but it wasn’t supposed to drain the life out of them.

The whole issue was a major concern, because I’d come to rely on Big Mac to help defend the pack. Having witches on our side gave us an edge the other packs didn’t have, so the sooner we figured out what was happening to them, the safer we would be.

I turned back to Mace. “I guess we should get a move on, then. Take care of this mess.”

“I guess so,” Mace said. He grinned. “An Alpha’s work is never done, is it?”

I shook my head. “Never.”

We were about to shift back to wolf form when we heard the sound of feet sprinting through the trees. We turned in the direction of the noise, and I was shocked to see Ravi and Rishika barreling toward us.

I frowned. What the hell were they doing? I hadn’t asked them to follow me. And I had just opened my mouth to say as much when there was a bone-chilling growl from right behind them.

*Of course.* I should’ve known that they had good reason. My pack *always* had my back.

And then I saw Lance—in his wolf form—sprinting after them. He emerged from a dense copse of trees, and he was flanked by two more Bitterfang wolves. All three of them were sleek and strong and fast, and practically frothing at the mouth as they hurtled after Ravi and Rishika.

Mace tensed, clearly about to shift, but I held up a hand to stop him.

“Wait,” I said. “I need everyone to just back the hell off.”

“Greyson, what are you talking about?” Mace said. “I want—”

*Greyson!* Rishika mind linked as she ran toward us. *I really don’t think you should—*

*We can handle this!* Ravi said.

“All of you need to *back off*,” I half-growled, taking a step forward. “Lance is *mine*.”

They didn’t understand the way Lance had looked at Cali. The hatred in his eyes. The look that told me, if given the chance, he’d hurt her. I couldn’t let that happen. Ever.

I shifted in moments, then launched myself at my prey.

# Episode 3700

**Xavier**

I jumped up and quickly looked around for the others as the ground began to rumble and shake beneath my feet. Lilac was knocked to his knees. The sky above us flashed red, then purple.

What the fuck was this? What was happening?

I grabbed Ava’s hand and tried to pull her to her feet. “You have to get away from the river, in case the Summoner comes back.”

The rumbling began to fade, and Lilac struggled to his feet.

“What the *hell* just happened?” Ava demanded breathlessly.

“I have no idea,” I said, looking around. “You tell me. You and Lilac are supposed to be the experts down here, aren’t you?”

Ava shook her head. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Me neither,” Lilac agreed. “But we can’t worry about that now. We have to find Marta and Julia. Anyone see where they went?”

I looked around. “Let’s try this way.”

I led the way back up the riverbank. The ghosts that populated this part of the spirit world were moving in a cluster toward where we’d been earlier—the Redwood pack house. From here, the house looked like a shadow—dark and eerie. The windows were blacked out, and the porch railings were twisted and broken. The outside matched the dreary inside we’d seen earlier.

My ankle was sore from where the Summoner had grabbed me, and when it gave way and I stumbled, Ava was waiting. She slipped her shoulder beneath my arm and wrapped her arm around my waist, supporting me as I walked.

My wolf immediately reacted to her nearness, feeling grateful that she was here. I admitted to myself that this time my wolf was right—it was good that Ava was here. She’d been to this place, and she could try to get us through this. But this was nothing more than her helping me out. It pissed me off that my wolf couldn’t tell the difference—everything to him was about the mate bond. I just didn’t have the time to deal with it.

As we walked back toward the house, I had no idea how much time had passed since we’d entered the spirit world. Were we gone for days? Weeks? We needed to get out of here. I didn’t want to risk wasting any time. Not when Adéluce might be out there. We had to find Marta and Julia. We *had* to. After all the shit we’d already been through in this horrible world, failure was just unacceptable.

We kept walking, though moving through the slow-moving ghosts felt like passing through laundry hanging on a line. We kept at it—none of us speaking—until we reached the strange version of the Redwood pack house.

I walked up the porch steps and reached for the doorknob, but the door opened before I could touch it, swinging inward without a sound. As I stepped back inside, I thought about Cali, and my heart ached. I wanted to get back to her so badly it hurt.

Drawn by a miniscule movement, my gaze went to a corner of the hallway. There, huddled beneath a massive, filmy cobweb, was Marta. She was sitting with Julia and Vaughn, and they were all staring up at us as though they couldn’t believe their eyes.

“*Marta!*” Lilac cried.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, looking at Vaughn.  
 “I thought it would be best to remove them from the threat of the Summoner,” he said.

“Yeah, thanks, that was probably smart,” I said, begrudgingly grateful. “But now we need to get back to the mirror upstairs.” I nodded at Marta. “Let’s get going.”

She got to her feet and took Julia’s hand.

“I’m coming with you!” Vaughn announced as we all headed toward the stairs.

He was what? No way. I didn’t allow myself to react. I didn’t want to dignify his declaration with a response. There was no way I was going to have any part of bringing someone back from the dead. I had enough problems.

“We’ve got Julia,” I said, turning to Ava and Lilac, “so now it’s up to us to get our asses back to the real world.”

“We can do it,” Lilac said, nodding.

I’m glad someone was feeling optimistic about things.

“How are you feeling, X?” Ava asked, glancing back at me.

“Fine,” I said quickly.

She rolled her eyes. “You were still limping.”

“The Summoner did a little damage,” I admitted, “but it should heal up fine. Maybe healing just takes a little longer down here.”

She nodded, keeping her eyes on me. “I was kind of worried that you weren’t going to be able to get away from the Summoner. I panicked.” She shook her head. “The idea of losing you here, and being in this place without you…”

She glanced around, taking in the weird grey light and the haunted look of the living room we stood in. The way everything looked *almost* familiar—just enough to be deeply unnerving in its strangeness. I didn’t like seeing the pack house this way. It should always be full, filled to the brim with life.

“The thought was devastating,” Ava finished quietly.

I didn’t speak. I knew the only reason she’d come back to this place at all was because I’d agreed to come with her—to help her through it. She hadn’t admitted it, but I knew. And she’d stepped up.

She’d been doing that more and more recently.

*Why?*

“—and I’m asking you to *think about it!*”

I was pulled from my thoughts by the sound of Vaughn’s voice. I looked over to see that he and Marta were in the middle of an argument.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Marta looked back at me, exasperated. “Vaughn’s still insisting I bring him with us.”

I frowned. “Bring him *where*? He’s already with us.”

Vaughn shook his head. “You don’t understand. None of you do, but why would you, I suppose?” He scoffed. “I want to return to the living world.”

Marta huffed. “And I already told you I can’t do that. That’s not why I’m here,” she said. “Plus, I’m a bridge, not a necromancer.”

Was this guy going to get pushy on us? “You’ve been helpful, Vaughn, but we can’t just bring a random spirit back to the living world,” I said, cutting in. “That’s now how this is going to work.”

Honestly, I didn’t really give a damn about Vaughn. I’d come to the spirit world to get Julia back, and that was what I’d done. Now, all I wanted was to get her back to the other side, and to get back to Cali. I needed to feel her in my arms and get out of this place. It was making my skin crawl.

“Please,” Vaughn begged, turning to Ava, “I helped you when you first came down here, remember? You admitted that.”

She shook her head. “It’s not my decision—”

“It’s no one’s decision, apparently,” Vaughn snapped. He muttered a little more under his breath, then fell silent.

“Let’s go,” I said, looking at the others and ignoring Vaughn. I led the group upstairs toward what would’ve been Big Mac’s room. Part of the house seemed to look different than it had before—I knew this place like the back of my hand. Little things were out of place, like where a picture was on the wall—changed. It was almost like the place was ever evolving, like it was actively trying to confuse and disorient.

We opened up Big Mac’s door and entered. Lilac looked up, then around, then back over his shoulder. He shot a glance at us. “Uh, guys? Where’s the mirror?”

Ava’s brows drew together. “It should be here.”

My stomach clenched. “And how exactly would a mirror get up and leave in this place? Is that possible?”

I glanced over at Vaughn, wondering if he could help, but he was brooding silently, clearly not in any mood to provide directions.

Marta’s eyes were wide with fear as she looked around. “I don’t think it’s here… I can barely feel the pull of the mirror.”

Shit. That didn’t sound good.

“Ava, Lilac—both of you search the room,” I commanded. “Maybe the mirror was moved or something. This place seems to like tricks.”

I didn’t exactly know what I was looking for, but I figured I would know it when I saw it. It was a mirror, right? How hard would that be to find?

Apparently, pretty hard. We turned the entire room inside out, looking for the mirror. Eventually we started to split off into the other rooms of the house, but there was nothing. No mirrors anywhere.

“Anything?” I called out.

No one answered, but when I looked up, they all came out into the hallway, shaking their heads.

Shit. This wasn’t good.

“Wait, *look*!” Lilac rushed over to the end of the hallway. He crouched down, then straightened, holding something in his hand. It glinted in the low light, and when I walked closer, I could see that it was a shard of glass.

“What is it?” I asked.

Behind me, Marta gasped. “It’s what’s left of the mirror. It’s been broken—we’re trapped!”

# Episode 3701

**Greyson**

I stepped toward Lance, wondering if he was going to take me up on the challenge I’d issued, or if he was going to let his lackeys to do the dirty work.

Honestly, I didn’t care. I would kill them all if I had to.

*You shouldn’t have tried to track me down*, Lance growled over the mind link. *But I’m glad you did. I’m looking forward to taking down the mighty Redwood Alpha. It’s always satisfying to see another Alpha topple. And your head will pair nicely with your mate’s—a bonus for Malakai to treasure. He does enjoy symmetry. And with you out of the way, it will be that much easier for me to kill your mate—*

I growled, cutting him off. *There have been far more dangerous forces than you after my mate, and they haven’t killed her yet*,I warned Lance. *They’ve all failed, and she’s still thriving. It may have been easy to murder a coward like Zeke, but I’m not Zeke.*

*Alpha? Rishika’s voice came.*

*Stay back. I mean it*, I told her. *Only step in if the other Bitterfangs interfere. This is between Lance and me.*

Lance glanced over his shoulder and nodded toward the Bitterfang wolves. They took a step back, though it was clear they weren’t happy about it.

*This will be like the Lupo Finale*,Lance said, turning back to me. *The only rules are that there are no rules. But when I win, I’m not going to take over as Alpha of the Redwood pack—I’m going to destroy it.*

I could read Lance like a book, and he was pointing me right toward his biggest weaknesses—his overconfidence, and his blind, unquestioning devotion to a morally corrupt Alpha. If we weren’t about to do battle, I would have told Lance to do himself a favor and shut his damn mouth.

We circled each other, sizing each other up. I knew I needed to be patient. I wanted Lance to make the first move, so I focused on his eyes. I steadied my breathing and quieted my thoughts, until they were nothing but a low hum. This allowed me to anticipate Lance’s sudden lunge toward me.

I dodged it easily, then leapt around him, jumping onto his back and knocking him to the ground. He went down hard, but fighting, and we lashed out at each other, biting and snapping and swiping with extended claws.

I wasn’t worried about being overpowered—I knew I could out-muscle this asshole. But I kept thinking about the unconventional Bitterfang fighting style. I knew I had to be careful—they could be unpredictable, and I couldn’t let myself get over-confident.

Lance broke free and scrambled to his feet. He charged at me immediately, and I barely had time to get my feet back underneath me before he lunged, teeth bared. I dodged the bite aimed at my neck, but not fast enough—he caught my shoulder instead. The pain seared like fire, and I jerked away before he could sink his teeth in deeper. I kicked at his face, knocking him away.

This disoriented him, and I swiped my paw across his face. I was going for both his eyes but only managed to catch one before he slid away. Blood poured down his face, and he turned, snarling, and lunged for my throat.

As I dodged again, I was driven by one thought, and one thought alone—I *had* to remove this threat to Cali. There was so much I couldn’t control when it came to keeping her safe—I certainly didn’t have the ability to restore the balance of magic and make Cali feel like her old self—but at least I could make sure that this bastard and his threats wouldn’t continue to hang over her. I knew that by tangling with Lance, I was inviting a conflict with Malakai—and with a pack like the Bitterfangs, that kind of conflict could easily erupt into a pack war. But I’d had no choice. Lance had made that clear the moment he’d threatened Cali.

The Bitterfang pack had become an enemy of the Redwood pack.

There was sharp pain in my other shoulder as Lance ripped into me again. This bite had gone deep—*really* deep—but I gritted my teeth against the pain. I’d been through worse, and I used the pain to fuel my movements as I rounded on Lance and jumped, catching his shoulders with my front paws and slamming him into a scaly pine.

Lance hit the tree and crumpled to the forest floor, but he rose. He was dazed and bloodied, and when he glanced at the two Bitterfang wolves behind him, they reacted instantly. They lunged toward me—but my Redwood wolves reacted faster. Ravi and Rishika, with Mace as backup, intercepted them, leaving me one-on-one with Lance. Again.

He’d said there were no rules, of course, but it spoke volumes about who Lance was, and who the Bitterfangs were.

But I was sick of him, and ready for this to be over. I attacked hard, lashing out at him with my back legs. He fell to the ground again, and I jumped on top of him, pinning him down.

Lance glared up at me, blood streaming from his injured eye. *You can kill me, but you will* never *stop the Bitterfang pack.*

I snorted with derision. *That remains to be seen*, I said. *Stay the fuck away from us and my mate.* And then I tore out the bastard’s throat.

He writhed underneath me for a moment, gurgling as blood poured from the gaping hole in his ruined body. I stepped back as he twitched, and spat blood and fur from my mouth. It tasted as salty and as bitter as the name of their pack suggested.

I turned and looked around, wondering where the rest of my group was. Mace, Ravi, and Rishika were in the throes of battle, the three of them easily overpowering the two Bitterfang wolves. Good. This would be over soon.

*What do you want us to do, Greyson?* Rishika asked. *Kill them? Take them prisoner? Now’s the moment to decide.*

This appeared to be the case, but not in the way Rishika meant. The two Bitterfang wolves managed to gain a little distance from us, and then they glanced at each other and—as one—snapped up the small bags that had been strung around their necks and bit down.

For a moment, I was confused—what the hell had I just watched?—and then I remembered what Xavier had said, about the Bitterfangs carrying pouches of silver. One of them had nearly killed Ava.

Sure enough, the Bitterfang wolves fell to the ground and writhed, clearly in agony as the silver worked its way through their systems. Silver wasn’t usually so fast acting, but they must have ingested a concentrated dose, because moments later, they were still.

Mace took a started step back. *What. The. Hell?* he said.

Ravi and Rishika stepped back cautiously.

*Silver*, I told the three of them. *They use the bags like cyanide pills. They would rather die than lose*. I shook my head in disgust. *What a waste of life. Silas would approve—which is never a vote you want to get.*

Ravi looked at the bodies. *So… What do you want to do with them?*

*I don’t give a shit*, I said honestly. *They were more than happy to dump Zeke out here to rot, and I’d be happy to return the favor if they weren’t so close to the pack house. Get a group on cleanup.*

*You got it*, Ravi said.

I wasn’t surprised when no one raised any objections. In fact, I could see disgust in every face.

*Thanks for your help*,I told them all. *That was good work, but I still need to bring Zeke back. Help me get him onto my back?*

They did, and once he was loaded up—and Kira had climbed on Mace’s back—we started back toward the pack house again.

*We started to follow Lance’s scent when we realized he was circling back*, Rishika told me. *We could tell by the direction he was taking that he intended to surprise you. That’s why we came back.*

I shrugged, though it hurt my injured shoulders. *You did what I asked you to do, and it all worked out. Justice prevailed, and all that shit.*

Mace chuckled, shaking his furry head. *You’re a real poet, man.*

I was relieved when the pack house finally came into view. There were no barriers surrounding it—and none were needed. For now, at least.

We trooped up to the door, and I dropped Zeke’s body on the porch. The door opened, and Cali rushed out. I shifted back to human just in time to catch her as she threw herself into my arm. I wished this could’ve been a happy, warm welcoming, but I knew it wouldn’t be. Cali’s face was streaked with tears.

“Cali, what’s wrong?” I asked. “What’s happened?”

She looked up at me, clearly terrified. “Greyson, you have to lock me up!”

# Episode 3702

**Marta**

I looked into the shard of glass Lilac was holding. I could see a part of my reflection, but both were broken, and the edges were jagged. This couldn’t be happening. It just couldn’t be.

My mind went back to the strange earthquake we’d all felt earlier. No one had known at the time what had caused it, but… Had it been *this*? Had it been the result of the mirror breaking?

Xavier’s eyes flashed dangerously as he looked around. “What the fuck? Who would do this?”

“I seriously doubt it could have been someone here in the spirit world,” Vaughn said quickly, taking a cautious step back from Xavier’s nearly palpable anger. “We’re ghosts. It’s not so easy for us to physically break things.”

I stared at him—stunned—as my brain put the pieces together. “That would mean someone at the pack house broke the mirror. But why would anyone do that? And who?” I shook my head. “It just doesn’t make any sense!”

As I looked around, I saw that Ava was upset. Panic was spreading across her face. She hadn’t wanted to come here at all—she’d been so scared.

“There has to be something we can do to get out,” she said, her voice thick with tension.

“Poor Russell,” Julia said. She looked like she was about to cry. “I have to get back to him. I have to let him know I’m not dead.”

“Um, I hate to be *that guy*,” Vaughn started, “but if you’re here, then technically you *are* dead.”

Xavier glared at him. “Would you *shut up*?” he snapped. “You’re not helping.”

“Who said I was trying to help?” Vaughn muttered, but quietly, so Xavier couldn’t hear.

“Marta,” Lilac said, turning to me. “Is there anything you can do? You brought me back from the spirit world once before, and you hadn’t used the mirror.”

I chewed on my lip. It was true, but there had been a sort of… break between the worlds at that time. That wasn’t the case anymore since Letifer was gone and the Orb with him.

I thought for a moment, then I took the shard from Lilac’s hand and looked at it carefully. There was something strange about the reflection it showed. I angled it back and forth as I stared into it. I could see myself reflected back, but there was more. Moving shadows seemed to be passing back and forth, somewhere beyond the reflective surface.

“If that’s the living world,” I murmured to myself, “then maybe the mirror could still function as a portal.” My heart pounded as I dropped to my knees and started to search through the dark house for more pieces of the mirror. I glanced up at the others. “Maybe we can find a piece that’s big enough to use.”

A few minutes later, Lilac called out to us. “What about this one? Will this work?”

I took the jagged mirror piece in my hands. It was about the size of a dinner plate, though it felt like its shape was shifting in my hands. I glanced at Julia—I had no idea how much time she had left.

“Julia should try to leave first,” I said.

Julia frowned at me, clearly confused. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Just try to put your hand through,” I said. “Whoever is waiting for us on the other side will pull you back into the living world. Just hurry,” I said urgently.

Julia still looked unsure, but she took one of my hands and reached the other to touch the mirror.

I felt a tug in my chest—it was hope, hooking itself in. Maybe this could actually work.

“We can do this,” I said encouragingly, and tried to use my magic to help open the portal. As long as she held onto my hand, she should have the ability to pass through.

Julia took a deep breath, gritted her teeth, and pushed harder. Suddenly, her arm slipped further into the piece of mirror, there was a sudden ripple in the surface, and then—in an instant—Julia was pulled through, and she disappeared from sight. I felt her go through, and when I was confident she was, I let go of her hand.

Ava gasped. “Oh shit. It worked!”

“Did it?” Xavier looked at me quickly. “Did it work? Are you sure?”

I swallowed hard. “I can’t be sure of anything, but the portal seemed to do what a portal’s supposed to do.”

“Well, that’s good,” Xavier said. He looked at Ava. “You’re next.”

She looked surprised. “Lilac can go—”

“No, go ahead,” Lilac said. “I know you want to get the hell out of here even more than I do.”

It was really nice of him to offer to let Ava go first. I doubted he liked being back here either, but he could probably see as well as I could how deeply disturbing it was for Ava.

The piece of mirror seemed to shake a little when I held it up for Ava as she walked over. She took my hand and reached out her hand, and her fingertips disappeared into the glass. She smiled, a little nervously, but as she tried to push in further, the mirror gave a violent shake, and Ava stumbled back. The mirror piece in my hands shattered into a million little pieces—more of an explosion than a break—and I gasped.

“What the *hell*?” Xavier bellowed.

I stared at the glittering dust, still hovering in the air, then down at the pile that had settled at my feet.

“What just happened?” Xavier demanded.

“I… I don’t know,” I said in disbelief.

That seemed to be it for Ava. She squeezed her eyes shut and screamed. “NO! I can’t stay here any longer! I have to get out! I have to get out *now*! I can’t breathe in here!”

She did seem to be having trouble breathing. Her face had turned red, and her lips looked almost blue. Xavier stepped toward her and wrapped an arm around her, pulling her into his chest as she sobbed hard enough to make her breathing even more labored.

“Try to find another piece,” Xavier said, speaking over her wails.

Lilac and I scrambled around, looking everywhere for another large piece in the pack house.

“I’ve got one!” I called out, holding up another piece of glass. It wasn’t as big as the last one—this one was only the size of a tea saucer—but there was still a chance it would work.

“Ava, try again,” Xavier said, his voice soothing. He gave her a little push.

Ava took a shuddering breath and stepped toward me. She extended her hand, and we all held our collective breath—but her fingertips didn’t penetrate the surface of the mirror.

She sucked in a ragged breath. “No. Oh god, no. NO!”

It felt like a gigantic weight had just settled on my shoulders. I looked around at Ava, Xavier, and Lilac. I had failed them. And I just had this dreadful creeping fear that whatever happened next would be so much worse than the time I’d spent trapped in Bert’s house.

Lilac must have seen the guilt on my face, because he rested his hand on my arm. “Marta, stop. Don’t do that. Don’t blame yourself. You aren’t responsible for the mirror breaking.”

I shook my head, and he put his arm around me. I leaned into him instinctively, letting myself feel the warmth of his embrace. For a moment, I forgot everything that had pushed us apart. *This* was the Lilac I wished I could have back—before he’d found Perrie. Before I’d broken up with him.

“*Fuck!*” Xavier looked furious. Furious and scared. “It just doesn’t make sense. None of this makes any fucking sense.”

He was right about that.

“If Julia could pass through, why can’t Ava?” I wondered out loud.

“Lilac should try,” Xavier suggested.

Lilac hesitated. “I don’t know…”

“What’s the problem?” Xavier demanded.

“I don’t want to leave Marta,” Lilac admitted.

“Go,” I said quickly, feeling a flush rising in my face. “I’m fine.”

Lilac took a deep breath and nodded. He reached for the mirror, but he got the same results as Ava. His fingers only left prints on the glass.

“What the *hell*?” Xavier burst out, clearing seething.

“Well, if getting out of here was *easy*, then all the spirits would do it,” Vaughn muttered to himself.

Xavier rounded on him. “What do you know about this?”

“Not much,” he admitted quickly, looking a little unnerved by Xavier’s anger. “Except, from what you’ve told me, Julia still has a physical presence in the living world. Only her spirit passed from your world into his one. But the rest of you came through with your physical selves. He shrugged. “But that’s just a guess.”

“If the portal wasn’t broken into pieces, would we be able to pass through?” I asked.

“I suppose so,” he said. “It breaking is the only thing that’s changed.”

I took this in. “We need another portal.”

“What?” Xavier asked.

“There has to be more than just one mirror that’s a portal—there’s no way Big Mac owned the only one in existence.” I turned to Vaughn. “Do you know of any others?”

He smiled. “Of course I might. And I’d be happy to take you to them.”

“Great,” I breathed. “Then let’s—”

His smile widened. “But only if you agree to do one little thing for me in exchange.”

# Episode 3703

**Greyson**

I pulled away from Cali and looked down at her anxious face, baffled. “Lock you up? Cali, what are you talking about?”

She took a shuddering breath, and the tears seemed to flow faster down her cheeks. She shook her head, apparently unable to answer.

Confused, I pulled her into a hug. “Hey, just breathe, okay? Just take a breath. Whatever’s going on right now, it’s fine. You’re going to be okay—”

“*Cali!*” Orla rushed out the open front door. “There you are!”

Artemis was on her heels, and she looked equally relieved to find Cali. “You need to get back inside,” she told her firmly.

I stared at them both, desperate for an explanation. “What’s going on? I haven’t been gone that long. What the hell could have happened?” I looked around. “Where’s Xavier?”

Why wasn’t Xavier taking care of Cali when she was so upset? That was basically the only upside to my brother’s continued connection with Cali—he could help with stuff like this.

“I’ve trapped them!” Cali wailed. “That’s why you have to lock me up! I can’t control myself! I’m a danger to everyone around me! Look what I’ve done! I’ve trapped them!”

“Trapped *who*? Will someone *please* justtell me what the hell is going on!” I demanded, looking around.

“The spirit world—” Orla started.

“The mirror is broken—” Artemis chimed in. “But Cali, you *need* to get back to Mom’s room, where we can keep an eye on you.”

“We’re going to figure this out,” Orla added.

Cali was crying freely now, and she shook her head again, pulling away from their reaching hands.

*Just tell me, love*,I said through our mind link. *What’s wrong?*

She was shivering when she looked up at me with anguish in her eyes. It physically hurt to see it there, and I wished I could take it from her—somehow absorb it into myself. I’d take on all her pain if I could.

When she started to sway on her feet, like she was going to pass out, I scooped her up and carried her into the house.

*Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay*, I tried to assure her.

That just made her bury her face in my chest and sob harder.

After I put Cali down and she dropped into a seat at the table, I looked at Orla and Artemis, who had followed us into the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” I demanded—hopefully for the last time.

Artemis let out a gusty sigh. “Xavier went into the spirit world to get Julia. He took Ava, Marta, and Lilac with him. They went through Big Mac’s mirror, which is also a portal. Then”—she cast a quick glance at her sister—“that weird wisp compelled Cali to throw a rock at the mirror portal, and it broke. So now we’ve got a bunch of people trapped in the spirit world, and we don’t know how to get them out.”

“Oh,” I said flatly. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.” Artemis nodded. “Basically.”

I ran a hand across my jaw. Well, that explained Xavier’s absence. My heart had started to pound with worry, but I fought to keep my expression neutral. I couldn’t show Cali how I was feeling—she was already blaming herself for this mess.

In the back of my mind, it occurred to me that Cali had shattered a mirror—didn’t that mean she was going to have seven years of bad luck? Like *that* was what we needed.

Big Mac appeared in the kitchen doorway. She looked almost like herself again, but when my mother appeared at her side, her expression anxious, I wondered if the witch was just putting on a brave face for the rest of us.

“MacKenzie, you really do need to get back to bed. You need your rest,” my mother urged.

Big Mac scowled. “I can rest later. Julia’s waking up—I thought this little group might want to know.”

Cali gasped and leapt to her feet. “That means she’s back!”

She ran out of the kitchen, pushing past Big Mac and my mom. I followed her, still trying to piece together everything I’d just learned.

When I found Cali again, she was in the living room, where Russell and Julia were sitting on the couch, wrapped in each other’s arms, both crying their eyes out.

Cali looked around frantically. “Where are the others? Where’s Xavier?”

Julia looked confused. “What? I don’t—what’s happening?”

I wasn’t surprised that she was confused. The poor kid had technically been *dead* for a while—it was understandable that she might wake up a little disoriented. And coming back from the spirit world was probably no picnic.

“*Where is Xavier?*” Cali repeated, her voice a hoarse plea. “Weren’t you just with him? Where is he? Why isn’t he here?”

Julia frowned. “I remember being in the spirit world, and Marta was there. She helped me go through a piece of mirror?” She shook her head. “I thought the others would be right behind me. They’re not here?”

All the blood drained from Cali’s already pale face, and she turned to Big Mac, who was standing in the doorway. “What do we do now?”

I could see that Cali was panicking. Her breath was coming in gasps, and she was clearly spiraling into a full-blown anxiety meltdown. I grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the room.

In the hallway, I wrapped my arms around her. “Try to calm down, love. Just breathe—”

She pushed me away and looked around, wild-eyed. “We have to fix the mirror—”

“There’s no way to fix it,” Big Mac said, stepping back into the hallway.

“Big Mac, couldn’t you at least *try* to be helpful?” I growled.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” she said shortly, and headed up the stairs.

Apparently, Cali wasn’t prepared to accept Big Mac’s answer. She broke for the stairs, running after the witch, but I caught her wrist and stopped her.

“Let me go!” she cried, trying to wrench her arm free. “*I* did this! I’m responsible for this! I have to do something! *I* trapped Xavier and the others in the spirit world!”

“Listen to me,” I said firmly, stepping in front of her. “I know this sounds bleak, but if I know one thing, it’s that Xavier will do everything he can to find his way back. You just have to trust him and the others to think their way out of this, okay?”

“You don’t understand! This is *my* fault! This happened because of *me*!”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“By breaking that mirror, *I might have made a choice!* And now Xavier is trapped!”

I wasn’t sure what to say to this. There was no way that Cali had been in her right mind when she’d smashed the mirror—she would never have knowingly chosen to endanger Xavier. A choice was something that required thought, and the ability to understand the circumstances and consequences of your actions.

“Did you choose on purpose?” I asked her. “Did you *want* to do it?”

She opened her mouth to respond, then I watched as her face fell. She looked down as she shook her head. “Of course not. I didn’t want any of this to happen.”

“Then it wasn’t a choice, love. For the *due destini* or otherwise. Something is *making* you do things against your will, and that’s the opposite of a choice. Remember when you couldn’t kiss me because of Artemis’s magic?” She nodded. “Whatever drove you to throw that rock is using the same kind of magic. The kind that takes away your ability to make independent decisions.”

But this didn’t seem to help her at all. “My mom and Artemis have been trying to help. They’ve been working on helping me build up my defenses, but”—she dragged in a ragged breath—“those defenses failed when I needed them most. And now look what’s happened.” Tears started streaming down her face again. “Xavier, Marta, Lilac, and Ava are all paying the price for my weakness.”

“Stop, Cali,” I said sternly. “You have to stop blaming yourself. You are a *victim* here, as much as anyone else.”

“How can you *say* that?” she demanded.

“You’re the victim of whoever is doing this to you. And I swear to you,” I said, locking her gaze in mine, “we will find a way out of this.”

Before Cali could say anything more, Julia appeared in the doorway. She looked pale and weak, but she was on her feet, which was a big improvement over being basically dead.

“I’m so sorry.” She shook her head. “If I’d known that any of this would happen…” She trailed off.

We all looked at her for a moment, and the silence was heavy in the air.

“Go back to Russell,” I said quietly. “Don’t worry about it, kid.”

Julia nodded and walked back into the living room.

“I’m going to go talk to Big Mac,” I said. “See what options there are for bringing Xavier and the others back. You should come with me, okay? I don’t want you to be alone right now.”

Cali nodded and dashed the tears from her cheeks. “Okay.”  
 We headed upstairs, and I knocked on Big Mac’s door.

“Come in,” she barked, looking up as I swung the door open. “I just got a message from Marta.”

# Episode 3704

It felt like my heart skipped a few beats. “You heard from *Marta*? How? When? *How?*”

Big Mac nodded down at the broken shards of mirror she’d puzzled together on the floor. “I didn’t think it was possible, but Marta was able to reach out to me through the shards to relay a message—”

“What message?” I demanded. “What did she say?’

Big Mac sighed. “She said they’re all safe.”

I breathed. I hadn’t really noticed, but I’d pretty much stopped breathing since I’d broken the mirror, only taking in gasps of air when I started to feel light-headed. But now that Big Mac had told me Xavier was safe, I found I could finally take a full breath.

Then another terrible thought occurred to me.

“But how are they going to get back?” I asked.

“They’re on the move,” Big Mac reported. “Marta said they’re looking for another portal.”

“What? How?” I asked. “There’s another portal in the spirit world? How do they know about it?”

“Someone’s helping them find it,” Big Mac told us.

“*Who?*”

“A ghost that Ava knows.”

I nodded, though even as I did, I realized how completely insane everything she’d just said truly sounded. A ghost was helping them find another exit. Sure. That made sense.

But, to be fair, if anyone was going to be acquainted with a ghost in the spirit world, it would be Ava.

I shook my head—at least they were all okay.

“Where would they come out if they were able to find another portal?” Greyson was asking.

“I can’t answer that,” Big Mac said, rocking back on her heels. “But I don’t suppose it would be too far, if the two worlds have the same basic geography.”

“Ask Marta where they’re going to come out. And how long she thinks it’s going to take,” I demanded. I needed to see Xavier in the flesh—to know for sure that I hadn’t sentenced him, Ava, Lilac, or Marta to a lifetime with the undead.

But Big Mac glared at me. “This isn’t a telephone,” she snapped. “I can’t just call her whenever I want. You’re going to have to wait.”

Mrs. Smith was standing over her fiancée, still wearing her anxious expression. She looked up at me. “Cali, I promise I will personally come and let you know if we learn anything else about what’s going on.”

“Okay,” I said, and though I didn’t want to leave, I did.

“See?” Greyson said as we stepped out into the hallway. “I told you that all your worries about Xavier not coming back were premature. My brother’s a pain in my ass, but he’s also resilient.” He pulled me into a hug. “Maybe my mom had the right idea. You should really try to get some rest, too.”

I stiffened. “I don’t need rest,” I said, pulling free of the hug. “I *need* to see Xavier, Marta, Lilac, and Ava back here safely.”

I bit my lip. I was frustrated and worried, and I was taking it all out on Greyson, who was only trying to help.

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “I didn’t mean to snap. I didn’t even ask how you were doing. Was that… Zeke’s body you came back with?”

He nodded. “Yeah. We found it in the woods. Killed by the Bitterfangs.”

I sighed. “I feel bad about that. Zeke never really had much of a chance, did he?” After a moment, I remembered why Greyson had gone out in the first place. “What about Lance?”

Greyson’s gaze slid away from mine. “He won’t be making any more threats against you.”

My stomach clenched. “What does that mean?”

Greyson’s voice was rough. “He’s dead.”

I felt myself wilt a little. “Oh. Okay. I just—I hate that even one more person had to die. It just feels so senseless.”

“It’s not so easy as that, Cali. How would you have wanted it to end?” he asked, a slight edge to his voice.

I sighed. “Werewolves just deal with conflict in a very black and white way.”

He nodded. “I guess that’s true, but that’s how we have to deal with it sometimes too if we want to survive.”

We headed downstairs again, stopping to look in on Julia and Russell in the living room. The two teenagers were huddled together on the couch, not speaking, just holding each other tightly.

I was glad that Julia had made it, though I’d almost ruined their happy ending when I’d broken the mirror portal.

With this thought in mind, I looked up at Greyson. “I meant what I said earlier—you need to lock me up.”  
 “Cali—”

“I’m not safe,” I insisted. “I can’t be trusted.”

As if by magic, Lucian materialized in front of us. In reality, he’d just walked in from the kitchen, but he seemed to magically appear before us, looking interested. I thought he’d left earlier. It probably would’ve helped Greyson’s mood if he had.

“*Why* can’t you be trusted, Caliana?” Lucian asked. “Is it a *due destini* thing?”

“You shouldn’t talk about that,” Greyson growled, glaring at Lucian.

“My apologies,” he said quickly. “Perhaps it’s none of my business—”

“You’re right about that,” Greyson snapped.

I felt a pop of worry that they’d start fighting, but I wasn’t about to breathe a word of what had just happened to Lucian, or tell him why I couldn’t be trusted. If I did, I knew he would just turn around and tell every single person he came across. If there was anyone who *really* couldn’t be trusted, it was Lucian.

The Vanguard Alpha cast a glance over his shoulder into the living room, where Julia and Russell still sat. “It’s nice, those two. Like Shakespeare, but with a happier ending. I was just heading in to speak to them.”

Greyson passed a hand over his eyes. He looked tired. “Lucian, before you leave, I need to talk to you about the Bitterfangs.”

He nodded. “Of course. But for now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go congratulate the reunited lovers while I have a chance.”

As Lucian walked away, I looked up at Greyson in surprise.

“What do you need to talk to Lucian about?” I asked. “I thought you said the Bitterfangs weren’t going to be a problem anymore.”

He shook his head. “I said that *Lance* is no longer a problem. The Bitterfang pack as a whole is a very different story.” He sighed. “It won’t take long for Malakai and the rest of his pack to piece everything together once the stragglers arrive back. And when they do, I’m sure they won’t be pleased with our pack, or our allies.”

“What is that going to mean?” I asked nervously.

“Malakai’s going to want revenge for Lance and the other Bitterfangs’ deaths,” Greyson said simply.

I shuddered. “I hate the thought of another pack war, Greyson. What that could mean for us…”

“The most recent skirmish really brought our allies out of the woodwork, and our alliance with the Blue Bloods, the Samaras, and the Vanguards is now stronger than ever,” Greyson said. “Ultimately, this is our territory, and we will take the Bitterfangs in a fight if that’s the route they want to go.”

I nodded slowly. “I get that, but that doesn’t change my situation.”

“What situation?”

I gave him a hard look. “Any time any other pack member becomes a threat—when something makes them dangerous—you lock them up in the basement,” I reminded him. “I think you should do the same to me.”

“This is completely different—”

“Because I’m your mate?” I interrupted, narrowing my eyes.

“Cali—”

“Greyson, listen to me. My being your mate isn’t going to protect the pack. Look at what I’ve done!” I said, my panic rising. “I’ve already proven that I can’t be trusted. I hurt my mother. I destroyed the portal, and members of our pack are trapped in the spirit world because of me. Right now, I’m dangerous.”

“I really don’t think—”

“I want you to treat me like you would treat any other pack member in my situation,” I said sternly.

“Love, I know you’re scared, but you have to be reasonable about this. I’m not going to shove you into a basement cell for you to waste away until—”

“Well, I might need to head back to the palace.” Lucian breezed back into the hallway, interrupting our conversation. “You know how it is for Alphas. It seems that Aysel can’t find her favorite moonstone.” He shook his head, then looked at Greyson. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“And should I be in on this?” Mace asked, coming up to the other two Alphas.

Greyson glanced at me, then shrugged. “I guess you might as well hear this, too,” he told me with a sigh. He looked like he was about to do something he wasn’t looking forward to. He looked between Lucian and Mace. “Your packs need to be prepared.”

Lucian looked confused. “Prepared for what?”

Greyson’s eyes usually looked like molten silver, but in this moment, they made me think of iron. “For war.”

# Episode 3705

**Xavier**

*Dammit.*

I eyed the forest as we followed Vaughn down a rough track. The woods that I knew so well looked… different. They were no longer familiar, but suddenly terrifying in the dim, grey light of the spirit world. It was like I was looking at everything through a fever dream. The trees seemed to grow closer together as we walked. This land was *almost* like the Redwood territory I knew, but darker and denser. And it seemed to *breathe*.

Vaughn led the way, and I looked at him as we trudged along, thinking hard. Of course he had his price for leading us to this supposed other portal. In exchange for a way out of this hellish place, he wanted us to bring him back to the world of the living.

I’d agreed to his demands. What choice had I had? I wanted to get the fuck out of here, and that was all I cared about. What actually happened to Vaughn once we reached the portal was a bridge I would cross once I got to it. I didn’t even know what the rules were in this place. *Could* we bring him back, even if we wanted to? Was that even a good idea? That seemed like a question that needed answering, given that we’d had problems with malevolent spirits before. Vaughn wasn’t *my* contact—for all I knew, he’d end up revealing himself as some kind of evil demonic spirit and try to pull a Seluna-style power move at the last moment.

When he’d first bargained to come back with us, I’d shut that shit down fast—but that was when I’d thought we were going to be able to return through the mirror portal without a problem. Everything had changed, now that the mirror was gone. We were at a disadvantage, and therefore perfectly positioned for Vaughn to extort. Which I still found pretty suspicious.

I slowed my pace, dropping to the back of the group, and grabbed Ava’s elbow, pulling her back to walk side by side with me.

When she looked up at me, I could see that she still looked pale and frightened, but I knew she wasn’t about to freak out, which was a relief. I didn’t think my wolf could handle another shot of that kind of vulnerability from her. It made him go crazy.

“What’s up?” Ava asked.

“Do you really trust Vaughn?” I asked, lowering my voice.

She raised an eyebrow, looking almost like her usual sardonic self. “It’s a little late to be asking me that, isn’t it? Besides, it’s not like we have much of a choice, anyway.”

“I just think it’s strange that the mirror ended up broken,” I said.

“What do you mean?” she asked, frowning.

“You know full well. The mirror just happens to break, and Vaughn knows about another portal. It seems awfully convenient for him to suddenly have that kind of leverage over us—enough leverage to make us agree to bring him back to the world of the living,” I pointed out.

She took this in. “I’ll admit, it does seem pretty coincidental. And I know from my own time down here that when a spirit decides they want to return to the world of the living, it can turn into an all-consuming obsession.”

I looked over at her, wondering what it was like for her to be here without a guaranteed way back. She’d been here for years. What had it been like for her? Had she been like the other ghosts, spending every moment trying to find a way back to the world of the living?

A wave of guilt crashed over me as I remembered that I was the reason why she’d ended up in this place—both times. First, I’d killed her, and now—this time—I’d convinced her to go and help Julia.

She looked up at me. “Xavier, listen, I wanted to thank you for keeping your promise.”

“What promise is that?” I asked, confused.

“You promised to stick with me while we were here, X, and you have. Thank you.” She gave me a small smile.

I shrugged. “Sure. Consider it a nod to young love.” I shook my head. “I just hope Julia made it back to Russell.”

I looked down, only just becoming aware of something that I realized had already been happening for a few moments. Ava was holding my hand. I didn’t even know when she’d taken it. Instinctively, I started to pull away, but stopped myself. I’d promised to protect her while she was down here, and it felt like I owed her. If holding my hand brought her a measure of comfort, then I would let her.

For now.

We kept walking, and I saw that the trees were thicker up ahead. It looked menacing. Did everything in this place look menacing? It sure felt that way.

I wondered if I was insane for following our self-appointed spirit guide through the woods. And it wasn’t like I was being overly paranoid. Even Ava had expressed a certain level of doubt about Vaughn. But—I reminded myself—it was one thing to be paranoid, and quite another to be cautious.

“Vaughn!” I called.

He turned back to face me. “Yes?”

I gestured to where the woods grew denser. “What is this place?”

“The Forest of Reflection,” he informed me.

I let out a gusty sigh. “Of course it is,” I muttered. Then, louder: “But what *is* it? Why are we here? You haven’t told us anything about where you’re taking us. This looks pretty menacing for a place called ‘the Forest of Reflection.’”  
 “Does it?” Vaughn looked over his shoulder at the forest, a curious look on his face.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. “It’s ominous as hell.”

“Most things that appear ominous to the living are fairly commonplace to the dead,” Vaughn stated calmly.

“What kind of cryptic bullshit is that?” I asked, getting even more agitated. “Open your fucking eyes. Everything is practically radiating danger.”

“They *are* open,” he said in a long-suffering voice. “The forest looks different to everyone who sets eyes on it. What you are seeing is not what I see. Nor is it what Ava sees, or what Marta sees, or Lilac.”

I glanced at the two women and Lilac, then back at Vaughn. I wasn’t sure if I bought that detail—at all—but it didn’t seem particularly important, so I kept my doubts to myself. “So, where are you taking us?”

He pointed into the forest. “The portal you seek is in this forest.”

I shook my head in disgust. “Of *course* it is.”

Vaughn managed to look offended. “Why would I lead you astray?”

“You tell me,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “Why would you?”

“Allow me to remind you of the bargain you’ve struck with me,” he said, glaring at me. “I want to reach this portal just as much as you do—if not more.”

I doubted that. However much Vaughn wanted to return to the living world, he didn’t have a mate waiting for him. The guy had been a ghost for over a century—unless he’d spent a lot of time with vampires while he was alive, everyone he knew was probably long dead.

“It’s not much farther,” Vaughn said briskly, and he turned back to the forest. He stepped into the dense section, and Ava’s grip on my hand tightened as we followed him.

Ahead of us, Marta and Lilac were walking side by side. Their arms were nearly touching, though they weren’t holding hands.

“I wonder if it’s as awkward for Marta and Lilac to be forced to be together as it is for you to be with me,” Ava said, nodding toward them.

I scoffed. “It’s not awkward for me.”

I felt like it was important to say that. Acknowledging the awkwardness would be as good as admitting to the extremely complicated feelings I was having, and I wasn’t about to do that.

Ava didn’t respond to that. “Well, if Perrie is Lilac’s mate, then things between him and Marta will only become more difficult.” She looked up at me. “Mate bonds are hard to deny.”

I let go of her hand. She was pushing things too far. I’d still keep my promise to protect her, but I didn’t need to do anything beyond that.

“You’re right about that,” I said coldly. “Mate bonds *are* hard to resist. Which is why I’m so motivated to get back to Cali.”

I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth—I could see the hurt in Ava’s eyes—but it was probably for the best that I’d said them. It was the truth, and she needed to hear it, no matter how much it hurt. *Especially* after things had gotten so out of hand in the Airstream.

Ava took a step away from me, just as Lilac gasped.

“Something’s following us!”

# Episode 3706

**Greyson**

Lucian raised a sculpted eyebrow at me. “A pack war?”

Mace looked grim. “I suppose it was too much to hope to not have to live through another one of those.”

I felt his exhaustion at the idea, but denying reality wouldn’t help us.

I nodded. “Yes. I think it’s a matter of time. After all, Lance was Malakai’s second.”

Lucian took this in, then made a sweeping gesture with his arm. “Yes, yes. And of course, you can count on the Vanguards’ full support.”

“That’s not what I’m thinking about right now,” I said shortly. “I’m wondering if you’ll be leading your own pack, like the Alpha you claim to be, if you’ll be playing armchair general. Sitting back behind the battle lines, glancing at maps and nibbling on hors d’oeuvres while your pack takes the brunt of the risk.”

Lucian raised his chin. “I am always with my pack in spirit—if not in body. But, if it will make you feel better, then of course I will be prepared to fight side by side with you, Redwood Alpha.”

I narrowed my eyes. That *didn’t* make me feel better. Until I actually saw Lucian out on the field, with blood smeared across his face, doing something besides pontificating about the beauty of battle, I wasn’t going to believe a damn word he said.

“I will notify my pack of this development and await your orders,” he said. He nodded to me, then to Cali, and turned to leave.

“Hang on!” I called after him. “Just how the hell am I supposed to relay those orders? How about you give me your damn cell number, Lucian.”

He made a face. “*Cell number?* Please, Greyson. Technology is beneath me. I will assign a messenger to the Redwood pack house. They will relay all required communications. *Armin!*” he shouted as he headed out the door. He paused in the doorway to regard us one final time. “I must be off, but I’ll bid you farewell once I sort this out.”

*Don’t bother*, I thought, but I bit my tongue before I could accidently start another pack war.

Cali and I stared after Lucian as he made his exit.

“Do you believe him?” she asked quietly.

I snorted. “I don’t know. I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

“Greyson,” Cali began again. “About what I was saying before. It’s really not safe to just let me wander around the—”

“Cali,” I interrupted, taking her hands in mine. “I heard you. I know you feel like locking you up is the only option, but I’m not doing it.”

“You have to—”

“I’m *not*,” I said firmly. “But I know something else we can do—you can just stay with me. And if you notice anything weird, or that you’re drifting, or if anything is amiss—or if I notice anything—then I’ll either help you push through it, or I’ll do as you’re asking and lock you up in your bedroom.”

She shook her head, looking stubborn. “No. That’s not good enough. The bedroom isn’t secure. I’ve tried to climb out of windows before, remember? That was how we met.”

I smiled, remembering the stunned look on her face when she’d landed on me after falling out of a window.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, the basement, then—but only as a last resort,” I added quickly. “In the meantime, you stick close to me, okay? And if you see or hear anything even *resembling* a wisp, you let me know. You see a hairball drifting along the floorboards, we look at it together. Got it?”

This elicited a reluctant smile from her. “Got it.” She rubbed her eyes. “Okay, that should work. For now, at least. Thank you, Greyson.”

“You’re welcome, love. You know I’m here to help you.” I leaned down to kiss her, but I froze when I heard a commotion coming from the porch.

It had to be about Zeke’s body.

Dammit. I hadn’t had time to do anything with it except dump it unceremoniously onto the porch.

I stifled a groan, knowing that whatever was about to happen was going to be a fucking nightmare. I looked down at Cali, on the verge of telling her that I would be right back to finish that last thought, but then remembered that I’d just advised her to stick with me at all times.

Grabbing her hand, I shot her a rueful smile. “By my side.”

“By your side,” she said grimly.

Together, we marched outside and onto the porch, where a group of Samara wolves were gathered. There were a couple on the porch itself, and a few on the steps, like they hadn’t all made it up before they’d been stopped in their tracks by the sight of Zeke’s dead and bloodied body.

I had to admit it—from their perspective, this probably didn’t look great.

The Samaras looked up uneasily when Cali and I stepped outside. I recognized Marissa and Perrie and a few other faces that I couldn’t put names to at the moment.

“We found him in the woods,” I explained before anyone could say anything. “He was killed by Lance, from the Bitterfang pack, and his body had been abandoned. I brought it back here. I felt like you should be the ones to decide what happens to him next.” I looked around. “What do you want to do with him?”

There was a look of confusion that spread across the faces of the Samara wolves like a catching cold. Some of them glanced at Zeke, then down at the ground. A few leaned together and whispered. No one seemed to want to touch him.

Despite my very complicated feelings toward Zeke, I felt a knot of anger forming as I watched his pack stand there so passively.

“Is this how you treat your dead Alpha?” I snapped, glaring around at the group. Next to me, Cali took a startled step back, probably surprised by the strength of my tone.

I didn’t take my eyes off the Samaras, shaking my head disgustedly.

“It’s no wonder this pack has trouble keeping an Alpha,” I said acidly. “And regardless of everything else, Zeke was once your Alpha. He might not have been cut out for the job—hell, maybe he *did* betray you—but he was still a Samara wolf. He had the blood of your pack running through his veins, and that blood was spilled across the forest floor out there!” My voice rose into a bellow. “And you should *have some goddamn respect!*”

There was a beat of very tense silence, then Perrie took a step forward.

“He was barely an Alpha,” she said bluntly.

“Be that as it may,” I snapped, “that doesn’t change what he was, and he died at the hands of your enemy.”

“So, what are you saying we should do?” Marissa asked, sounding genuinely confused. “Bury him?”

I sighed, running a frustrated hand through my hair. Where was Ava when you needed her? That woman was a pain in the ass, but at least she had a sense of honor—and would’ve known what a moment like this called for.

“You should treat him like you would treat any other Alpha,” I said, trying to sound patient, though I didn’t feel it.

“And how’s that?” Marissa asked.

“He should be burned in a pyre on Samara land,” I said tightly. “You don’t have to fucking grieve for him, but you need to do what’s right.”

“Greyson,” Cali said quietly, stepping back to my shoulder. “Ease up a little. They don’t have an Alpha to lead them, and they haven’t in a long time. Look at them.”

I looked around at the pale, worried faces of the Samara wolves and realized that Cali was right. The closest thing this pack had to an Alpha was Ava, and she wasn’t available at the moment.

I changed tack. “I know this has been a challenging time for all of you,” I said, my voice a little softer than before. “But that doesn’t exempt you from giving one of your own a proper funeral.”

“So we take him with us?” Perrie said cautiously.

“Yes,” I said. “Take him back to your territory. Do the right thing and build a pyre. Someone in your pack must know how to do it.”

“I’ll show them how,” a man I didn’t know said quietly.

“So do it. And when you’re done, you need to prepare yourselves for a fight. The Bitterfangs killed Zeke, and they’re still a threat.” I looked down at Zeke’s body, then back up at his pack. “You may be without an Alpha, but your pack is still part of an alliance with the Redwoods, the Blue Bloods, and the Vanguards—”

“*Speaking* of the Vanguards!”

I looked over to see Lucian striding toward the porch steps, making good on his promise of seeing us off.

“I thought you left,” I said, not caring that I sounded rude.

He ignored me. “Since they are without an Alpha, and because Ava is currently unreachable, I believe *I* should be the one to lead the Samara pack—temporarily, of course.”

“That will *not* be happening, and I doubt the Samaras would just let you waltz in and…”   
 “*They’re here!*” Zainab burst out of the forest and sprinted across the lawn toward us. “The Bitterfangs!” she screamed. “They’re here! *The Bitterfangs are coming!*”

# Episode 3707

**Xavier**

I whipped around, my senses on fire. I sniffed the air, but I couldn’t pick up any scents. Did spirits even *have* scents?

“Look!” Lilac yelled, pointing.

I followed the direction of his finger and saw—sure enough—several dark masses, moving toward us. I couldn’t tell what the things were, but I could see that they were getting bigger as they approached.

“What the hell are they?” I demanded, rounding on Vaughn.

Vaughn looked alarmed. “Shadow creatures!”

“*Shadow creatures?*” I repeated. I looked at the dark shapes again, remembering that Cali had encountered shadow creatures when she’d almost been dragged through the mirror. “How do we fight them?”

Vaughn’s look of fear now mixed with confusion. “Fight them? What are you talking about? You can’t *fight* shadow creatures.”

“So what do you do?” I asked.

“The best you can hope for is to run and pray they don’t catch you.”

I could see real panic in Vaughn’s face, which was unnerving, to say the least. He was already starting to pick up speed.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I muttered. Like things weren’t bad enough already—we were stuck in the spirit world without a portal back to the world of the living, and now we were being chased by shadow creatures I couldn’t even fight? “Okay, it’s official. This place fucking sucks. Follow Vaughn,” I said, waving everyone after the fleeing spirit.

I made sure I brought up the rear. If the creatures attacked, I would do my best to hold them off.

*How* I would do that, I had no clue.

Vaughn was running, leading us deeper and deeper into the woods, and I hoped to hell this wasn’t some kind of elaborate trap. I still had plenty of doubts about Vaughn.

I shot a glance over my shoulder, then frowned. Was it my imagination, or were the woods behind us getting darker? Regardless, even in the darkness, I could sense movement. The creatures were following us.

Shit.

“What are those things?” Marta gasped, struggling to keep up with the group.

“Shadow creatures are dark spirits that haunt and terrorize corners of the spirit world. They must have sensed your presence—they’re coming for you,” Vaughn said unhelpfully.

Marta shot a look at Lilac and sped up. The pair of them were just behind Vaughn, and Ava was running ahead of me. I could feel a strange chill creeping up on me—probably the shadow creatures closing in.

My mind was on this latest threat, and I wasn’t fully paying attention to the path in front of me, so when my foot caught on a root, I went down. Hard.

“*Xavier!*” Ava screamed, turning back.

“Keep going,” I shouted, but she just grabbed my arms and helped me to my feet.

I tried to hide my growing fear as we started to run again. We were all running as fast as we could, but the creatures were still getting closer. I could feel them, just behind me. It was only a matter of time before they caught us.

“Hurry!” Vaughn urged. “I know a place we can hide!”

And then suddenly, like he’d been blipped away, he was gone.

We all skidded to a halt.

“Where the fuck did he go?” I demanded, looking around.

Before I could begin to curse him for betraying us and leaving us behind for the creatures, I heard him.

“Down here!”  
 It was Vaughn’s voice, but where was it coming from? I followed the sound until I reached a steep hole in the ground—more like a tunnel, really. I peered into the darkness and spotted Vaughn at the bottom.

“Hurry!” he said, waving frantically.

Ava shot a look at me. Everyone was looking at me, like I actually knew what to do in this situation.

I *didn’t* know what to do, but when I glanced back, the darkness and creeping chill were getting closer, so I knew we didn’t have a lot of choices.

“Marta, Lilac—into the tunnel. Follow Vaughn,” I ordered.

They nodded and scrambled in.

I grabbed Ava’s hand. “Let’s go.”

She nodded and we followed the others, fighting to keep our footing on the rocky, uneven ground.

Vaughn was waiting for us when we reached the bottom. “Everyone stay perfectly still,” he whispered. “*Don’t make a sound*.”

I kept my eyes glued to the opening above us. The spirit world’s strange grey light poured in. It wasn’t sunshine, but it was something. I didn’t even realize how important a *something* it was until it was suddenly blotted out, and a cold, listless draft descended on us.

Ava was still breathing hard, though I could tell it was more from panic than from the run. Her body was pressed tight against mine in the cramped space.

Shit. That wasn’t good. My wolf was freaking out.

*Not now*. I had to remind myself. *Not ever, but* especially *not now.*

Ava was shaking with fear, which really jarred me. I looked down at her and slowly put a finger over her lips.

*Just breathe slowly*, I told her.

She looked at me, her eyes wide with terror, but managed to nod.

After an excruciatingly long moment, the cold draft began to dissipate, and the opening at the top of the tunnel filled with grey not-light again.

“It’s okay,” Vaughn whispered, relief apparent in his voice. “I think they’ve moved on.”

There was a collective exhale from the group—everyone must’ve been holding their breath.

Ava gripped the hand that was still at her lips and kissed my fingers. *Thank you, X*, she said.

I looked at her for a moment, then pulled away, clearing my throat and looking around. I needed to shake off all the emotions that were building deep inside me. It had to have something to do with the spirit world—it was messing with my head. Nothing about this place felt right.

We crawled back out of the tunnel, and when we reached the relative light of the forest, Vaughn nodded.

“We’re almost there.” He started walking again, leading us deeper into the woods.

We trudged after him wordlessly. I didn’t even pay attention until we reached a clearing, and then I looked around in surprise. The place *almost* looked like the lake house, but—like everything else in this place—it was twisted and ominously different. That damn feeling seemed to shade everything, here.

Vaughn brought us to the door of the house, which was hanging open.

“The portal is just inside,” he said, turning to look back at us. “But before you go in—you remember what you promised, right? You *have* to take me with you to the other side.”

Marta shot me an anxious glance. I nodded, hoping she would just go along with it. I supposed Vaughn had earned his fare—he *had* saved us from the shadow creatures, after all—but I still didn’t even know if it was possible to escort him to the land of the living.

As we stepped into the house, a shudder crawled up my spine. It was awful to be inside this alternative version of the lake house—so familiar, yet not familiar at all. It was disconcerting and disorienting. The walls were all in the right place, but they were dark and covered with dust, and every time I looked away, I felt like I could *almost* see them pulsing from the corner of my eye.

Vaughn stopped in front of one of the studies and nodded inside. “The portal is in here.”

I looked over his shoulder. There was a mirror on the wall—one I didn’t remember from the actual lake house. But it did look like the mirror in Big Mac’s room—it shimmered in the same way, and had those dim shadows passing across it.

“Go ahead,” I said, looking over at Ava and Marta. “You two go first.”

“What about me?” Vaughn asked quickly.

I rolled my eyes. “You go after them.”

Marta stepped toward the mirror first. We all held our breath as she reached out her hand, but to everyone’s relief, it went easily into the mirror. The rest of her slipped right through after it. She held out her hand for one of us to take.

“Lilac, you go next,” Ava said.

Lilac nodded. He took Marta’s hand and pushed through, shoulder first. He disappeared without incident as well and left his hand waiting.

Ava took Lilac’s hand and stepped up to the mirror when the room went dark.

My heart thundered as I looked around, searching for the source of the sudden blackout.

“Shadow creatures!” Vaughn hissed. “They’re back! We have to hurry!”

Moving on instinct, I practically shoved Ava into the mirror. She fell through, just as the dark, undulating shapes of the shadow creatures began to pour into the room. They came from everywhere—the door, the windows, even the cracks in the walls and the floorboards.

Vaughn shrieked and hurried toward the mirror. He tried to push through, but he kept bouncing away from the glass.

“Why won’t it work?” he demanded hysterically. “It was supposed to work with living beings nearby!”

The shadow creatures were moving toward us, congealing like a dark cloud.

“*Do something!*” Vaughn screamed at me.

I looked around desperately. Vaughn had said that we couldn’t fight them, but I’d be damned if I went down without even trying, so I grabbed the rickety desk chair to use as a weapon. I held it up like a fucking lion tamer and was bracing for impact when Ava’s hand reached through the glass, grabbed my arm, and yanked me through the mirror.

The chair, the room, and the shadow creatures all whirled away in an instant. The last thing I heard before the darkness consumed me was Vaughn’s terrified scream.

# Episode 3708

My heart pounded as the other Redwood pack members and I looked toward the woods. Why couldn’t the Bitterfangs just leave us alone?

I knew a pack war was possible—Greyson had warned Lucian that we would probably find ourselves in one, now that Lance had been killed—but I hadn’t expected it to break out so *soon*.

How was I supposed to help defend the pack if I was unable to control myself? I was a huge liability right now. I’d already attacked people I loved. I clearly had no ability whatsoever to resist the dangerous suggestions that kept filling my mind—how could I help protect the pack when, at any moment, I could be easily manipulated into making things even worse?

Greyson didn’t seem nearly as alarmed by the Bitterfangs’ sudden reappearance as I was. Maybe because he was the Alpha. He’d be the one leading us in this war against them, so it made sense that he was putting on a brave face—even if he was just as worried as I was.

Greyson, Mace, and Lucian approached the trees, their faces identical masks of apathy and strength. Then Greyson stepped in front of the other two Alphas and took the lead—just as a group of Bitterfang wolves emerged from the trees.

“Stop—now,” Greyson told them. “You’re trespassing on Redwood land, and you have no business here. Turn around before things get ugly.”

“If you’re planning to attack,” Mace added, “you should save yourself the grief and just go back to California now, while you still can. There aren’t nearly enough of you to take on the Redwood pack and its allies. Don’t waste your lives on this idiotic vendetta.”

One of the Bitterfangs stepped forward. He was one I’d seen before—one of his eyes was darker than the other.

“Don’t worry, we won’t stay,” he said. “We’re here to deliver a warning. You might think this is over, but it’s only just begun. Malakai isn’t going to forget what happened here. He *will* avenge Lance’s death, and he *will* drink the blood of every Alpha who played a part in the tragic death of his beloved daughter, Julia. He’ll kill their mates, too.”

Greyson and the other Alphas gave no indication that they were concerned by the warning, but I couldn’t contain the shudder that rippled down my spine.

*Drink their blood?* As if it wasn’t bad enough that they were clearly violent and cruel—the Bitterfangs were *literally* bloodthirsty? *This pack is a nightmare.*

Greyson had been right, in the worst way possible. There was no way to avoid a pack war now, was there? Even though we’d only been trying to help Russell and Julia, and even though some of the violence the Bitterfangs had suffered at our hands had been self-defense, there would be no reasoning with these people.

They’d never been reasonable to begin with.

Greyson scoffed. “Get the hell out of our territory, and take your empty threats with you. I’ll give you a five-minute head start, and then I’m going to have each of you hunted down and your heads delivered to Malakai.”

Greyson’s callous response shocked me almost as much as the Bitterfangs’ threat, but it seemed to be the only language they were capable of speaking, because a hint of doubt crept into the Bitterfang wolves’ eyes.

Was this really the first time anyone had pushed back against them?

The spokesperson shrugged. “Fine, but you’ll have to answer for your crimes at the pack summit. There’s no escaping what’s coming.” His cold, mismatched eyes dragged over me, and another shudder racked my body. “Your foolish belief in the *due destini* has all but sealed your fate.”

Greyson wrapped an arm around me and pulled me close. His low growl vibrated down my side. “I’ve changed my mind. Now you have sixty seconds to get the fuck out of here.”

At that, the Bitterfangs gave us one last chorus of snarls before taking off into the woods. My stomach churned with anxiety as I watched them go. It certainly didn’t seem like they’d be forgetting their vendetta against us anytime soon.

I sighed. “That went well.”

Greyson gave me a squeeze, then dropped his arm. “About as well as I expected it to, honestly. They don’t seem capable of backing down from a fight—even if they wanted to.”

There was a resignation in his tone that set my teeth on edge. I looked up at him, frowning. “Why aren’t you more concerned?”

“I *am* concerned, especially whenever they mention you. But the Bitterfangs brought this on themselves. We didn’t ask for it. We didn’t attack them, trespass, or threaten to kill a teenage boy. And every step of the way, we’ve tried to reason with them and avoid violence as much as possible. Whatever happens next, it’s on them. The other Alphas and I aren’t afraid. We have an alliance—if the Bitterfangs try to act on their ‘warning,’ we’ll crush them.”

He meant every word—I knew it in my bones. This wasn’t going to end until the Bitterfangs backed down, or we defeated them in a pack war.

I shivered again, and not entirely from the cold.

“Come on. Let’s get you inside.” Greyson wrapped an arm around me again and led me back toward the house.

We stepped inside, and the heated air wrapped around me like a soothing blanket.

“I know it might seem impossible, but try not to worry about the Bitterfangs, okay?” Greyson said. “I’ll take care of everything, and I won’t let anything happen to you, love. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“It’s not just me I’m worried about,” I said. “It’s not like I can forget everything they said.”

He smiled down at me. “I know. It’ll be okay. I promise.” He leaned in to kiss me, then hesitated.

Artemis’s compulsion was still at work. I hadn’t had a chance to ask her to end it yet.

“Do you want to kiss me?” he asked.

I nodded. “Of course I do.” Even if I were half dead, I’d still want to kiss Greyson senseless.

He gently lifted my chin and stared into my eyes. “Then do it. You say you’re worried that you can’t resist the manipulation magic being used against you, but I believe you have it in you. You’re stronger than you think, love. You always have been.”

I pulled in a deep breath. I wanted to believe him. Wanted to believe in myself the same way he seemed to. This manipulation magic had deeply shaken my trust in myself, had made me feel like my body wasn’t truly my own anymore.

But being with Greyson, kissing him… Maybe that was one piece of myself I could get back.

Oh so slowly, I brought my lips close to his. In the back of my mind, I was desperately worried that I wouldn’t be able to kiss him back. I wanted to. Could I do it?

I closed my eyes and thought of the many kisses we’d shared in the past, the warmth and hunger that doused my body every time we were close like this—and before I knew it, my lips were pressed against his. The thought and sensation was similar to that moment of when I saved my mom—pure, unbridled happiness.

His lips were firm and warm against mine, moving slowly, gently. I opened my mouth to him, deepening the kiss. Greyson cupped my cheek, sliding his hand into my hair. I breathed him in, resting my hands on his chest.

I was doing it—I was kissing Greyson the way I wanted to. The realization sent a jolt through me. I’d broken through Artemis’s compulsion! Was it because I’d fought back, or was it down to the power of love? Maybe both?

*I resisted the magic.*

My heart swelled, and I wrapped my arms around Greyson. The events of the past few days faded away as I lost myself in our shared connection.

And then, with another—harsher—jolt, I realized that despite this breakthrough, the fallout from the wisp’s manipulation wasn’t over. Xavier was still trapped in the spirit world.

*I shouldn’t be rewarding myself until both my mates are safe and sound.*

I broke away from the kiss, regret souring the joy in my chest.

“Are you fighting the magic?” Greyson asked.

I shook my head. “It’s Xavier. It doesn’t feel right, doing this while he’s… not here.”

I’d been worried that Greyson would be upset, but he just smiled. “I understand. I’m just glad you were able to break the compulsion. Selfishly of course.” His thumb brushed over my cheekbone. “And when you’re ready, we can pick up where we left off.”

Heat rushed into my cheeks. “I’d like that.”

“And no matter what happens, you need to let me know if you feel anything weird. If the wisp or whatever it is returns, let me know.”

I nodded. “I will.”

Still, worry gnawed at my gut. I could make all the promises in the world to Greyson, but that didn’t mean I’d be able to keep them.

*If the wisp tries to come for me again, will I be able to resist it?*

# Episode 3709

**Xavier**

My body lurched through the mirror, pulled by the force of Ava’s vise grip on my hand, and I crashed to the ground as Vaughn’s scream faded behind me.

The tight grip on my hand softened and became a warm, soothing weight. *Ava*. She was holding my hand, our fingers intertwined. For a long string of seconds, I floated in a strange, dreamlike cocoon, anchored only by Ava’s touch.

*I wish I could stay like this forever…*

Then the darkness surrounding me dissolved, and I found myself lying on my back, a dull ache radiating up my side. Ava was kneeling beside me, stroking my hair.

“Xavier?” Her voice was whisper soft and threaded through with too much emotion for me to wrap my head around.

I blinked once, twice, as my surroundings came into focus. We were back in the lake house—the real lake house. We’d made it through the mirror. We were back in the living world.

I slowly sat up, my body protesting each movement, and pulled my hand out of Ava’s as I looked around.

Marta and Lilac were standing close, watching. Marta looked pale and weak, and I suspected that Lilac was the only thing keeping her upright. Ava must have held onto Marta in order to pull me through. I owed the bridge one.

“Oh, thank god.” Ava breathed. “Are you okay, Xavier? You look okay, but… Here, let me help you up.”

I looked back at the mirror I’d just come through. How had a mirror that had access to the spirit realm ended up in the lake house? Had this always been here? Maybe we were around witches too much. Or it was because we were with Marta. Maybe since she was a bridge, any mirror could become a portal if she wanted it to.

I ignored Ava’s offered hand and pushed myself to my feet. “I’m fine. Marta, are you all right? You don’t look so good.”

The rest of us were more or less unscathed, it seemed. But not Marta. She looked a few seconds away from passing out.

She ignored my question and looked past me at the mirror. “What happened to Vaughn?”

I thought back to those frenzied last moments in the spirit world, when the shadow creatures had closed in and all I’d heard was Vaughn’s pained scream. I swallowed. “He didn’t make it.”

Probably for the best. I didn’t want any part of bringing someone back from the dead. It seemed like something that had consequences that weren’t worth it. I spared a glance at Ava. She and Vaughn had been friends, right? Allies? Did she care that he’d probably been torn apart by shadow monsters?

Her expression was blank, completely unreadable.

*She’s probably processing.* Did she feel guilty because she’d gotten lucky coming back to life on her own? Didn’t seem like Vaughn would ever have that chance.

“Xavier’s right,” Lilac said, breaking me out of my spiral. “Marta doesn’t look good. I’m going to take her back to the pack house. Maybe Torin can help her out.”

I nodded. “That’s a good idea. Let’s stick together. We don’t know who or what might be out in the woods right now.”

Lilac nodded and turned to Marta. “Do you have enough strength to hold onto me if I shift and you ride on my back?”

She nodded. “I… I think so.”

I glanced at Ava and pointed to the door. “Let’s go.”

She didn’t seem to hear me at first. She hadn’t moved an inch and was staring at her reflection in the mirror.

I froze. *Is she thinking about Vaughn? Or something else?*

Whatever. It didn’t matter what was going on in her head. I had more important things to worry about—not the least of which was making sure our resident medium didn’t keel over before we could get her some help.

“*Ava*,” I said sharply. “Come on.”

She turned to look at me, then ducked her head and took a few steps toward the door. Then she stopped suddenly, and I nearly bumped into her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She opened her mouth, her brows knitting together. “I…”

She shook her head and didn’t offer up anything else. She looked away, like she couldn’t bear to see my face.

What had that just been like for her in there?

“Are you coming?” Lilac snapped from the front door, still holding on to Marta, who looked impossibly paler than before.

Lilac had never spoken to me like that, and it brought me up short.

“Marta needs to get back,” he pressed. “We don’t have all day.”

I glanced back at Ava. “Come on.”

She shook her head. “You go. I need a few minutes.”

I frowned. I wasn’t going to do that.

But Lilac had reached the end of his patience, it seemed. He’d already shifted, and Marta was climbing weakly onto his back. Once she was settled, her body draped over him and her fingers gripping his fur tightly, he took off toward the pack house.

*Fuck.* I needed to get going too. I hated the idea of Lilac making that trip alone. There was no telling what was going on in the woods right now, and I would never forgive myself if anything happened to him on my watch. We didn’t know what had happened with the Bitterfangs while we were gone—hell, I didn’t even know how *long* we’d been gone. It could have been minutes or hours or even days.

I checked my watch, my eyes widening. *We’ve only been gone an hour? I guess Vaughn was right—poor bastard. Time passes differently in the spirit world.*

I turned back to Ava. “Come on. We’ve got to go.”

She still didn’t move, so I caught her arm and started physically dragging her toward the door. She didn’t resist me, but she didn’t try to walk, either. It was like she’d suddenly become a ragdoll.

“Enough,” I snapped. “You need to knock this shit off right now. It isn’t safe for Lilac to make the trip back alone. If you’re not feeling well, that’s okay. I’ll shift and you can ride on my back. But we have to get going.”

Suddenly, she turned to me, threw her arms around my neck, and started to sob.

And just like that, I was the one frozen in place. I didn’t know what to do—didn’t know how to comfort her with what just happened. All I could do was let her cling to me and, after a beat, put my arms around her, patting her back.

Comforting words rushed to the tip of my tongue, but I didn’t really know what to say. Was this about the spirit world? About Vaughn? About the Samaras? All of the above?

For a long string of seconds, she stayed in my arms, crying like her world had been ripped in two, before she finally took a deep breath and eased herself out of my embrace. She wiped her eyes. “Please don’t ask me to do that again.”

*Shit.* My insides twinged with guilt. I had brought her to the spirit world when she clearly hadn’t wanted to go. When she’d been afraid to go. But the past was the past, and it was too late to do anything about it now.

I gently lifted her chin. “You helped save Julia’s life. I know it was awful, but it’s done. It’s over now. We made it out alive. You’re safe now.”

“I know that. And I’m sorry, but not everyone made it out of there.”

I pulled back, frowning. “Wait… Did you really think Vaughn was actually going to make it out of there?”

She shook her head. “No… I’m sorry. You’re right. We should get back to the pack house.”

She started for the door, but I put out a hand to stop her. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something else was going on—that this was more than just the spirit world scaring the hell out of her.

*Should I press her about it? Or wait to see if she opens up? Or… I could always just ignore it?*

Ava’s problems weren’t my problems. And all things considered, she should’ve been happy that she’d made it out of there unscathed. Marta, on the other hand, might not have been so fortunate. We really did need to get going to make sure she was okay.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” I asked. If she wasn’t, now was the time to fess up about what was really going on.

She nodded. “I am.”

We finally made it out of the house, and I took one last look at the place before we headed back to the pack house. I hadn’t been to the lake house in a long while, but Phil was doing a good job keeping it up.

*I’ll have to have Lola remove the last of the Christmas decorations.*

I liked the lake house, but I knew I’d always feel more at home in my own pack house.

I was about to shift when Ava reached out and caught my arm.

“Wait,” she said. “There’s something you need to know about Vaughn and me.”

# Episode 3710

After our latest encounter with the Bitterfangs, I stayed glued to Greyson’s side, almost literally shadowing him. After everything that had happened lately, I didn’t want to lose sight of him for one single second. What if that was the second when the wisp reappeared and made me do something even worse than before? It didn’t seem possible, considering I’d attacked my mother under the wisp’s bidding, and trapped four people in the spirit world. How could it get worse than that?

*Actually, I don’t want to know.*

I pushed that thought to the back of my mind—as far as it would go. We still didn’t know who or what was behind the wisp’s manipulation, so there was no way of knowing what its puppeteer was capable of. What horrible things they’d make me do next.

I couldn’t relax my guard. Not if the Bitterfangs might make good on their threat-slash-promise to hold us accountable at the pack summit. The rest of the pack might be able to enjoy a brief reprieve, but I couldn’t let my guard down. I knew myself too well.

I couldn’t risk losing control of myself again. At least if I stuck near Greyson, I’d probably be a little safer. And so would everyone else.

Xavier’s absence was still a palpable thing, a nagging worry that wouldn’t ease up until I knew he was home and safe again. But at least I had Greyson to help me through this strange limbo I’d found myself in.

Zainab stepped into the pack house, back from a patrol. “Those Bitterfang assholes listened to your warning and left Redwood territory. We’re in the clear.”

I let out a breath. “Thank god.”

Relief seemed to ripple through the room. This was one less thing to worry about, at least for the time being. What kind of threat the Bitterfangs would present in the future, especially at the upcoming pack summit, was a whole other consideration.

And with the news of the Bitterfang representatives leaving, my worry for Xavier rushed to the forefront of my mind. The tension in the pack eased at this new information, but my own anxiety held on tight.

I wouldn’t be able to rest until I saw Xavier and confirmed with my own eyes that he’d made it back.

Suddenly, I heard voices. They were coming from the front of the house.

“Fucking hell. What now?” Greyson growled.

I followed him as he raced out to see what the commotion was about. Lilac rushed forward, holding a barely-conscious Marta in his arms.

“Oh my god, is she okay?” I asked, rushing forward.

“I don’t know—someone get Torin!” he called. “Marta needs help!”

What had happened in the spirit realm? The panic monster began to grow inside me, threatening to eat me alive.

Someone ran off to get the Fae. I hoped Marta would be okay, but with Torin she was in the best hands possible. I looked out toward the woods. Where the hell was Xavier? And Ava? I couldn’t shake my fear and panic. I had to know where Xavier was. What had happened to him. Why he wasn’t here with Lilac and Marta.

I grabbed Greyson. “Where is he?”

His brows furrowed as he looked at me, then he cut through the commotion and went straight to Lilac. “Where are the others?”

“He and Ava should be right behind us. We left the lake house together.”

Okay, so then where were they? Xavier should’ve beaten Lilac back—hell, I would’ve thought he’d carry Marta himself just to be faster about it. Had something happened?

“Did he make it back from the spirit world okay?” I asked.

Lilac nodded.

“Was there any trouble on the way back from the lake house?” Greyson asked.

I gulped. Were there still Bitterfangs out there? Could they have tried to attack Xavier and Ava?

“Other than Marta being in such terrible condition?” Lilac deadpanned. “No, it was peachy.”

Crap.

“There’s Torin. Just go tend to Marta,” Greyson told Lilac, who didn’t need to be told twice.

Torin rushed out onto the porch, took one look at Marta, and hollered for Lilac to bring her inside and lay her down in the living room. Lilac didn’t waste any time, and soon Greyson and I were alone on the porch.

He smiled at me. “I told you my brother would find a way out. He’s a survivor.”

My own smile felt weak in return. I knew I should’ve been relieved by this news, that it should’ve slain the panic monster. But until Xavier walked through the door, all my worst fears would be running the show. It didn’t help matters at all that the Bitterfangs had only just been here, threatening the pack. It seemed like if they had the chance to attack, they would take it.

“Should we go find him?” I asked. “If there are still any Bitterfangs out there in the woods, he might need some backup. You bite, I blast?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Greyson said. “Lilac didn’t run into any Bitterfangs, and Zainab confirmed that they’ve left Redwood territory. I’m sure Xavier will be back soon. Try not to worry, okay?”

I nodded. Greyson was right. All I could do was wait and hope he’d get back soon.

Still, I would’ve felt a whole lot better about the situation if Ava hadn’t been a part of it.

*Why did he have to run back with Ava? What could they possibly have to do together? Or talk about?*

I knew that wasn’t the kindest or most grateful perspective. I should’ve just been grateful that he’d made it back okay and was on his way home. But… *Ava*. She always created complications where there didn’t need to be any.

Ugh.

*Pull yourself together, Cali! Put the petty jealousy aside and look at the facts! It’s a* good *thing that Ava went along to help, and it’s a good thing that she made it back, too. It was very selfless of her to go to the spirit world to help. Especially since it’s not the most pleasant place to be for her, I’m sure.*

But knowing how you were supposed to feel and actually feeling it were two very different things. The thought I’d had earlier rushed to the forefront of my mind—I needed to find a way to break Ava and Xavier’s connection for good, and Ava getting stuck in the spirit world would have fixed that for me. This might not have been the kindest or most generous take, but that didn’t make it any less true.

I wanted their mate bond to be severed. For good. I was sure Xavier felt the same way.

*Focus, Cali. Don’t go down Petty Lane. Now is* not *the time to be thinking about this. Just chill out. Xavier will be home soon. He’s strong. Even if Bitterfangs attacked, he can take them. Easy.*

Soon, I’d be able to hold him in my arms again. The rest could wait.

I followed Greyson into the living room, lowkey stalker that I was, and found Torin kneeling beside Marta, who was laid out on the couch.

She held up a hand to stop Torin. “I’m okay. I’m just tired. I just want to sleep.”

“No, she’s not okay,” Lilac cut in. “This is more than just being tired. She’s *drained*.”

Okorie rushed into the room and knelt down at Marta’s side, taking her hand. Lilac’s jaw tensed. This had to be awkward for everyone involved. Marta had gone on a road trip with Okorie, and Lilac was still trying to figure out what to do about his newfound mate.

Still, it didn’t take a love expert to see that there were still unresolved feelings at play—between all three of them. It wasn’t quite the same as my *due destini* situation, but Marta did clearly have two people in her life who genuinely cared for her.

Torin’s hands glowed blue, and, with Marta’s permission, he went to work.

Suddenly, Big Mac and Mrs. Smith came in.

“How is she?” Big Mac asked.

Clearly, the witch was concerned about Marta. She put on a gruff front, but she had a soft spot for the young medium. But Marta was already starting to look better.

She sat up and waved Torin off. “Thank you all for your concern, but I’m feeling much better now. So… show’s over.”

“We’re only here because we care about you,” Lola said. “Besides, you deserve a medal. You helped rewrite *Romeo and Juliet*.”

I smiled. It was nice to see the pack camaraderie alive and well. We really needed it after everything we’d just been through.

I kept stealing glances at the door, waiting for Xavier to walk in.

“Actually, I’ve got a great idea,” Lola continued.

I braced myself. *Here we go…* Lola’s ideas were historically not universally great. For instance, her suggestion that Xavier and Ava bang it out.

“We should celebrate!” Lola said. “How about a barbecue, to celebrate the success of the alliance?”

# Episode 3711

**Xavier**

Standing here with Ava, whose cheeks were still damp from her tears, I felt so torn. I needed to get back to the pack house. Lilac had probably already made it back by now, but there was always the possibility that he’d run into some trouble. Who knew if the Bitterfangs were still around? Plus, Marta was definitely not looking good.

There were a million reasons why I needed to get out of here and back to the pack house, but the one that nagged at me the most was the fact that I wanted to see Cali. She would have been worrying about me from the moment I stepped into the mirror. It would ease her mind to see me safe and well.

Plus, I missed her.

But here was Ava, clearly in a bad place after we’d made it out of the spirit world by the skin of our teeth. She needed support too. And she had something to tell me about Vaughn? The way she was acting, it seemed like some sort of loaded confession was forthcoming.

*What, did she and Vaughn have some kind of ghost affair while they were in the spirit world together?* I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer, honestly. The thought pissed me off. Sure she’d been dead, along with our mate bond. And there was the whole mutual betrayal situation, and me killing her. But I knew Ava, she’d been in love with me. Fuck, I had been too—that’s why my wolf had left in the first place, hadn’t he?

On paper, she had every right to hook up with Vaughn. She didn’t need my forgiveness, or to confess anything to me. And yet if she was about to tell me that they had in fact had ghost sex or whatever the fuck, I was going to jump back through that mirror and make sure he was obliterated.

“Ava, whatever it is, it’s fine—”

“Just let me speak, okay?” She sounded so broken, I couldn’t find it in myself to refuse her. Even though I wasn’t sure I really wanted to know what this was about.

I nodded, and she took a deep breath.

“When I first arrived in the spirit world, I was shocked. And angry. So, so angry. I hated you for killing me. For sending me to that place.”

Well, that… was the least surprising thing I’d ever heard. If our roles were reversed, I would have hated her too. I’d probably still hate her now. And it wasn’t like I hadn’t carried my own share of anger and hatred. Ava had killed my mother—at the time, I’d probably hated her just as she’d hated me.

“I stewed in that anger, and I vowed that if I were to ever return to the living world, I’d get my revenge,” she continued. “I was absolutely consumed by the idea. I spent almost all of my time coming up with ways to hurt you. I pushed away anyone and everyone who tried to befriend me. This lasted a long time—and remember, time passes differently there. It lasts longer, in a way. I was that ugly, that hateful, for what felt like forever. Vaughn was there for me.”

She fell silent for a moment. Whether she was lost in her memories of him or just carefully considering her words, I wasn’t sure.

“Why haven’t you ever mentioned him before?” I asked.

“Because I hate talking about that place. It’s… Well, you’ve been there. You know how awful it is.”

“Fair enough.”

Still, I couldn’t consider the spirit world all bad. It was where I’d seen my mother for the last time. Where I’d gotten probably the nearest thing to closure I’d ever have. Sure, the spirit world was creepy and dangerous and a thousand different kinds of awful, but there was some good mixed in with all that bad.

Maybe Ava felt the same way. And maybe that was where Vaughn came in. I knew better than most that sometimes, if you didn’t talk about something or someone you’d lost, it wasn’t because your time with them had been all bad. Sometimes, it was because it had been good—even if it didn’t last.

I waited for Ava to continue, and she finally broke the silence.

“Vaughn told me he was like me when he arrived. Bitter. Angry. But then he learned that he couldn’t spend eternity roiling with hate and anger—he helped me realize there was nothing to be gained from existing that way. He helped me look past the anger I was using as a shield and see all the genuine sorrow I felt for what I’d done.”

She looked up at me, her eyes brimming with tears.

“The thing is, I knew that what I was doing was wrong, even as I did it,” she said. “I just couldn’t stop myself. I was too angry, too poisoned with hatred and blinded by all the lies Silas fed me. I brought all of that with me when I died, but Vaughn helped me see the truth. He was the only one who could see through my rage and wasn’t afraid of what he found beneath it.” She sniffled. “I know I’ve already apologized to you, but you have to know how much I meant it.”

I remembered. I’d probably never forget the sight of Ava shifting and showing me her stomach. Submitting to me at the Vanguard palace. I’d felt so conflicted about the gesture, then, so caught up in my own hate and anger and hurt. My own distrust. I hadn’t even been sure if I believed her.

I definitely believed her now.

“So, what happened after that?” I asked.

“It took a long time for me to accept what Vaughn was trying to tell me. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I can be stubborn.” The weak smile she gave me nearly broke my heart in two. “Eventually, I pushed him away, just like I’d pushed everyone else away in the real world. For a long time, I wandered the spirit world alone, trying to come to peace with myself. And when I came through the mirror and returned to the living world, I thought I’d never see Vaughn again.”

Her voice broke, and those unshed tears finally poured down her cheeks.

“I’m not just upset because I had to go back to that horrible place,” she said. “I’m upset because I never got the chance to thank Vaughn for saving me.”

*And based on what happened to Vaughn in the seconds before I escaped*,I thought to myself, *you probably never will.*

I could only imagine what it was like to lose a friend like that—someone who had helped piece you back together through your darkest times, even when you hadn’t wanted them to.

I sighed. “I’m sorry, Ava. For what it’s worth, I’m glad Vaughn was there when you needed him. I’m glad you weren’t alone.”

“Me too.” She wiped her cheeks. “Sorry. I know you’re eager to get back to the pack house.”

I was, but after what she’d shared with me, I felt compelled to offer an olive branch in return. “Thanks for pulling me through the mirror. If you hadn’t, I probably would’ve been eaten by the shadow creatures.”

She gave me a wistful smile. “I guess we look out for each other, no matter how complicated things are. Just like you stepped in when my pack needed a leader, an Alpha. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for that. I hope it wasn’t too much to ask.”

I thought of the rush I’d felt at taking charge, however briefly, when I’d been trying to rally the Samara pack.

“It felt good,” I admitted. “A little addictive, honestly.”

“You’ll be Alpha for real, someday.”

She’d been pushing that idea for a while now, but I’d grown to like hearing it from her. It confirmed what I already knew.

I thought back to that moment in the Airstream, how I’d almost given in. I hoped that moment—and our little heart-to-heart talk—hadn’t put any fresh ideas in Ava’s head. I wouldn’t allow things to get out of hand with her again. I owed that to Cali. I knew I was hiding all of this from her, too, but it was because I didn’t want to hurt her.

I didn’t know what the fuck to do about any of this.

We shifted and headed back toward the pack house. The closer we got to home, the more visceral my need to see Cali became.

As we broke through the tree line and stepped into the yard, the scent of barbecue washed over me, along with the smoky scent of a bonfire.

*Why the fuck are they having a barbecue?*

I spotted Cali standing in the yard near Greyson and shifted back to human as I ran to her. I didn’t hesitate to scoop her up and wrap her in my arms.

“Xavier!” she cried, grinning from ear to ear. “Oh, thank god you’re all right.”

She kissed my face, my jaw, my neck, any part of me she could reach. She’d missed me just as much as I’d missed her. “I’m so glad you’re back!”

I pulled back as something occurred to me. “Does this mean you shook off Artemis’s compulsion?”

She answered me with a kiss that took my breath away—until Greyson pulled me off her with an angry growl.

“Inside,” he said grimly. “*Now.*”

# Episode 3712

**Greyson**

Just looking at my brother had my vision going red, and it took all my self-control to haul him off Cali without doing him bodily harm.

“What the fuck, Greyson?” Xavier demanded. “Get your hands off me.”

*How like Xavier to be completely oblivious as to why I might be angry with him.* I rolled my eyes and didn’t let go of him. Considering my brother thought he was hot shit, his attitude wasn’t at all surprising. Unfortunately for both of us, I now had the shit job of reminding him exactly where he stood in the Redwood pack.

I glanced at Cali. “I’m sorry. I know you’ve been dying to see Xavier. But you’ve seen him—you know he’s safe. And he and I need to have a conversation.” I pinned my brother with a look.

“No way,” he said. “Anything you have to say to me, you can say right here.”

I felt Cali’s eyes on me, felt the weight of her unasked questions, her unspoken concern. I knew we’d caught the attention of the other pack members who’d gathered for the barbecue, too. But I didn’t care. I needed to set things straight with Xavier, and if everyone in the pack bore witness to it, then all the fucking better. There couldn’t be any questions about who was in charge here. There *wouldn’t* be. I’d make goddamn sure of it.

“I won’t ask again,” I growled. “Get the *fuck* inside.”

Xavier held my stare. Then he turned to Cali and kissed her cheek. “I’ll be right back, baby.”

He started walking toward the house. I followed Xavier into the den, and he turned to face me, looking almost bored. Like he didn’t care that I’d just torn him away from Cali and pulled rank in front of the entire pack. I knew that couldn’t be the case. He had to be absolutely seething.

“So, is there a reason why you just *had* to interrupt my reunion with Cali?” Xavier asked. “Or did you just do it for fun?”

I scowled. “This isn’t about Cali.”

“Are you sure about that? Seems like you’re just feeling pissy about seeing us together.”

My teeth ground together. Of course he’d assume I was *that* petty. That I’d pull rank just for the satisfaction of keeping them apart. Like I was some kind of goddamn Disney villain. I wasn’t the one who called Cali *baby* in front of everyone.

It was annoying as hell that he’d assume that of me, after everything—but then again, I didn’t know that I’d put that kind of behavior past him. I didn’t doubt if he had an opportunity to take me away from Cali that he’d take it. Maybe our understanding wasn’t as peaceful as either one of us had thought.

Still, this genuinely wasn’t about our mate. Not today.

“Don’t make this about Cali,” I said flatly. “This is about you and me. You disobeyed me when I told you not to leave before the Bitterfang fight. I’m pissed about that. You know what else I’m pissed about? You running off to the damn spirit world and almost getting lost there. Believe it or not, I actually care about you. Don’t you get that? And when you run off and do this boneheaded shit, there isn’t anything I can do to help you. It’s fucking *maddening*.”

Xavier’s face twisted into a look of… I wasn’t sure what. Confusion? Anger?

“What are you even going on about?” he demanded. “I’ve never asked you to take care of me, and I don’t need you to start now. I’m perfectly capable of handling myself. I was literally in charge of the Samara pack out there during the threat, and I did a damn good job of it, but you just can’t bring yourself to admit it, can you? Because you know what it would imply. That I’m perfectly capable of taking on the role you’re clinging to because it’s all you have.”

I sighed. I should have known things would go this way. That no matter my reasoning, my brother would take any attempt to rein him in as my trying to quash his chances of becoming Alpha in the future. Which, he wasn’t wrong. This was *my* pack. Not his. But it wasn’t always about that. I’d just told the guy I cared about him, and he thought it was some kind of power grab.

Sometimes, I really didn’t know what Cali saw in this idiot. He was my brother, and I loved him, but he was definitely an idiot.

“If you refuse to believe that I give a shit about your safety, then here’s another reason to change your behavior: every time you openly defy me, the rest of the pack notices. When you disobey your Alpha, you fuel disobedience throughout the pack. If you don’t think I’m a fit Alpha for the Redwood pack, then you’re welcome to call for a Lupo Finale.”

“Careful what you wish for,” he snarled.

“I’ll keep it simple. Disobey me like that one more time, and you’ll no longer be a member of the pack you’re so desperately trying to take charge of.”

That seemed to bring him up short. Good. It was about time he paid some goddamn attention to me. I’d let this wannabe-power struggle go on for too long because I sympathized with Xavier. I knew it was hard for him to watch me lead the Redwood pack, and that it would likely never get any easier. So I’d given him leeway to talk shit and be disrespectful when I probably shouldn’t have.

But now it was time for him to understand that I wasn’t fucking around. He needed to get in line or get the fuck out. We might have put off the Bitterfang threat for now, but they were going to be a problem for us down the line. And when that shit storm blew in, I’d need to be certain that Xavier wasn’t a liability—I couldn’t have a loose cannon crashing around and questioning my authority in the middle of a pack war.

“You’re bluffing,” he said.

I absolutely was. I needed Xavier. But he didn’t need to know that.

“I want you to be part of the Redwood pack,” I acknowledged. Then my voice hardened. “But I’m the Redwood Alpha, and if you aren’t prepared to fully accept that, then maybe it’s time for you to go rogue or find another pack.”

“You’d never banish me,” he snapped. “Not only is it the wrong thing to do, but Cali would never forgive you.”

At that, my self-control snapped. I grabbed him by the arm and shoved him against the wall.

“I told you not to bring Cali into this,” I snarled.

I wasn’t sure which pissed me off more—that he was using Cali as ammunition against me, or that he was right. If I exiled Xavier, Cali would never forgive me, no matter the circumstances.

“Fine. I’m being put in my place. I get it.” He glared at me. “What’s my punishment going to be for disobeying you, then? No white chocolate mocha for a week?”

*God*, he was such a prick.

“There won’t be a second chance,” I said. “If you ever disobey me again, you’re out. Simple enough for you?”

I could only hope Xavier would never challenge me on this. The Redwoods needed him—he was a good fighter. And Cali needed him too. She’d been a mess waiting for him to come back from the spirit world.

I released my brother and stepped back. “Are we good?”

He scoffed. “We’ve never been good, but I promise I’ll do my best to follow your lead.”

“Glad we understand each other.” I started to head back to the barbecue, but Xavier’s voice stopped me in my tracks.

“By the way, you can thank me for risking my ass while you were busy playing fearless leader. I was the one who risked my life to get the Samaras, and I didn’t see you in the spirit world trying to bring Julia back. So, yeah. You’re welcome, big brother.”

“You are a fucking piece of work, you know that—”

Before I could say another word, Cali stepped inside the den and looked between us. “Is everything okay?”

Xavier eyed me. “I don’t know. Is it?”

I nodded, my jaw set. “Everything’s fine.”

“Then you should both come outside,” she said.

Xavier smiled. “I’m coming—unless Greyson forbids me?”

I gave him a dirty look, but he just laughed and headed out to the barbecue. I hoped he was just trying to save face in front of Cali, and hadn’t already forgotten our conversation. And my ultimatum.

“What was all that about?” Cali asked.

“Xavier and I just needed to clarify a few things, but I think everything’s fine now.” I took her hand. “Let’s go back outside and enjoy the barbecue. We deserve it.”

She didn’t move. There was so much heaviness in the air. I knew Cali wasn’t stupid. I knew she knew that Xavier and I had been fighting. But I didn’t want to get into this with her. We didn’t need to bring her into this kind of thing.

*Stupid Greyson.*

“I’m sorry about that—”

Suddenly, she grabbed my arm, her nails digging into my skin. Her eyes were wide and full of fear. She tried to speak, but no words came out.

I looked around wildly for a threat. “What is it?”

Cali’s gaze was riveted to the window behind me. I turned around, but I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. I turned back to Cali just as she whispered, “A wisp. I see a wisp.”

# Episode 3713

I kept my eyes on Greyson. I was afraid to look past him and back at that window again. It was clear he didn’t see anything, and that made the idea of spotting the wisp again even more terrifying.

Because if it wasn’t really there, that meant it was all in my head. It meant I had the Shard and the protection of my mates and the support of the pack and all of Artemis’s training against manipulation, and it still wasn’t enough to keep me from seeing things that weren’t there.

*Am I just damaged beyond repair?*

I didn’t even want to think about it. It just made too much sense, all things considered.

Greyson’s arms wrapped around me, ever my security blanket. “Is it there now?”

I forced my eyes open and made myself look out the window. My heart plummeted. There was nothing there. No wisp. All I could see was the barbecue going on outside. Until this moment, I hadn’t been sure what would have been worse—seeing the wisp, or knowing it had never been there at all.

Now I knew. Learning that I’d been seeing things was so much worse.

I let out a bark of a laugh, the sound wild and bordering on hysterical. “I must be losing my mind.”

“You’re not,” Greyson said gently, squeezing me a little tighter. “It’s possible you did see it and then it disappeared. They’re elusive, right? Do you hear anything? Do you feel like you’re being compelled to do something you don’t want to do?”

I grimaced, thinking of how I’d blasted Artemis. How I’d hurt my mother. How I’d smashed the mirror. Thankfully, other than the quiet horror of maybe going a little crazy, I didn’t feel anything. There were no strange urges, no voices telling me what to do.

I shook my head. “No. There’s no compulsion.”

“You did the right thing,” Greyson said firmly. “Please come straight to me if you see it again—even if you *think* you see it.” He released me, stepping back just far enough that he could look at my face. “I’m so sorry I left you alone in the yard, before. I wasn’t thinking, but I should have been. I shouldn’t have forgotten to protect you.”

I didn’t want an apology. I hated that he was in this position at all, that I was forcing him to keep an eye on me all the time. This was just another reason why my being locked up would’ve been easier for everyone. At least that way, he wouldn’t have to worry about me constantly.

“You’re the Redwood Alpha, and my mate,” I reminded him. “Not my babysitter.”

At least, he wasn’t *supposed* to be my babysitter. This was a new layer to our mate dynamic—one that couldn’t be resolved soon enough.

“Hey, I’m not trying to be your babysitter,” he said with a small smile. “Just think of me as your personal bodyguard, okay?”

Despite the terrible mood I was in, I couldn’t help but laugh. Greyson always knew how to make me smile. How to make whatever awful situation we’d found ourselves in feel just a little bit less impossible.

“Why don’t we join the others and take some time to celebrate?” he suggested.

We headed outside, and I immediately hesitated, glancing nervously around in case the wisp reappeared. It would have been a comfort, in a way, to know that it was really appearing and I wasn’t seeing things on top of everything else that was wrong with me. But if the wisp *did* come back to manipulate me, I’d be back at square one—a danger to myself and everyone around me.

But the night sky was clear, the moon was bright, and the bonfire was warm. It was the perfect night for kicking back and celebrating. For setting aside all the worries that had been plaguing me for so long. I looked around at the pack, gathered around the bonfire, drinking and laughing and chatting. They seemed happy to just let loose.

I doubted I’d be able to do the same.

My mom came over and wrapped a blanket around my shoulders.

“Why didn’t you remember your coat?” she asked, laughing.

“Guess I got distracted.”

Nearby, Jay, Jacs, and Lola were all laughing as Ravi did some joke dance moves.

Lola cackled. “That is the worst flossing I’ve ever seen!”

“Cali?”

I turned to see Russell and Julia standing behind me, holding hands and smiling.

“We want to thank you and everyone else who helped us for your support—we know the risk you all took on by helping us,” Russell said.

“We know you didn’t do so lightly, and we’ll never be able to repay you for what you’ve done for us,” Julia added.

I smiled, and some of the tension and worry weighing me down lifted. “It was more than worth it. I’m just glad to see the two of you looking the way young people in love are meant to look.”

*Even though they both just came back from the dead, they look great.*

Lola had been right, in a way. We *had* rewritten the ending to *Romeo and Juliet.*

The teenagers went off to enjoy the barbecue, and I scanned the crowd for Xavier. Instead, I found Ava, standing off by herself. There was a sadness clinging to her that I found unsettling. Maybe because everyone around her was celebrating.

Ava had done a lot more than I did to help reunite Russell and Julia. She deserved to enjoy the celebration, too. Yes, her pack was in disarray, and their former temporary Alpha was dead, and she’d barely escaped from the spirit world, but the good guys had prevailed. *Ava* had prevailed. It didn’t feel right to leave her alone with what were clearly unhappy thoughts.

I tugged Greyson’s arm to get his attention. “I’m going to check on Ava. I’ll be right back.”

His brows lifted in surprise, but he didn’t stop me.

I slowly approached her, holding my blanket around me like a shield. “Hi, Ava.”

She blinked, clearly as surprised as Greyson. “Gotta say, didn’t expect you to try and make nice with me.”

“Did you want anything to drink? We’ve got beer, moonshine, white chocolate mocha. We might have some wine somewhere, if that’s more your thing.”

She shook her head. “Thanks, but I’m not thirsty at the moment.”

An awkward silence settled between us. I didn’t really know Ava all that well, I was realizing. But I’d never been one to give up easily, and I wasn’t about to give up now.

“You played a big part in saving Julia,” I said. “Going back to the spirit world… That was very brave. I’m sure we couldn’t have pulled it off without you.”

I could barely believe the words that were coming out of my mouth. Not that long ago, I’d wanted Ava dead. Or at least symbolically dead. Out of my life, in any case. And now here I was, complimenting her, trying to make her feel a little bit more involved in the pack.

She was staring at me with something like disbelief, and I didn’t blame her one bit.

“I mean it, Ava,” I continued. “Thank y—”

“You don’t have to do this,” she interrupted. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do here. You’re a good person and all, and I know you mean well, but please don’t overdo it.”

Then, before I could muster up a response, she turned and walked away. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised, but still.

*I was the only one trying to involve her in the party, and she’s still going to turn me away?* I fought the urge to chase her down, to demand to know what the hell her attitude was all about. *I guess that’s what I get for being the bigger person.*

I scanned the party for Xavier again and found him doing flaming shots with Gabriel on the far side of the bonfire. I hoped he was being careful not to burn his beautiful face.

He looked really annoyed. Whatever disagreement he and Greyson had had, it’d clearly affected him more strongly than he’d let on. Knowing Xavier, he wouldn’t let it go, either.

I glanced over at Greyson, who was talking to Mrs. Smith. He kept looking my way, checking in on me to make sure I was all right. I smiled back at him. He really was my personal bodyguard.

I was about to go check in on Xavier when Lucian sidled up to me.

“Such a nice party you Redwoods have thrown us; glad we didn’t leave before we could share in the revels,” he mused. “And that’s coming from me, so you know it’s a very fine compliment.”

“Um, thank you?”

“No, thank *you*.” He sipped something from a glass. “I never realized that cheap liquor could actually make a decent martini. You’ve really opened my eyes to all sorts of possibilities.”

That didn’t *seem* like a compliment. And I seriously doubted Xavier and Greyson would stock the pack house with bottom shelf booze.

Lucian glanced around and lowered his voice. “I know you’re the eyes and ears of the pack house.” He gestured to where Elle was standing with Zainab, who was offering her a cooked hot dog on a stick. I’d had my doubts about her, but Elle really was fitting in with the pack. These days, I couldn’t imagine the pack house without her in it.

“Has Elle said anything?” Lucian asked.

I frowned. “About what?”

“About me, of course.” He huffed. “I thought we had a connection…”

I stopped listening, my gaze shifting to the nearby bonfire. Its flames were moving hypnotically, like a set of hands. Almost like they were beckoning to me.

“Excuse me,” I mumbled, and started walking toward the fire. It was calling to me. I had to answer.

As I neared the flames, it hit me with a lurch that I couldn’t stop walking. My body *wouldn’t* stop walking, even as it set a course to march right into the fire.

I tried to call out for Greyson, but I couldn’t find my voice. The heat was oppressive, and my eyes stung from the smoke, but I couldn’t stop myself. I kept walking.

# Episode 3714

*I shouldn’t be doing this.*

I tried everything I could to turn around, to stop walking. But it was impossible. I was fixed on one position, and my legs continued to carry me toward it. I tried one last time to stop and turn away from this compulsion.

It didn’t work.

This had to be a manipulation trick. Whoever had been sending the wisp was doing this to me. The fact that being manipulated now meant I *had* seen the wisp was cold comfort when my body was heading directly for a hot, fiery doom.

I tried to look around for Greyson, tried to signal for help or mind link with him or do *anything* that might keep me from walking into the fire. Nothing worked. My body wasn’t under my control, and my thoughts were all scrambled. I couldn’t focus long enough to form a mental connection with Greyson. Something was interfering.

I was only a few feet away now, and already the heat of the bonfire was nearly unbearable.

Suddenly, I remembered that horrible dream I’d had, where Seluna had burned me to ash. It had been an awful dream, but it hadn’t been real; maybe this was no more real than a bad nightmare.

But no, I wasn’t sleeping. I’d just been talking to Lucian. I could hear him now, asking me where I was going.

I tried to form words to respond to him, to beg for help, but I couldn’t get a single syllable past the tip of my tongue.

Another voice was calling out to me. One I knew was coming from inside my own head.

Seluna.

“*Caliana, stop!*” the demon ordered. Her voice was haggard.

I hesitated as the demon’s eyes appeared in the fire.

“*I need you, Caliana*,” Seluna begged. “*Why won’t you let me rest? Neither one of us will be free until you do.*”

The flames seemed to swell, and I closed my eyes as a wave of heat hit me. This new development shook me to my core.

*Seluna can’t be talking to me. None of this is real.*

The Shard was supposed to prevent her from causing me further pain. This had to be something else, some side effect of the wisp. Maybe just another layer of manipulation to make me see something that wasn’t there.

But either way, it didn’t matter. Because even if Seluna *was* here, I had to make myself stop before I walked into the fire. I’d sort everything else out later—if I didn’t burn to death in the next thirty seconds.

I forced my brain to focus, thinking back to what my mom had taught me. How I’d been able to overcome Artemis’s compulsion magic. *Think of a happy memory. A powerful emotional memory…*

I thought again of saving my mother’s life. That potent combination of love and relief.

I took a step back from the fire.

Suddenly, I was yanked even farther away and spun bodily around. I came face-to-face with Lucian. He frowned, looking down at me with something that very much resembled concern. It was strange, seeing that empathetic emotion on his face. Before tonight, I’d never seen evidence that he was capable of such a thing.

“What were you doing?” he demanded. “It looked like you were about to walk into the fire!”

He was right, of course, but he didn’t need to know that. I still didn’t really trust Lucian, and I probably never would. You never knew when or if something you confided in him would be used against you. Who else he might tell, if it served his own end.

“I… I was cold,” I said, feeling like an idiot. Nobody would ever believe that lie, right?

*Anyone with an ounce of common sense will realize—*

“Well, you must be warm now,” Lucian said, already pulling me away. “I was asking you about Elle. Surely things are not so bad with her that you had to abandon the conversation halfway through?”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. I should have known Lucian would be too caught up in his own affairs to care about mine, even something as dramatic as my nearly walking into a fire. It was a relief just as much as it was a damning indictment of his character.

I could barely mumble out an apology. I’d almost turned myself into a roasted half-Fae. And Lucian was probably the most self-absorbed person I’d ever met, but thank god for him—he’d literally just saved my life.

I looked around the barbecue. I needed to talk to Greyson. I needed him to lock me up. The jury was still out on whether or not there had been a wisp, but hearing and seeing Seluna while being compelled to walk into a bonfire seemed like the kind of thing he’d want to know about. It also seemed like irrefutable proof that I was too much of a danger to myself and others to be allowed to roam freely.

If it weren’t for Lucian, I’d probably be dead.

“Well?” Lucian pressed, looking at me expectantly. “What do you think?”

I didn’t have the first idea what he was talking about, nor how to respond. “Um, let’s move away from the fire. I’m getting a little sweaty, now.”

I led him about twenty feet back, scanning the party for Greyson before I turned back to Lucian, who was starting to look very miffed.

“Sorry, can you repeat the question please?” I said.

Nearby, Lola’s loud laughter echoed across the yard, and I glanced over to see her heading into the pack house with Jacs.

Lucian huffed. “How have I been doing with Greyson?”

I looked back at him, frowning in confusion. “Huh?”

*I thought he was asking about Elle. What does Greyson have to do with that?*

“I know Greyson has his doubts about me,” Lucian said. “It wasn’t lost on me that you were the one to chaperone when I last took Elle out on a date. Clearly, Greyson has some issues with me, and I’d like to know what they are so I can settle whatever differences we have.”

So this *was* about Elle, in a way. And about Lucian’s ego, in another way.

*Sounds about right.*

I grimaced. “I’m so sorry, Lucian. I wish I could help.” A lie. I actually couldn’t have cared less. “I think you’d be better off talking directly to Greyson about all of this. I think he’d appreciate you being forthright with him, and then you two can work out your differences between yourselves.”

Lucian seemed to chew on this for a moment before he smiled. “Caliana, you are as smart as you are beautiful. Of course, it would be much better for me to explain myself to Greyson, and to declare my intentions for Elle and my vision for our illustrious future together. After all, I am incredibly articulate. My second-in-command was just saying the other day how well-spoken I am. ‘Nobody delivers a message like you, my prince,’ he said.”

Lucian continued to enumerate his many virtues, but once again, I was only half listening. Maybe a quarter listening.

*Is Lucian just using Elle to try to get closer to Greyson?* The thought hadn’t occurred to me until now, but it made sense. It would’ve been a twisted, roundabout way of doing things, but I wouldn’t have put anything past the Vanguard Alpha. He might’ve been on our side now, but that didn’t make up for all the times he’d betrayed us.

“Thank you again for offering such insightful ideas, Caliana,” he finished.

*What did I even say to him? He did all the talking.*

I smiled. “You know me, happy to help. Excuse me—I need to talk with Greyson about something.”

Lucian took my hand, kissed the back of it, and bowed. “Perhaps we can discuss Elle a bit more later?” The hope in his voice was my undoing.

I nodded. “Sure.” Anything to get away from here.

Another advantage to getting locked in the basement? It’d get me out of talking with Lucian again. Because it wasn’t just that he was insufferable—I remembered how he’d danced around the subject of Elle being turned. How he’d suggested that there was a strong connection between Elle and Greyson because Greyson had turned her. We hadn’t confirmed any of that to Lucian, but he was getting dangerously close to guessing the truth, if he hadn’t already.

Lola had suggested something similar, right after Elle was turned. *Is there anything to that idea? Is that why Lucian keeps persisting with learning more about Elle?*

*Ugh. I can’t deal with any of that right now*,I thought to myself. *I have my own problems to worry about. Bigger problems than whatever fresh hell Lucian might unleash next.*

I still hadn’t checked on Xavier—something I’d wanted to do before I’d been thrown at the bonfire. I found him in the same spot, across the party. He was still hanging out with Gabriel, looking upset.

I started to walk toward him, but then Lola brushed past me and grabbed my arm. She dragged me off in the opposite direction.

“I need to show you something,” she said.

I looked back toward the pack house, frowning. “I could’ve sworn I just saw you go inside.”

Lola laughed. “I wanted to show Jacs where the marshmallows were.”

She kept pulling me toward the woods.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Just over there.” She pointed ahead to the tree line.

I dug in my heels and forced her to stop. “I promised not to leave Greyson’s side.”

Lola tightened her grip, and pain lanced up my arm. Her eyes hardened. “No, you’re coming with me.”

My blood ran cold.

*This isn’t Lola.*

# Episode 3715

**Xavier**

I knocked back another flaming shot, grimacing at the way the liquor burned down my throat. I didn’t even know what kind of alcohol it was, and I honestly couldn’t have cared less. I needed something strong to rid myself of the bitter taste Greyson had left in my mouth, and this was as good an option as any.

“You know, I have a great solution to your Greyson problem,” Gabe said, looking a little too amused by my anger. The asshole.

“I don’t *have* a Greyson problem.”

“Says the guy who just spent the last ten minutes bitching about his big brother.”

My teeth ground together. Couldn’t Gabe see that I wanted to stew in my anger for a while longer? I didn’t want any so-called solutions or words of advice. I just wanted to drink and be pissed off.

“My brother is the one with the problem,” I snapped. “And I don’t remember asking for your advice.”

“It was implied.” Gabe shrugged. “You want to dump your problems on me? Be prepared to hear my perspective every once in a while.”

“I’ll keep my mouth shut, then.”

Gabe rolled his eyes, smiling good-naturedly. “You’ve got yourself all tied up in knots, and for what? So you can stay in the exact same situation that got you worked up in the first place? Why don’t you take a break from all this? Get some space. Some perspective. Surely you have other options—you don’t have to stick around here at your brother’s beck and call forever if that’s not what you want.”

I shot him a dark look. “Exactly how much booze have you consumed? Because it’s got to be a hell of a lot if you’re even *suggesting* that I leave my pack. And Cali. That’s never going to happen, no matter what threats Greyson throws at me.”

I still couldn’t believe my brother had threatened to exile me from the Redwood pack. My own fucking pack. It was more mine than it had ever been his—and he thought he could take it from me and give me the boot when I didn’t fall in line?

*I’d like to see him fucking try.*

He had to be bluffing. If he exiled me, there would be a mutiny. Half of the pack members only followed him because I was supporting him. If I was gone, he’d have one hell of a morale issue on his hands. There was a chance the pack would fracture completely, which would put everyone at risk—Lucian and Mace and the Samaras were our allies, but how long would they stay that way if the Redwood pack was broken in two, weak and ripe for the taking?

No, Greyson had to be bluffing. It would cost him too much to get rid of me—to say nothing of how Cali would react. She’d never support him if he made that call. Hell, she’d probably leave with me if I were exiled.

*Let’s see how high and mighty he feels when Cali chooses me.*

I didn’t *want* to be exiled, of course, but what a silver lining that would be.

“Just hear me out,” Gabe said. “Think about all the great times we had when we were free to do whatever we wanted—when we were mercenaries, choosing the jobs we wanted, rejecting the ones we didn’t. Nobody was our boss. We didn’t answer to anyone, certainly not asshole older brothers. Am I right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, that was great. But it was before Cali. I was a different person then. I didn’t stick around anywhere for long back then because I didn’t have a reason to. I do now.”

“You know what they say—‘absence makes the heart grow fonder.’”

I scoffed. “Right. Because you’d be willing to take a break from Mikah?”

He shrugged. “Mike could come with us. He’s a damn good detective, and I think he’s starting to come around to the whole mercenary way of life.”

I laughed in spite of myself. There was no way in hell Mikah was ever going to fully approve of Gabe’s bounty-hunting ways.

“So I’m supposed to ‘take a break’ from my mate, but you get to bring yours along? No thanks.”

“I’m just saying… It seems like you could use the space. There’s another saying: ‘the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.’”

I tuned Gabe out as he kept rambling about his half-baked idea. If I’d known he was going to hand out advice and quotes, I would’ve chosen to drink alone.

I glanced around the barbecue, looking for Cali. I’d seen her talking with Ava earlier, but I couldn’t see her anywhere now… My blood went cold. Shit, what if Ava had said something to Cali about what happened between us in the trailer?

My grip on my empty shot glass tightened. *If she’s making trouble for me and Cali, she’ll be sorry.*

I couldn’t see Ava anywhere, either. That probably didn’t bode well. I excused myself from Gabe’s rambling and almost immediately bumped into Mikah, who was heading over to us with a beer in hand.

“Have you seen Cali?” I asked him.

He glanced around, then frowned when he didn’t see her. “I saw her talking to Lucian a few minutes ago.”

Fan-freaking-tastic. As far as I was concerned, any conversation with Lucian was a lousy way to spend time. The guy was a complete asshat, and he was always playing some angle or another. I didn’t have any interest in dealing with his bullshit right now, and I hated having to ask him anything, especially when it concerned Cali.

Still, it was my best lead as I couldn’t find my mate anywhere. I sent out a tentative mind link but received nothing in return, so where she was, she was out of range. With no other choice, I headed over to the princeling. He seemed to be in the middle of an argument with Aysel.

“I hate to interrupt this family feud,” I lied. “But have either of you seen Cali?”

Lucian waved me off. “She went somewhere with Lola.”

Another wild goose chase.

“Where?” I sighed, exasperated.

He turned back to me again, looking both surprised and vaguely annoyed to find me still standing in front of him. “I haven’t the faintest idea. Is something wrong?”

“No,” I said automatically, though I wasn’t sure that was actually true. I felt like I was playing some kind of mystery board game and losing—badly. *Why can’t anyone tell me where Cali is?*

I spotted Greyson nearby, talking to Mrs. Smith. I marched over to him. “Where’s Cali?”

“I was just talking with her,” he looked around. “I saw her making the rounds only a few minutes ago…”

I ground my teeth. “You lost her?”

His eyes narrowed. “She said she was going to talk to Ava. Have you asked her about that?”

“I would, but I can’t find Ava either.”

“They both have to be here somewhere.”

“Well, thanks for being as useless as ever.”

“Give it a rest,” Greyson growled. “If Cali is really missing, we need to stop pissing on each other and find her.”

The urgency in Greyson’s voice brought me up short. It was almost like he knew something that I didn’t. Something about Cali.

I grabbed his arm. “Did something happen with Cali that I should know about?”

He jerked his arm out of my grip. “Yeah, actually. Something did happen. And if you hadn’t run off on your own, you already would’ve learned that Cali freaked out, blasted Artemis, broke Big Mac’s mirror, and is now convinced that she’s a danger to us all and should be locked up.”

No string of words could’ve shocked me more. *Cali is the one who broke the mirror? When she knew me and others were in the spirit world? Why would she do that?*

I couldn’t wrap my head around it. Cali would never hurt anyone, especially not people she cared about. What could possibly have happened to her to make her react like that? And why the hell hadn’t anyone told me about it? I’d been drinking and stewing by the fire for a while now, and neither Cali nor Greyson nor anyone else had thought to inform me that Cali was going through hell? That she thought she was enough of a danger to people that she needed to be locked up?

“If that’s the case, then maybe you should’ve just listened to Cali and locked her up,” I said. “But let me guess—you were probably too busy giving orders to listen to your own mate. Can’t let anyone forget for even a second who the high and mighty Alpha is here, right?”

Greyson’s eyes flashed. “You little—”

“Guys!” Lola stepped between us, pressing a shot into each of our hands. “How can you two be swinging your dicks around when we’re supposed to be celebrating? Cali would be ashamed of you two both.” She looked around the party. “Speaking of, where is she?”

I frowned and pushed the shot back toward her. “I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“Sorry?” She blinked in confusion. “Ask me what?”

“Lucian said Cali went somewhere with you. Where is she?”

Lola raised a brow. “And you believed Lucian, the prince of bullshit?”

My stomach tightened. This wasn’t about believing Lucian or not. It was about my mate, who seemed to have gone missing from a huge party full of potential witnesses. I had no idea where she was, and that coupled with Greyson’s revelations about what she’d been going through sent a thread of panic through me.

I looked at Greyson, my eyes wide. “Where the fuck is she?”

# Episode 3716

**Lilac**

“Don’t put it *in* the fire!” Sage laughed. “Unless you like your hot dogs with a side of char.”

I pulled the hot dog back so it was hovering a foot or so above the fire. Sage wasn’t wrong. Already, the skin was bubbling and burned in some places.

“It’s better when fire cooks slowly, then?” Elle asked, turning to Sage and Zainab for confirmation.

“Unless you like your meat burned on the outside and raw on the inside,” Zainab said. “Not that hot dogs really count as meat, anyway.”

Elle frowned. “They don’t?”

Sage and Zainab immediately launched into horror stories about what was really in a hot dog, but I tuned them out. I carefully turned my hot dog over the fire, more to have something to do than anything else. I hadn’t had much of an appetite since coming back from the spirit world. I wondered if Marta felt the same way.

I hoped she was doing well, but I didn’t know for sure. I was trying to give her space right now. Last time I saw her, she’d been resting under the watchful eyes of Big Mac… and Okorie.

My teeth ground together, and I let my hot dog graze the flames again, just for the satisfaction of watching it burn. Just thinking about that guy annoyed the hell out of me.

*He’s so cocky…*

But then again, he had every reason to be, didn’t he? He was good-looking—if you were into that warlock-y, effortlessly stylish vibe—and older, and some magical genius prodigy or whatever.

“Lilac, you are burning your hot dog again,” Elle pointed out.

There was no saving it now. I yanked it off the end of the stick, hissing when it burned my fingers, and tossed it onto the bonfire.

“I’ll go get a new one,” I said, heading toward the food table. As I mulled over whether or not I actually wanted to go through the motions of cooking a hot dog I didn’t want for a second time, I spotted Violet coming out of the house.

She beelined for me and wrapped me in a tight hug. “I’m so glad you’re back. I was so worried about you!”

“I’m fine,” I said automatically.

She drew back and gave me a skeptical look. “You went to the spirit world and back. That *is* what you did, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “And I was like all the other times I’ve been there, only this time I wasn’t dead, and I didn’t have to search and reconnect with Plum. I’m fine, really. It’s over now, and I’m back, and I have no intentions of visiting that place ever again.”

“Uh-huh,” she said dubiously. “And how was spending time with Marta?”

My glare must have said it all, because she put up her hands.

“I just wanted to check in with you!” she said. “I thought you might be emotional about it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I have feelings, and I know you like me to share them, but you need to hear me when I say that I. Am. *Fine*.”

“Fine,” she repeated, clearly mocking me. “So, you’ll be fine with the fact that Perrie is looking for you?”

My stomach lurched. It wasn’t a totally unpleasant sensation—all shock and anticipation and anxiety. Things with Perrie were better, but… I still didn’t know what to do with her. How to feel.

“She is?”

Violet nodded and gestured toward the porch. Sure enough, Perrie was there, sipping from a plastic cup. My stomach did another little flip, a much more pleasant one this time.

*She really is gorgeous.*

Her eyes caught mine, and she smiled and waved.

“Excuse me.” I left Violet and headed over to talk to my mate. “Hey, Perrie.”

“I hear you’re something of a hero tonight.”

I shrugged. “I just did what anyone would’ve done. Besides, you helped us fight the Bitterfangs. Those guys are nuts. If I’m a hero, so are you.”

She shook her head. “Don’t get me wrong—that was scary. But going to the spirit world to save someone and bring them back to life? That’s some next-level stuff. Not just anyone would do that.”

“It sounds bad, but I’ve been there before. I kind of know my way around the place.” I couldn’t resist puffing out my chest a little bit.

*Familiar with the world of the dead—what a humble-brag.*

“I’d love to hear more about it, if you’re willing,” she said. “You still haven’t called me about that second date.”

Despite the lousy mood I’d been in all day, this brought a smile to my face. “I’d be happy to tell you sometime.”

She moved in closer. “Actually, there’s something you forgot on our last date.”

My brows drew together. *What’s she talking about? Did I leave something at the café?*

And then she closed the distance between us and gently pressed her lips to mine. All my thoughts scattered.

She pulled back before I could really process the kiss—it was more of a peck than anything else, really—and I moved in to kiss her again. If she was my mate, I needed to try to figure things out between us. I needed to know how she made me feel. Kissing was a great way to get started with that, right?

Our lips met again, and it felt good. Her lips were soft and warm, and she smelled amazing, and each brush of her mouth against mine sent tingles down my spine. Made me want to pull her closer, to see where all this kissing would lead us.

But, lurking behind all that sensation, something still felt… *off*. It was good, kissing Perrie. But she just wasn’t Marta.

I broke away from the kiss and forced a smile. “Hold that thought, okay? I need to go to the bathroom.”

She laughed. “What great timing. Hurry back, okay?”

I nodded and dashed inside. I didn’t have to pee, but I needed an excuse to get away. I needed to see Marta. To talk to her before she left again. Her coming back to help with the Bitterfang situation had given me a second chance, and I wasn’t going to waste it. Who knew how long it would be before she came back again?

What if I opened up to her? What if I asked her not to leave? Perrie was my mate, and there was no getting around that, but Marta was *Marta*. I couldn’t just forget about her.

I found her in the living room, talking to Dani. Our eyes met, and something strong and unspoken passed between us. It nearly knocked the breath out of my lungs.

Dani glanced between the two of us then stood. “I’m going to get a hot dog.”

Once we were alone, I nodded at the couch she was sitting on. “Can I sit down?”

“Sure.”

I took a seat. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” She gave me a weak smile. “Tired, but it could be worse. Thank goodness for Torin.”

I looked down at her hand, resting on the couch between us. I wanted to take it, to entwine our fingers, but I wasn’t allowed to do that anymore.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” I said.

“Me too.”

Hope swelled inside me. Did she feel the same way I did?

“I’m happy for you,” she said.

“Huh? About what?”

“Your girlfriend. You two are cute together.”

My stomach dropped. “Oh. Yeah.” *I never should have told her about that.*

“Perrie seems really nice,” she added. “You deserve to be happy.”

“About that…” *What should I do?* I wanted to be honest, wanted to tell Marta that nobody made me happy like she did. Instead, I just said, “Thanks.”

“I should be thanking *you*,” she said. “I feel like without experiencing what I went through with you—the spirit world, using my magic—I never would’ve found the path I’m on. I’d never have run into your sister, either.”

I smiled. “You never know. You’re pretty amazing.”

“Thanks. I’m just saying, you’re lucky. Things with Perrie are so straightforward. You know where she stands, and that’s more than what I have with Okorie.” Then she seemed to realize what she’d just said, and she grimaced. “I’m sorry. Is it weird to talk about that with you?”

*Yes!* “Um, no. What about Okorie?” My heart raced.

“I like him, but I don’t know what we’re doing.”

I believed her. I could see the truth on her face. If I said anything to her now, would that just mess things up? I didn’t want to hold her back from being happy. She deserved to be happy, even if it meant breaking myself apart in the process.

“You should tell him how you feel,” I said.

She snorted. “Seriously?”

I nodded. “He’d be a lucky guy.”

“Thank you, Lilac.”

I stood. It was time to walk away. “I’ll see you at Big Mac’s wedding?”

She nodded. “See you at the wedding.”

It felt like my heart snapped in two as I stepped outside and found Perrie waiting for me. I forced the biggest smile I could muster. “Do you like bowling?”

# Episode 3717

My stomach sinking in horror, I tried to back away from Lola. This was like a nightmare I just couldn’t seem to wake up from. First the wisp in the window, then the bonfire incident, and Seluna’s voice in my head, and now *this*?

What the hell was happening to me? Who was doing this? *Why?*

Not-Lola smiled. “What’s wrong? Don’t you want to see the surprise I have for you? I think you’re going to love it. It’s to die for.”

I swallowed roughly. What should I do? Should I run? Should I try to blast whoever this was? Or maybe I should play along. I didn’t know who or what this imposter was, or what they were capable of. I didn’t even know if this person actually *wasn’t* Lola. If she was being manipulated like I had been, I didn’t want to hurt her. Maybe avoiding conflict was the safest option.

I pasted on a smile. “Of course I want to see it. But can’t it wait until daylight? I’m not a werewolf, remember? I can’t see very well in the dark.”

“Lola’s” grip on my arm was like iron. It was sure to leave bruises behind. Her nails dug deeper into my skin, and I bit my lip to muffle the whimper that threatened to slip out.

“You don’t need daylight to see this surprise,” she said.

Well, I couldn’t argue with that logic. Panic twisted my stomach. What was I going to do? How was I going to get away? Was this even Lola? Was she being possessed? Could another demon have taken over my best friend’s body and mind?

*Or maybe this is one of Seluna’s tricks. Am I just seeing things?*

Lola’s grip tightened even more. It certainly didn’t *feel* like a hallucination. My mind was spinning with questions and possibilities, but no clear answer came to mind. And in the meantime, Lola was still trying to drag me out into the woods to do god only knew what to me.

*It doesn’t matter who or what or why right now. Focus on getting away—ask questions later.*

But how could I? Not-Lola wasn’t letting go. And calling for help didn’t seem like a great idea. Even if I screamed for help and someone from the bonfire heard me, the Lola imposter could still kill me before help arrived. Especially if this really was a demon possession situation.

The only thing I knew for sure was that there was no way in hell I was going into the woods with this person—whoever they were. That would be a death sentence, for sure.

My mind whirled with escape ideas, but none of them bore fruit. Still, I couldn’t just stand here forever. I had to do something.

I planted my feet. “Are you Seluna?”

Not-Lola cocked her head. “Why would you think that?”

“Because you just asked for my help a few minutes ago. Near the bonfire. Is there something specific you want from me?”

She gave me that deranged smile again. “You’re a smart girl. Seluna does need your help.”

I swallowed audibly. “What is it? Tell me what you want. If I help you, will you please just leave me alone for good?”

Her eyes flashed. “The Shard. Give it to me.”

“I…” I shook my head, my stomach sinking. “I’m sorry. I can’t just give it away. Is—is there something else I can help you with?”

“*I want the Shard!*”

I couldn’t do it. Not only had people I cared about risked their lives to get me the Shard, I didn’t even want to imagine losing its protection. Sure, I’d still been having problems even with the Shard buffering some of the magic weighing on me, but that just meant I really needed it. Without the Shard, everything would be frighteningly worse. Life would be unbearable.

I couldn’t give it up.

“If you give me the Shard, I’ll leave you in peace,” she said. She raised a hand, reaching for my necklace.

I pushed her back, breaking her hold on my arm. “Stay away from me! Whoever you are, whatever you are, I know you’re not Lola. She wouldn’t ask this of me.”

My magic built inside me, a knee-jerk response to the danger I was facing. If this was someone possessing Lola, I didn’t want to blast her body, but I was running out of options.

“*Give it to me*,” she hissed, her eyes flashing angrily.

I clutched the Shard, stumbling back as Not-Lola pulled a knife from her waistband.

*Oh god.*

She was really going to kill me. I was going to be murdered twenty feet away from a party full of people. I couldn’t let this happen.

“I tried to make this easy for you,” she continued, “but you just had to make things difficult, didn’t you? You always do.”

I skittered back, stumbling over a root. I hit the ground so hard, the breath was knocked out of me.

She towered over me. “I don’t want to kill you, but I will. Give it to me.”

I had to do something. Whether this was Lola or not, I couldn’t just let her kill me. I reached for the chain around my neck, making it look like I was going to unclasp the Shard while I gathered my magic. At the last second, I flipped my hand around, palm outward, and blasted her.

But, to my horror, she absorbed the blast. Her whole body seemed to grow for a moment before she let out a pained howl and started to glow. Her body shrank down, turning into a wisp that floated away and disappeared.

I stared at the spot that Lola had just been occupying. Only, it hadn’t been Lola at all, just some kind of illusion.

*Was that a real wisp? Or was it a demon?*

I had no idea what to make of what had just happened. Was this Seluna’s doing? Or was it connected to the wisps and the manipulation? *Or* were those two things connected? It didn’t escape me for a single moment that, whatever that wisp-thing was, and whatever its reasons for targeting me, it had made me believe it was my friend for just long enough to make me vulnerable. And if that was the case, it could and would strike again. It could pretend to be anyone, and I’d have no idea until it was too late.

“Cali!” Voices called to me from the party. Greyson and Xavier and Lola and others.

I had to get back, but I was shivering badly. I didn’t think I’d be able to stand if I tried.

Greyson and Xavier broke through the tree line, running toward me.

I tried to call out to them, but a sharp stab of pain trapped the words in my throat. The Seluna mark on my shoulder burned like it was being branded into my flesh, like I actually *had* walked into that bonfire.

Xavier and Greyson reached me at the same time, dropping down on either side of me.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked.

Xavier looked me over. “What happened?”

Together, they helped me to my feet.

I tried to fight through the pain burning its way through my nerve endings, tried to force myself to speak.

“I… I can’t do this. An-anymore.” I whimpered and pulled in a deep breath. Tears burned my eyes. “Lock me up. *Please*. I was just lured away from the pack. I al-almost followed a demon, or something like it, into the woods. Even if I’m not a threat to others, I’m a threat to myself. I almost walked into the bonfire. I can’t keep doing this. *Please*.”

“Take it easy,” Greyson soothed. “You’re okay.”

I let out a sob. “I’m not okay! I can’t tell what’s real anymore! Please, for *my* sake, lock me up!”

“Maybe we should listen to her,” Xavier said. “Give her some peace of mind.”

“I’m not locking her up!” Greyson snapped. “She’s not some monster that needs to be chained up in the basement!

“Maybe somewhere else, then…”

As they kept arguing, the world started to spin. I slumped against Xavier, who caught me in his arms. “*Cali?*”

“Please,” I murmured, my eyelids fluttering. “Please. Lock me up.”

Then darkness rushed in.

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When I opened my eyes again, I was inside the house. Lying in a bed, with the basement ceiling above me.

“You’re awake.”

I blinked sluggishly and found Xavier perched on the edge of the bed beside me.

“Is there anything you need?” he asked.

I sat upright. “You can’t be in here with me. It’s not safe.”

“Okay. I’ll be just on the other side of the door, then. Let me know if you need anything.” He kissed my forehead and then left, closing the door behind him.

“Lock the door!” I called. Once I heard the lock click, I slumped onto my back and closed my eyes.

*How long until that thing—until* Seluna*—comes for me again?*

# Episode 3718

**Greyson**

I was pacing the hallway outside the basement when Xavier came back out. He closed the door behind him, as if deciding on my behalf that I wasn’t going to see Cali right now. He was fucking delusional.

Jaw clenched, I started to reach for the door handle, but then Xavier placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

“Give her a minute,” he said gruffly.

I shoved him away. I was so very *done* with playing nice. “Don’t tell me what to do when it comes to my mate!” I snapped.

Xavier got up in my face. “I told you, *she needs a minute*.”

I was going to punch this asshole right in that smug mug of his. Xavier had been fucking pushing it, like a fussy puppy crapping and peeing all over the place just to mark its territory, and Cali—

I hated leaving her in there. Alone.

I knew she was upset. Hurt. Of course she was—she’d been through a fucking nightmare only moments ago. She’d probably heard me fighting with Xavier, right outside her door. Guilt bit at me, and I took a deep breath, stepping away from my brother.

Fighting with him right now would only upset Cali. She’d hear us on the other side. She didn’t need that right now.

“Fine,” I said quietly. “I’ll come check on her later.” I eyed him. “You’d better follow your own advice.”

Xavier huffed. I chose not to stay and have yet another goddamn debate with him. He knew this was serious.

When I got upstairs, the echo of people talking and laughing in the yard reached my ears. The barbecue. Right. I had to go out there and play host while I was worried sick about my mate. Fucking hell.

When I stepped out of the house, Jay spotted me.

“Hey, everything okay?” he asked.

I gave him a tight nod. “Sure. But let’s start winding down the party. It’s been a long day.”

Jay agreed. “I’ll go tell Lola and Rishika to wrap this thing up.”

I thanked him and grabbed a beer from the cooler. I could feel a headache coming on. I wasn’t sure if the beer was going to help with that, but it couldn’t make my mood any worse. I mingled with the crowd, saying some hellos and goodbyes and pretending that things were okay for a minute or two. And then I decided I was done for the day.

I’d go back to the house, sit down with my thoughts, then check on Cali. I started to head inside, but then Elle walked over and grabbed my arm.

“Hi,” she said. “Can I talk to you?”

I wanted to say no, but I didn’t have the heart. I’d been neglecting Elle—neglecting my duty to teach her how to be a werewolf and to look out for her, like I’d promised her father I would. She’d been doing pretty well on her own lately, though. Even the way she spoke sounded far more natural, now.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“So,” she started, tucking her hair behind her ear. “I know this is not something you like talking about, but…”

I suppressed a groan. “Please don’t tell me you want to talk about Lucian, Elle.”

Her eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“I thought you weren’t into him anymore,” I said impatiently.

Elle bit her lip. “I mean, I wasn’t,” she admitted. “But then he showed up to fight with the Redwoods against the Bitterfangs. That’s loyalty, right? That means he has a code of honor, like a good Alpha should.”

I frowned. I personally would never have used the words “loyalty,” “honor,” and “Lucian” in the same sentence.

“Lucian did come, eventually,” I said. “That’s good. But doing *one* good thing doesn’t make him a good guy, Elle. You understand that, right?”

Elle pressed her lips together. “But Lola told me that people can change—especially bad boys. It happens all the time in movies and books. Do you think Lucian can do that?”

I felt the urge to bang my head against a tree. I did not—under any circumstances—want to encourage Elle’s *affection*, or whatever it was, toward Lucian. We didn’t need more of his nonsense in our lives. Besides, Lucian wasn’t a *bad boy—*he was a fake royal peacock-y ass with some potentially unhinged tendencies.

But if he truly *was* Elle’s mate…

“Well?” Elle pressed.

I decided that putting all my biases against Lucian on Elle had the potential to do more harm than good. She had a rebellious streak, after all.

Carefully, I said, “I guess anyone can change. But it takes a long time for people to prove they’ve actually done the work. That’s all I mean.”

“How long is a long time?” Elle asked.

“That’s a good question, Elle.”

She preened. “Thank you. I like asking questions.”

“Great. Now that that conversation is over—”

“Wait, but you didn’t say how long is long enough for Lucian to prove himself,” Elle pressed.

I paused, trapped. “A long time is… long.”

Elle squinted at me. I cleared my throat.

“You see,” I continued, “it takes as long as it takes. It may be a month, or it may be a year. It could be two years. A decade, perhaps. Half a century, maybe. It could be a very long time, and Lucian needs to prove himself in the meantime.”

I was absolutely full of shit, but Elle bought it. She nodded, looking thoughtful. A wave of protectiveness hit me as I watched her. Lucian had better not fucking mess with her.

“But would it be okay if I started talking to him again?” she asked hopefully. “Just as friends? To get to know him?”

I sighed. I had to give up on this. “I suppose so. That’s your call. But no dates without supervision, okay?” I didn’t trust that snake.

Elle smiled, resting her hand on my chest as she lifted onto her toes to kiss me on the cheek. “Thank you, Greyson.” She skipped away, rejoining the pack on the lawn.

At least one of us was having a good time.

I was about to go inside to brood when Russell’s moms came out of the pack house and immediately made a beeline for me.

“Thank you again for everything you’ve done for our son, Greyson,” Joan said.

I shook my head. “It was my duty as an Alpha. I wouldn’t have been able to sit idly by, either way—the Bitterfangs were threatening our territory.”

“You didn’t just defend your territory—you saved our son and his girl,” Paris said. “You went above and beyond.”

It felt good to hear the pack’s efforts acknowledged and appreciated.

“The pack did a great job, and I’m relieved that your son and Julia are safe,” I said, and I meant it, one hundred percent.

“If you’re okay with us giving a speech,” Paris said, “we’d like to thank everyone before the barbecue winds down.”

“Sure,” I said. “Go ahead.”

Both of them thanked me, and then Paris stepped forward on the porch. She tapped her glass with a knife she’d found somewhere, and everyone turned to look at her.

“Hello, everybody,” she said, glancing at her mate. Joan smiled at her encouragingly, nodding. “I just wanted to take a moment here to acknowledge how incredible this entire adventure has been for my family and me. What we saw in recent days—all your packs coming together to rescue the son of Rogues—is proof to me that people can look beyond tradition.”

There were murmurs of agreement in the crowd.

“You all saw our non-Alpha pack as worthy of assistance,” Paris went on. “You saw our son as a person, and you saw all of us as real members of the werewolf community. You risked your lives for us. You took these children in and believed in the innocence of their love and their lives. The Redwoods, Blue Bloods, Samaras, and Vanguards have given me hope…”

Paris’s voice cracked, and I could’ve sworn I heard sniffles coming from my right.

I turned to see Zainab blowing her nose.

“It’s the most hope I’ve felt in a long time,” Paris said. “And I think that’s beautiful. Feeling like you’re not alone, that there are people out there who will help you, is the true essence of community.” She raised her glass. “So here’s to the brave Redwoods, and the Redwood Alpha for bringing all of us here together, cultivating trust, and defying antiquated traditions.”

People cheered and clapped. Sage was crying now, too, along with at least three burly men from the Blue Blood pack. It made me smile. Paris was right—tonight was proof that the old ways were outdated and unnecessary.

Honestly, those ways were part of the reason why I’d originally become a Rogue. I’d just felt so stifled by werewolf tradition, and the way it had contributed to my father’s tyranny. But as Alpha, I seemed to be forging a new path for the Redwoods. There was proof of that on this lawn, where a group of Rogues had fought alongside four packs.

After Paris’s speech, everybody started to say their goodbyes and clear out. I spotted Lucian and realized that no matter how much I wanted to ignore his entire fucking existence, I had another bit of Alpha duty to attend to.

I needed to talk to him about Elle. No games. Just upfront conversation.

“I appreciate your help, Lucian,” I said. Reluctantly.

Lucian slapped me on the back. Way too enthusiastically, actually. “Anything for our alliance, my friend!”

I scowled. Not a great start.

“Right,” I said. “Our alliance. As long as it’s being used for the right reasons.”

Lucian’s cheerfulness vanished. “Whatever do you mean?”

I couldn’t ignore the question. Not when it weighed so heavy on me.

“Are you actually invested in the alliance between our packs, Lucian?” I asked bluntly. “Or are you only working with us to get to Elle?”

# Episode 3719

I lay on the cot in the basement, tossing and turning. I was trapped down here because the wisp that wasn’t a wisp was out to get me. I was certain it wasn’t a true wisp—a true wisp would never have tried to make me hurt my loved ones.

The basement certainly wasn’t cozy. How could anyone even sleep down here? Once things were calmer, I’d have to discuss a few improvements with Greyson. Like, sure, we usually kept prisoners down here, but that didn’t mean they had to be uncomfortable.

*Cali… YOU are the prisoner right now! This wisp isn’t letting you live your damn life!*

I burst into tears at the thought. I’d been tricked over and over by the evil not-wisp. But if it wasn’t a real one, what was it? Or, more to the point, who had sent it after me? My mind kept coming back to the same name: Seluna.

*That’s what makes the most sense…*

The mark was still on my back, which meant Seluna wasn’t truly gone. After everything we’d done to get rid of those damn ashes, Seluna was still haunting me. I’d have told her to get a fucking life and leave me alone, but she was supposed to be dead. Except clearly she wasn’t? Ugh.

*Is this torture ever going to end?* I thought, wiping my eyes. *Am I ever going to be free? Able to live my life with the people I love without being scared that I’ll hurt them at any minute?*

I felt sick with guilt at the thought.

My dark thoughts were cut off when there was a knock on the door. Grabbing a tissue to dab at my eyes, I called out, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, love. I’ve brought you some tea.”

I sat up, sniffling. I considered asking Greyson to leave—I didn’t want to hurt him. But I wanted to see him so badly. I felt so scared and alone that I made a bargain with my conscience.

*Just a little bit*, I thought. *I’ll see him for just a minute! Nothing bad’s going to happen.*

“Come in,” I called. “But be careful—I’m basically a magical bomb right now. Nobody knows when I’m going to freak out and explode.”

Greyson snorted—did anything *ever* faze him?—then slowly opened the door. He came in with a steaming mug of tea, and when I took it, I realized that my hands were freezing.

As if he could read my thoughts, Greyson said, “I’m going to turn up the heat down here.”

I thanked him and took a sip of the tea, enjoying the warmth as it spread down my throat. Greyson stared at me, gingerly placing a hand on my shoulder. I immediately shrank back, my heart pounding for all the wrong reasons. He winced at my reaction.

“I’m just—I’m terrified of what might happen,” I rushed to say. “What if I turn on you?”

Pain flashed across his face. He didn’t speak for a moment, and when I looked into his eyes, I felt fresh tears gathering in mine.

“Love—”

“I don’t know if I can trust myself, Greyson,” I whispered. My voice was shaking.

He took my hand—bravely, I thought. “I know you’d never hurt me.”

“I thought I’d never hurt my mom either, but look what I did to her,” I said bitterly. The tears started falling, then, and I did nothing to stop them. I didn’t brush them away, and I didn’t push Greyson away either when he hugged me, rubbing my back. This moment, this feeling of existing in his arms, was the only good thing in my life right now.

“We’ll figure this out,” he said in a low voice. He felt solid against me, and I clung to him like he was an anchor. “We’ve figured out everything else, right?” He faced me, cupping my cheek. The room felt warmer with him in it. “I’ll make sure you’re okay. Always.”

He kissed the wet corners of my eyes, and I didn’t even think about Artemis’s manipulation nonsense—nothing could’ve stopped me from kissing him on the mouth. I hugged him back and felt safer than I had in hours.

*But it can’t last, Cali…*

I knew it couldn’t last. I’d hurt my sister, my *mother*, and that meant nobody was safe.

“You have to go,” I whispered.

Looking pained, Greyson nodded. “I’ll come check on you in the morning, okay?”

“Yes.” I took another sip of tea. “Thank you for this.”

“Of course,” he said, kissing the side of my head before he stood to leave.

“Make sure to lock the door from the outside,” I reminded him.

He frowned. “I don’t—”

“Greyson,” I interrupted. “*Please*. It’ll make me feel safer. I don’t want to be able to just walk out of here and hurt someone. Promise me you’ll lock it.”

With a heavy sigh, he nodded.

After he was gone, I waited till I heard the lock click, then I lay down again. After all that crying, I felt really tired. Which was probably a good thing, because I just wanted to sleep and forget this day. Forget every terrifying little detail that made me feel impossibly worse about myself. I thought about Greyson holding me, and Xavier telling me that everything would be okay, and my family saying that they forgave me, that they knew I’d never do them harm…

And as I held these thoughts close, I finally drifted into an exhausted sleep.

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A loud noise woke me up.

Startled, I sat bolt upright, looking around.

I blinked at the door.

It was… It wasn’t the basement door anymore. It was a big wooden door that looked almost medieval. Confused, I got out of bed and walked over to it. I opened it easily, and when I looked out, I was no longer in the pack house.

I was in a green field.

*Okay, seriously. What the HELL?*

I turned back. The basement was gone, and so was the door. My heart was hammering—my pulse was the only sound I heard. Except… No, I could hear soft sobbing. Someone was crying in the tall grass. Someone was hurting. I looked around, searching the meadow. I had to find them. I had to help them. I had to figure out who it was…

It was a little girl.

I finally found her, and it was a relief to see her tiny body curled up in the grass. She was still crying, and I went over, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

The girl stopped crying. Slowly, she turned—

And she had Seluna’s face.

*A…* baby *Seluna?*

“What the hell are you *doing*?” I screamed, jerking back in shock and terror, hands raised to defend myself. “Why am I here? Why are you sending those wisps to control me?”

Seluna frowned. With her young face, it looked like she was pouting. “You’re not *listening* to me!”

This was so fucking surreal. “What are you talking about? You want to kill me!”

“I’m just trying to tell you something, and you’re not listening!” Seluna shouted, flailing her hands and ripping up the grass beside her. She looked like any normal eight-year-old in the middle of a tantrum.

“Why would I listen to you, you evil maniac?” I demanded. “You’re trying to hurt me and everyone I love!”

“No!” Seluna shouted, throwing grass at me. “I’m trying to be free!”

The strands of grass bounced off my chest. I was so confused—but mostly, I was fucking *furious*.

“I’d never free you!” I shouted. “You’re a demon! You stole my body so you could squat in it like a parasite! You belong in the demon dimension, so just…” I waved her off. “SHOO!”

Seluna groaned, standing up. She honest to goodness stamped her feet. “You’re so stubborn, you won’t even do what needs to be done to save us both!”

I let out a hysterical laugh. “As if saving you would ever help me!”

Seluna’s face turned red with fury. “Why won’t you *listen* to me?” she wailed, lunging forward.

*Oh no you DON’T!* I screamed inside my head, lashing out to defend myself. The reaction was automatic, borne of surprise and fear, and my nails scraped Seluna’s cheek, leaving a trail of blood.

I gasped.

How was she *bleeding*?

“Stop fighting me,” Seluna hissed, grabbing my face so she could look into my eyes. “Stop fighting me, or everything’s going to get worse!”

“What are you—how…” I stared down at the blood on my fingers. At the red on the girl’s rounded cheeks. Had I actually just *hurt* Seluna? Baby Seluna?

“What the fuck is happening?” I said softly.

Seluna stepped back.

When I blinked up at her, she was no longer a little girl.

The full-grown demon’s eyes glowed red. “I said, WAKE UP!”

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I jerked awake with a gasp, cold air hitting my face.

I wasn’t lying down, but standing up. Wait, not just standing—I was *moving*. Sleepwalking? My body felt like a puppet jerking on strings, and I was—

I was outside, alone.

And in front of me floated a not-wisp, zooming through the forest.

*No! This can’t be happening! How did I get out of the basement? Where am I going? Seluna—*

Seluna had been trying to wake me up in the dream. Why would she do that if she’d sent this wisp to body snatch me?

*This doesn’t make sense…*

I tried to stop walking, but my legs refused to obey. They kept moving forward. I heard myself whimper, let out a cry of distress, but when I tried to speak, the words caught in my throat.

*Why can’t I break free of this mind control? Where is this not-wisp taking me?*

And then I felt a flash of pain on my shoulder. The Seluna mark!

It flared again, and I cried out in pain. My hand lifted, as if to press against the mark, and the pain flared for a third time, so intense that it felt like I was going to burn up—

I stopped walking. *Finally.*

I fell to my knees, holding the mark, sobbing while the not-wisp zoomed angrily around my head. I couldn’t hear its voice, though.

I could only feel the pain, and I could feel…

I could feel my body.

Along with the pain, my body was mine.

Realization hit me, and I gasped—the pain from the mark had helped me break free of the mind control.

*Wait a second… Is Seluna actually trying to* help *me?*

# Episode 3720

**Xavier**

“Have a good night,” I told Mace. “Thanks for everything.”

He patted me on the back—a pretty hearty gesture, by his standards—and said goodbye. Most of the barbecue guests were leaving, so I was getting antsy. I wanted to be done with the pleasantries so I could go back inside and check on Cali. I hated that I’d had to leave her in the basement, of all places. But being down there was the only thing that had made her feel even vaguely comforted—the idea that she’d be locked away safely.

Anger built up inside me at the thought.

I was going to find whoever kept sending that goddamn evil wisp and make sure they got what was coming to them.

A few more people said goodbye, and I decided that the space had cleared enough that I could dip out. Rishika and Jay were there to monitor the end of the party, and Orla and Mrs. Smith were already cleaning up with giant trash bags in hand, saying things like, “No, that’s not how it’s supposed to be done—here, let me do it,” to anyone who tried to help them.

It was obvious who the moms were in this pack.

I thought about sharing that thought with Cali, just a little dumb joke to cheer her up a bit. I stepped back toward the house, impatient to see her.

Ava appeared in front of me, blocking my path.

She looked up at me, all wide-eyed and a little vulnerable, and my stomach flipped.

“You okay?” I was trying to keep my voice neutral. After everything I’d been through with Ava, I just didn’t want to be mean to her anymore. Even if she still annoyed the living daylights out of me half the time.

Besides, I knew that Ava was a good ally, and she’d more than proven herself at this stage. Moreover, I had to keep the peace between the Redwoods and Samaras, but also between Ava and me. Still, that didn’t mean I was going to let my wolf leap forward and curl himself around Ava like a fucking house cat. Because that was exactly what he wanted to do.

*Settle the fuck down*, I thought.

“I’m fine,” she mumbled, looking away. “The party was nice.”

She looked as awkward as I felt.

“Right.” I cleared my throat. “I guess, thanks for coming? Especially after all… that.” *The spirit world.*

Ava nodded. She made a move to turn around, and the sight of her back made something crack inside me. Without thinking, I reached out and grabbed her hand.

“Hey,” I muttered. “Just wanted to say, uh, thanks for all the help today.”

Ava stared at our joined hands. I realized that I’d just made things ten times more awkward. I let go quickly, like I’d been burned. She didn’t let me get away with that, though—she grabbed my other hand, maintaining contact.

I didn’t have the resolve to push her away when she looked up at me and said, “Yeah. I mean, those kids didn’t deserve what was done to them. The Samaras wanted to help them from the beginning.”

I swallowed roughly, glancing at our joined hands. Taking a deep breath, I said, “I know things have been hectic lately, but I wanted to check in and see where you’re at with Fletcher. Have you still been talking to him?”

Ava stiffened. She let go of my hand and took a step back, her expression hardening. “I don’t want to talk about this right now, Xavier.”

“You have to,” I said. “You and the Samaras have no other choice, Ava.”

She scowled, looking away. “We could,” she muttered. “But you won’t even consider it.”

This woman was a fucking headache and an existential crisis mixed into one.

“Please don’t go there, Ava.” I tried to sound patient instead of exasperated. “I’m only saying this because it’s what’s best for your pack.”

She looked up at me defiantly. I braced myself for whatever the fuck was going to come next. But then she just said, “Fine. I’ll talk to him again. Geez.”

She was acting like I was the unreasonable one. Great. Fantastic.

Fuck it all.

She took off, and I watched, my wolf whining for me to go after her. Preferably to touch her. He wanted to touch her so badly, it was fucking pathetic. I held back. I knew Ava needed time to come to terms with Fletcher as a potential Alpha, but time was a luxury she didn’t have. And she wasn’t stepping up either, which left them in need of someone like Fletcher. If the Samaras were to come up against another enemy like the Bitterfangs before they found a new Alpha, they could be totally destroyed.

Shaking my head, I started to turn back to the house. I still needed to see Cali—she had to be my priority. But as I took a step, I accidentally kicked something on the ground. I frowned. What the fuck was that? I looked at the thing—it was big and round and metal.

Had that been there this entire time? It looked big enough that I was sure I would’ve noticed it.

I bent down to pick it up and almost dropped it again when I realized it was a medal. A medal with a familiar mark on it.

Nope. No. This was *not* happening again.

I refused to even look at it.

In full denial, I dropped the thing on the ground and stomped back into the house.

But when I opened the front door, the medal was sitting on the welcome mat.

Was this a fucking joke? What the actual fuck? I spun around and marched back out to the lawn, where I’d just seen the medal. Sure enough, it was gone. I looked around, my heart pounding. Was this Adéluce’s work? Was she really not dead?

Because that was what my gut was telling me.

But acknowledging the possibility was a whole other thing that I didn’t want to get into. We had enough shit going on without Adéluce making everything a million times worse. I needed her to be dead. That was much easier to process. To fucking accept.

I didn’t even want to consider the idea that she could be watching me right now…

*Could* she be watching me right now?

I looked out into the night, at the empty lawn. While I’d been talking with Ava, the entire space had cleared out—even Rishika and Jay were gone.

My pulse thundering in my ears, I called, “Why don’t you stop being a coward and come out and face me?”

I waited, holding my breath.

Nothing happened; no one replied.

There was only silence and the sounds of the forest.

I felt like a fucking tool, yelling at nothing, so I shook my head and turned to go back inside. I wanted to ignore the medal again, but it was obvious that magic was involved here. Which could only mean that the medal would show up again—on my bed or in my whiskey or wherever the fuck.

I glared at the thing, then picked it up.

Defiantly, I thrust it into my pocket.

There. That would show it.

I was losing my fucking mind.

Frustrated and worried, I decided to ignore this latest bit of bullshit and focus on the most important thing—right now and always. And that was Cali.

I headed downstairs, ignoring the ambient chatter about how nice the barbecue had been. Moments later, I was in front of the basement door. I knocked gently.

There was no noise from inside.

“Cali?” I called. “Are you okay?”

Again, no answer. She was probably sleeping. Right. No need for alarm.

Still, I couldn’t stop myself from unlocking the door. It wouldn’t hurt—I’d just peek inside and check on her.

But when I opened the door, all I saw was an empty bed.

I stopped breathing altogether.

“Cali? *Cali!*” The second time I said her name, it was a shout. I barged into the room, looking for her as if she’d fucking materialize out of thin air.

And then I spotted a window with its glass shattered, its frame bent outward.

What the *fuck*?That window shouldn’t have been able to break, least of all by Cali. How? Did she crawl out of there?

Unless…

My chest filled with dread.

I raced back upstairs. I ignored the people who asked me what was wrong, because I knew that if I opened my mouth, all that would come out was a scream. As I ran outside, a plan started forming in my head. I raced to the side of the house, to the other side of the basement window—

But there was nothing there.

Nothing except footprints in the snow.

“CALI!” I screamed, whipping around to face the forest.

I could barely fucking breathe, and I hated myself for not keeping my cool. I was ready to shift and howl for the others to follow, because a full-blown search party was the only thing that made sense right now. But then I heard a noise, and my mate emerged from the trees.

“Cali!”

I ran to her, reaching out to pull her into my arms as she stumbled forward. There was dirt and snow all over her, and tears were streaming down her cheeks.

She clung to me. “Seluna, she—she’s not with the wisp! It’s evil, and the mark, she didn’t—I—”

Her sobs were so intense, her voice so raspy, I didn’t understand a word. I just held her tight, my heart breaking for her, one question burning in my mind.

*What the hell just happened?*

# Episode 3721

I couldn’t stop crying long enough to say anything that made a lick of sense. Xavier was trying to comfort me as he held me tight. I was so grateful for him, but also overwhelmed enough that crying even harder was my only reaction.

“Babe, it’s okay, I’m right here,” he whispered into my hair, and I clung to him. His embrace felt firm, unbreakable. I knew he wouldn’t let me go wandering off into the forest again.

*I’m so done with that forest!*

“Come on,” he said gently, kissing the top of my head. “Let’s get you back inside.”

I let myself be held and led across the threshold. The first person we ran into was the last person I wanted to see me in such a state—my mom.

“Cali!” She gasped, running to me. “What happened? Xavier, what’s going on?”

“M-Mom, I—” I couldn’t stop crying long enough to explain.

A fresh round of tears escaped, accompanied by sobs. Because when I looked at my mom, I saw myself hurting her, and I felt so horrible that I wanted to throw up and then just die so that this whole mess would be over.

*Cali, no!* I told myself. *What would Mom say if she knew what you were thinking? You have to power through!*

I had to—if not for myself, then for her. For everyone who loved me. But even though it felt like I had a new lead, like this last dream had been some sort of revelation, I just couldn’t…

I couldn’t stop *fucking crying*.

“… and then I saw she wasn’t in the basement,” Xavier was saying to my mom. “I went to look for her, but before I could shift and start searching, she wandered out of the forest like this.”

“Let’s get her upstairs,” Mom said, stroking my face. “I’ll take care of you, sweetie. Okay?”

Still sniffling, I nodded. I was so overwhelmed, it felt like I was about to break.

Xavier picked me up and carried me to my room, Mom walking right next to us. By the time he laid me on my bed, my sobs had softened into hiccups.

“Go get her some water, please,” Mom said to Xavier.

Xavier darted out of the room, and now it was just Mom and me. Instead of helping me get into bed, though, she took my arm and placed it over her shoulders, helping me stand.

“Wait…” My voice was raspy from all the crying. “Where are we going?”

“Bathroom,” Mom said. “We need to warm you up, and get you cleaned off.”

I looked down and realized that my bare feet were wet, scratched up, and covered in snow and mud. I gasped, ready to start crying all over again. This was just the cherry on top of a spectacularly bad situation.

“Oh no,” I choked out. “I must have tracked dirt through the whole house!”

“That’s hardly the end of the world, Cali; don’t worry about it.”

My mom kissed my cheek, then helped me take off my clothes and get into the tub. I was exhausted, and so grateful for her care and comfort. I felt like a child as she rinsed me off, watching while the dirt rolled down the drain. There was just something jarring about it, and fresh tears brewed in my eyes.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “If I’d done this on my own, I’d probably have tried to drown myself or something.”

Mom sighed, shaking her head. “This isn’t you, Cali. We’ll figure out what’s happening with these wisps, okay?” She leaned down and kissed the top of my head. “I’m right here.”

She filled the tub with warm water and started washing my hair. The room smelled like lavender, and I felt so grateful for my mother in that moment that I wanted it to last forever. Just me and her. She was taking care of me, like she always used to when I was a kid and scraped my knee or fell in a puddle, and I was…

I was *safe*.

“Here you go.” Xavier had returned. He offered me a glass of water, and I drank it all in one go. As I gave the glass back to him, Artemis and Greyson appeared by the door.

“They wanted to check on you too,” Xavier said gruffly.

I nodded and tried to smile. It came out like a grimace.

Greyson walked in, dropping to his knees by the tub. His expression was haunted. “What happened, love?”

I looked around at the others, taking a deep breath. It felt like I was all cried out, so I could finally think more clearly.

*I can do this.*

I told them everything—the dream, waking up sleepwalking, the mark burning, breaking free of the mind control… The entire time, my mother, Greyson, Xavier, and Artemis stared at me wordlessly—until I got to the end, and Artemis spoke up.

“Hang on a second,” she said with a frown. “If Seluna is the one sending the fake wisp, then why did she help break its hold on you?”

“That’s what I can’t get out of my head either,” I said. “It doesn’t make sense to me, either. And then in the dream, she claimed that helping her would help me.”

Xavier scowled, crossing his arms. “That’s exactly what someone who’s threatening you would say.”

“It didn’t sound like a threat,” I said, looking between my mom and Greyson. “Not really.”

“What *did* it sound like?” Mom asked.

I shook my head, biting my lip. “It feels weird to say, but… It sounded like she was scared. Like she was pleading with me to help her.”

Greyson’s expression now mirrored Xavier’s. Namely, he was scowling. “That doesn’t make sense. Seluna’s a powerful demon.”

“I know. That’s why I can’t figure it out,” I admitted.

Artemis shrugged. “Well, it seems like Seluna doesn’t want you to be controlled by those wisps. So, at the very least you two could be considered allies of convivence regardless of whatever is going on with her. You could use that common goal to your own advantage.”

Artemis’s words sank in while Mom helped me out of the tub. She wrapped me in a plush robe while everybody stayed quiet, seemingly processing the absolute insanity of what I’d just told them. I did the same thing, Artemis’s words echoing in my head.

*You could use that common goal to your own advantage.*

Was that even possible?

Once I was sitting on my bed, I finally spoke up. “I think I need to have a proper talk with Seluna.”

Greyson looked calm, but his gaze was intense when he looked at me. “What do you mean?”

“I think I need to try to find her, whether it’s in my dreams or through magic,” I said. “I think I need to finally listen to what she has to say.”

Xavier scoffed. “No fucking way. Seluna is dangerous. She can pull you into a dark place. What if she hurts you in your dreams? We’ve seen it happen time and time again, and the injury always follows you into real life!”

*He’s not wrong about that…*

That was in the past, though. Right now, Seluna seemed weakened. I stared at my hand, remembering how I’d drawn from her in my dream.

“I don’t think she can hurt me anymore, beyond the mark,” I said quietly. “She’s a lot weaker now. Enough that I can at least hurt her back. I can use that to my advantage.”

Greyson didn’t say anything, but his silver eyes were fixed on me.

Xavier shook his head, rubbing his face. “No, I still don’t like this. It’s too damn much, Cali!”

I looked at my loved ones. They were all staring at me with varying degrees of worry and concern. Xavier was the most agitated, and Greyson looked the calmest. “Looked” being the key word—I could almost feel the storm raging underneath.

“I need this,” I said. My voice was quiet, but even. No more tears left to cry. “I can’t just keep letting these things happen to me. I have to figure out what’s going on before something even worse happens. Something irreversible.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. Greyson exchanged a glance with Xavier, then with Artemis. Mom was staring at me, her eyes glistening, one hand pressed to her heart.

And then Artemis said, “If talking to Seluna is what you need, then we’re doing it. How can we help?”

I smiled at my sister. The muscles of my face ached, like I’d forgotten how to form the expression, but it was the only reaction that felt right in this moment. My warrior sister was on my side, and that was enough to make me feel stronger. I turned to my mom, and she gave me a soft nod. That was enough for me.

My mates still hadn’t spoken.

“I think we have to talk to Big Mac,” I said. “And maybe Marta and Okorie, before they leave? Dreamscapes might be similar to the spirit world, and I want to be as prepared as I can be before I try to face Seluna in mine,” I said as I looked up at my mates.

Xavier still looked agitated, but he nodded tightly. “I’ll go find Marta.”

My gaze flicked to Greyson. He was unmoving. But then he finally spoke. “I’ll go talk to Big Mac.”

I felt something in my chest ease.

My mates turned to go, but Artemis spoke up again. “There’s still one big question we have to ask ourselves, though.” Her gaze flicked to my face, then down to my scratched-up feet.

“Artemis is right,” I whispered. “If the dark wisp isn’t Seluna’s creation, then we have to find out who’s really controlling it.”

# Episode 3722

“But if it’s not Seluna, then who could it be?” Mom asked.

My throat went dry. It was weird, but being able to blame everything on Seluna had been weirdly comforting, somehow. At least I had a history with Seluna—better the devil you know, and all that. But if Seluna had nothing to do with the evil wisp sightings…

“What if it’s someone way worse?” I asked. My voice cracked.

Artemis’s tone was deadpan. “Worse than Seluna?”

“Could it be Adéluce?” Xavier blurted out.

Everyone turned to look at him, and it felt like my heart came to a screeching stop.

“She’s dead, Xavier; stop being paranoid,” Greyson said sharply.

Xavier glared at his brother. “We never found a body. And I found another medal.”

I immediately started screaming inside my head.

“You found *what*?” I spluttered. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

Xavier reached into his pocket and pulled out something shiny. “I just found this one a few minutes ago. There’s two of them.”

Xavier showed me the medal, and I frowned in confusion. It appeared for all intents and purposes to be a regular-shaped coin.

“I don’t think this is magical, Xavier,” I said. “It looks like a plain old silver dollar. Are you sure this is what you found?”

Xavier took the coin back, flipping it in his hand. His expression softened slightly, and he let out a breath. “I must’ve been mistaken.”

I took his hand in mine, squeezing. “Hey, I get it. You’re stressed after everything that happened.”

“Yeah, I’m probably just—”

“Xavier is right, though,” Artemis interrupted, her tone serious. “We never found Adéluce’s body. And we know what she’s capable of, how powerful she can be.”

Everybody went rigid. I shot a look at Artemis that very clearly said, *You are not helping right now!*

She heard the message loud and clear and shrugged. “You all know I’m right.” She turned to Greyson, crossing her arms. “If there’s no body, there’s no death.”

Greyson’s expression darkened, and Xavier stared at him. “I’d feel a lot better if we had substantial proof that Adéluce is actually dead, Greyson.”

“That does make sense,” my mom murmured.

“Perhaps we could do a spell to scan the lake or something?” I asked hopefully.

Greyson’s jaw clenched. His tone was calm but matter-of-fact. “You’re not leaving the house in this state, Cali.”

“When I say ‘we,’ I don’t mean ‘me,’” I clarified. “Even one of the pack could go and oversee it.”

Greyson seemed appeased. He turned to Xavier. “If I send Jay and Rishika, will that make you all feel better?”

I stared at Xavier. He was still tense, and radiating agitation. On his behalf, I said, “Yes, that would be great.”

I reached out to take Xavier’s hand again, squeezing. He squeezed back, as if in agreement, and it made me feel lighter. He hadn’t said a word in the past few minutes, but at least he seemed calmer.

“That’s a good plan,” Artemis said, eyeing Greyson. “But it still doesn’t answer the question of who’s sending these wisps.”

Greyson paused for a moment. He glanced at my neck, where my mother’s amulet and the Shard lay against my collarbone. “What about that Ganfael guy?”

“You really think that’s a possibility?” I asked.

“It’s a theory,” Artemis said, all business. “You said that the fake wisp wants the Shard, right? And Ganfael definitely wasn’t happy that we took it.”

Greyson nodded. Everything clicked into place in my head.

*That… makes sense! At least one thing is starting to, anyway.*

“Of course Ganfael would want the Shard back,” I said under my breath. “And he has access to a lot of magical items and resources that could’ve helped him make fake wisps.”

*Fake wisps that keep trying to make me hurt myself and those I love*. My chest constricted at the thought.

I looked up at my mates. “We need to talk to Ganfael. Right now.”

I got out of bed—pretty much ready to go, both furious and scared—but Mom blocked my way.

“Honey, you’re in a bathrobe,” she said seriously.

I blinked down at myself. *Good point.*

“Also, you need to rest,” she continued, gripping my shoulders and forcing me to sit back down. “The others can go talk to Ganfael.”

My breathing started to come fast. *No fucking way—I can’t just keep sitting here while other people put themselves in danger for me!*

“This is my battle to fight, Mom!” I said. “I need to confront the person who’s doing this to me, find out why, and give them a piece of my goddamn mind!”

I tried to stand again, but my mother’s grip didn’t ease. I’d never seen her so serious. Her voice was low but piercing, leaving no room for argument. “If this man is really using wisps to control you, then it might be dangerous for you to be around him, right?”

Mom rarely got like this with me—all strict and determined. But when she did, it was always for a good reason.

“That makes sense,” I admitted. What I didn’t say out loud was that the thought of going up against one of those wisps made my blood run cold. I was scared of it—scared of *them*, if there was more than one wisp operating under the same evil sorcery.

*What if you go talk to Ganfael and he makes you attack one of your mates? What if you can’t fight off the mind control?*

A cold sweat broke out on the back of my neck at the thought.

“What are you thinking?” Greyson asked in a low voice.

“My mom’s right,” I said. “I can’t come with you to confront Ganfael.”

Xavier looked relieved before his gaze hardened. “Let’s get going, then, before—”

“No!” I shook my head. “I don’t want you guys to run off and get in a fight with him, either. You need to prepare—to strategize.”

Xavier took a deep breath, rubbing his forehead. I knew he was ready to explode with impatience, but he thankfully didn’t protest.

Artemis and Greyson glanced at each other before Greyson said, “Okay. We’ll leave in the morning.”

I felt a smidge of relief. It was enough to make me feel better.

“Well, then!” Mom clapped her hands, startling everybody—even the Alphas. “It’s time for Cali to rest now.” She turned to me. “Let’s tuck you in. Right now.”

My mom wasn’t going to accept any arguments tonight, it seemed. But even though the bed looked comfortable and tempting, the idea of sleeping was nothing but. I eyed my pillow suspiciously and said, “But how am I going to sleep if I keep getting possessed? That doesn’t sound very restful.”

“Why don’t we take shifts and make sure Cali doesn’t go anywhere?” Artemis asked Greyson.

Anxiety flooded me. “So, you’d be guarding me?”

Greyson nodded. “More or less.”

I didn’t want to put anyone in danger if there was another body-snatching incident, and I had to wonder if being locked up again might be best. But then again, I’d found a way out of the basement the last time I’d been locked up down there.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” I said. “If you’re guarding me and something bad happens—”

“We can’t put you in the basement again,” Xavier said gruffly. “Or anywhere you can escape. Someone needs to watch over you at all times. And if there’s another incident, we’ll deal with it. We can all protect ourselves here.”

Artemis and Greyson nodded in agreement.

Mom stroked my arm. “You need to have faith in us, sweetheart. Try to rest, if you can.”

I doubted I’d be able to, but I still felt so grateful for the people in this room.

“Thank you all for doing this for me. I wish…” I swallowed roughly. “I wish I could do more to protect myself.” I looked at Artemis. “Maybe tomorrow you and I can practice resisting mind control some more?”

“That’s a great idea,” Artemis said. “I’ll ask Adair if he can help, too.”

I recalled our last training session with Adair. In his own intense way, the Dark Fae had been helpful. Mom agreed with Artemis, and then she tucked me in. All protests died in my throat when she kissed my forehead. I said goodnight to Artemis, Xavier, and Greyson.

“Someone from the pack will be outside your door at all times, okay?” Greyson said, and Xavier nodded.

My mates both lingered for a moment before my mom firmly ushered them out. “She needs to sleep.”

Sleeping seemed like an elusive dream, though. Now that I was alone, my anxiety made me feel like I was vibrating.

*Maybe I should count sheep? One sheep, two sheep—*

I heard pounding footsteps in the hallway outside, and then my door opened with a creak.

When I opened my eyes, it was to the sight of Lola leaning over my head.

I gasped.

*Is it really Lola? What if it’s another imposter?*

Alarms went off in my head, my magic flooding through me automatically. Hands raised, ready to attack, I shouted, “Get the hell away from me!”

# Episode 3723

“Wait, no!” Lola screeched, backing up. “It’s just me! It’s Lola!”

My fingers were tingling—magic had gathered there in a tight ball, visible and ready to fire. I was shaking, scared shitless and furious at the same time.

*I’m not going to be tricked again!*

“Prove you’re Lola, then!”

She spluttered, “I don’t—”

“Tell me something only the real Lola would know.”

“Oh my god, okay! When we were in college you got drunk on peppermint schnapps one night and stole a cactus in a pot from someone’s backyard! You felt super guilty the next morning, but you loved that cactus so much you wouldn’t take it back.”

I let out a sigh of relief and let my hand drop.

At the same time, Ravi barged in.

“Why the hell are you guys screaming?” He turned to me, looking confused and alarmed. “Lola just wanted to say hi; I thought letting her in would be fine.”

I was still shaking. Poor Lola looked bewildered. *Shit*.

“It’s nothing, Ravi,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I overreacted. Still spooked, I guess.”

Ravi looked between Lola and me again, his frazzled expression turning curious. “Can I hear more about this stolen cactus, though?”

I frowned. *You steal something* one time *in a moment of peppermint-induced weakness and suddenly everyone’s a critic!*

Lola noticed my expression and glared at Ravi. Crossing her arms over her chest, she said, “That was a secret between me and my bestie.”

Ravi looked back and forth between us. “*Okay* then… I’ll just get back to guard duty.”

He skedaddled, closing the door behind him. I turned to my friend, feeling horrible. “Sorry, Lola, I’m still a bit on edge.”

Lola sat by my side on the bed. Taking both my hands in hers, she said, “Please don’t worry about it—I totally get it. I’m glad you’re so alert.” Her eyes narrowed. “I’m so angry that someone stole my face and tried to hurt you. Whoever it was, I’m going to track them down and chop their head off!”

I gasped. “Lola!”

“Right, sorry, I forgot you don’t like murder—not even when it’s righteous.” Lola cleared her throat and then rephrased her threat. “I’m going to track them down and give them a piece of my mind. After my verbal lashing, they’re going to cry hysterically and wish they were never born.”

Well, then. That was about as good as it was going to get.

“The others think it’s Ganfael,” I said. “They’re going to talk to him tomorrow, actually.”

“Good,” Lola said. Was that glee in her tone or malice? “I’m going to be on that mission too. And then I’ll report back to you—every detail.”

“That would be amazing, actually,” I said, squeezing Lola’s hand. “The boys rarely give me any details. Xavier in particular just grunts and nods, and it’s like, what am I supposed to do with that?”

“That’s what I’m here for. Don’t worry,” Lola said seriously. Then her expression softened. “I’m so sorry I scared you. I was just going to leave some water on your nightstand.” She pointed at the glass of water she’d already set down.

“Thank you, Lola,” I said softly.

“Any time. Call me if you need anything.”

Lola gave me a hug, and I hugged her back, some of the fear leaving me. She left, and I felt much lighter when I lay back down in bed.

So much so that I was, finally, able to fall asleep.

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Judging by the fact that I woke up clean and in my bed the next morning, I assumed there had been no possession incidents overnight. That was a positive. I’d come to terms with the fact that I wouldn’t be doing anything to help fix my mess today—I wouldn’t be going with the others to interrogate Ganfael—so I’d decided that the only thing I *could* do was refuse to let said mess negatively affect me. If I stayed in bed all day, crying and brooding, it would be a win for my tormentor. And I *refused* to let that happen.

I was going to have a nice day, out of sheer stubbornness and spite.

*That’s the spirit!*

I stood up and got ready, even put my hair in a nice braid, and then I went downstairs. I was going to have a wonderful breakfast and chat with my friends and family. That was my goal, and it would be a very easy one to achieve, because when I reached the kitchen, I found Torin making pancakes.

*Thank god*, I thought, *something normal in the middle of all this madness.*

I watched Torin hum and stir, and I felt my eyes water. Yes, I was highly emotional at the moment, but I loved Torin. He was such a constant in my life these days, and I didn’t know what I would do without him.

“Cali! Good morning,” he said cheerfully. “Here, try this.”

He offered me a plate with a weird, lumpy, magenta blob on it.

“I thought you were making pancakes,” I said. “What’s this, and why is it Lola’s favorite color?”

Torin frowned. “I was trying to make a heart-shaped pancake to prepare for Saint Valentine’s Day! I need to practice.”

I laughed. He was adorable. “Oh! Then this is a great start!”

Torin preened at the compliment, smiling wide. “Go ahead, try it.”

I took a seat at the table, then took a bite. “It’s delicious. I love it!” *Is there anything this Fae can’t make?*

I shoveled the rest of the pancake down as proof. Torin looked ten feet tall, full of pride. Just seeing him like that made me feel better.

*Today’s already looking up!*

I’d barely finished that thought when Marta shuffled in.

“Good morning,” I said.

The girl didn’t reply. That was weird—Marta was usually so friendly.

“Marta, *hello*!” I waved a hand in front of her face, and Marta flinched away.

“Oh, sorry!” she said, looking guilty. “Did you say something?”

Wow. She must’ve been really lost in thought, there.

“Just good morning,” I said.

“Right,” she replied with a heavy sigh. “Sure.”

“Okay, sit down,” I said, sliding down the bench to make room for her. “What’s going on with you? You’re acting super loopy.”

Marta looked sad. “I’m leaving today.”

A wave of sadness hit me. Goodbyes were so hard. But I knew that Marta really needed to go on her trip—to see the world, to grow.

“Hey, it’s not goodbye forever. You know you’re always welcome here, right?” I asked.

Marta nodded. Without another word, she reached out and gave me a tight hug. I smiled, feeling a little better.

“Do you… Do you think I should go say goodbye to Lilac?” Marta asked. Ah. This must’ve been what was bugging her.

“Do you think he’ll be upset if you don’t?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Not sure. It feels like things are more settled between us, now. But I don’t want to rub the fact that I’m leaving with Okorie in his face.”

“I think that you *want* to say goodbye, though,” I countered. “Why don’t you go find him? That way, you won’t have any regrets.”

Marta chewed on her lower lip for a moment. “Okay, yeah. I think you’re right.”

Marta left, and it felt nice to know she’d decided to follow my advice. This felt normal, too.

Just then, the Pit Bulls all came downstairs in a group, their bags packed.

“Oh! Are you leaving already?” I asked, walking over to say goodbye.

“Yes,” said Paris. “We don’t want to overstay our welcome.”

“And Big Mac cast some kind of spell,” Joan added. “She said that today is a good day for us to get home without the Bitterfangs seeing us…” She glanced at her son, and Julia. “Julia will be staying with us for a bit.”

“That sounds like a great plan.” I turned to the girl. “How are you feeling?”

Julia gave me a little smile. “Better. And much happier now that I don’t have to hide my relationship.”

“I’m sure that’s exciting,” I said, smiling. My happiness faded quickly, though. “But what about… What about your family?” I wasn’t sure how to say it, but obviously Julia’s father thought she was dead. “How are you handling that?” I asked carefully.

Julia sighed. Her expression was somber but matter-of-fact. “To be honest, I’m glad to cut ties with my family. I don’t care what my parents think—I don’t even know if they’d mourn me… my dad almost got Russell killed, and he might have tried to kill me.”

Internally, I worried about the possibility of the lie of her death catching up to Julia at some point. I wasn’t going to say anything to dash her hopes, though. She and Russell looked so happy together right now.

They both hugged me goodbye and thanked me yet again.

Just then, Greyson, Xavier, and Lola walked into the foyer, dressed and ready to go. Stress started to build up inside me.

*This mission is crucial, Cali*,I reminded myself*. Ganfael might have all the answers you need. We have to figure out if he’s the one who’s been sending the wisps.*

“Have a safe trip,” Greyson told Paris and Joan. He spoke with them for a moment, and they must’ve said “thank you” at least ten times.

I was sad to see Russell and Julia go, but I knew it was for the best. I watched them walk out the door with the rest of the Pit Bulls, holding hands, and I couldn’t help but smile a little.

The young lovers were alive and well, and happy together.

“We did that,” I said to Greyson.

He squeezed my shoulder, nodding, then Lola clapped her hands.

“Okay!” she said. “Where are Gabriel and Mikah? We need to get this show on the road.”

“Are you guys leaving now?” I asked, swallowing my nerves.

Lola nodded. “Just waiting for Gabriel and Mikah to get their butts down here. They’re late!”

“Why are they going with you?” I asked Xavier.

“They were there when we met Ganfael last time, so they know their way around his place,” Xavier said. “There are so many entrances and exits… We don’t want the guy to escape.”

“Who was saying that my mate and I are running late?” Mikah asked. I looked up to see him walking sedately down the stairs, while Gabriel basically bounced down. “We’re right on time.”

“Ready for an adventure, Lola?” Gabriel asked with a smirk.

Lola rolled her eyes impatiently before rolling her shoulders and cracking her knuckles. She definitely *looked* ready. “Let’s just go, okay? I’ll be in the car.”

She gave me a quick hug, then dashed outside while Xavier moved closer.

“We’ll be back before you know it,” he said, giving me a hug, then a kiss on the cheek.

“Don’t worry,” Greyson murmured when he hugged me next.

I walked them all to the door.

“Be safe!” I called, waving.

Greyson smiled. Xavier nodded. And all I could think was, *Please, god, let everything be okay.*

I didn’t want anyone else to get hurt because of me.

With those thoughts twisting in my head, I went back inside—just as the phone started ringing. I looked around, realized that I was the only one in the hallway and half the pack was still asleep, and rushed to pick it up.

But before I could even say hello, a dark, gravelly voice crackled down the line. “The Redwood pack is going to pay for killing my daughter!”

# Episode 3724

**Greyson**

The mission was officially underway. Lola, Mikah, and Gabriel were in the back seat of one of my brother’s many, many SUVs, with Xavier himself in the driver’s seat and me in the passenger seat. Thankfully, we’d been to Ganfael’s before—my brother had many faults, but at least he remembered the route.

“You know, this might not be a good idea,” Gabriel said casually.

“We heard that when you said it the first time,” Mikah said wryly.

Gabriel shrugged. “I’m just saying—Ganfael’s already super pissed at us. At this point, I’m pretty sure that not even I could charm him into listening to what we have to say without attacking first.”

“Then we’ll just have to surprise him,” I said. “If he’s sending these wisps after Cali, he needs to stop immediately, or I’ll kill him myself. I think that’s pretty straightforward.”

My tone was sharp, but Gabriel didn’t comment on it. He didn’t say anything else, either.

*It’s just that it’s one thing after the other*, I wanted to tell him*. If Cali’s not being tortured by the Seluna mark, she’s being tortured by these fucking wisps. It’s like a never-ending cycle.*

My mood wasn’t fantastic, obviously. I’d taken half the overnight shifts to guard Cali’s door. I’d been wide awake the entire night, fucking terrified by the idea that a wisp could somehow slip inside. Could the fuckers float through walls? Probably.

“At least the Pit Bulls left safely,” Lola noted, breaking the silence. “And the kids are both safe with Russell’s parents.”

“I hope Julia’s father doesn’t catch up with her,” Xavier said.

Gabriel cringed. “Yeah, that would be just the damn thing we need on top of all the rest of this chaos.”

“I’m sure he’ll catch up with us first. We haven’t seen the last of the Bitterfang pack,” I said grimly.

They’d come for us eventually, but I was ready for them. The Blue Bloods and the Samaras would be with us, no matter what. And as for Lucian, when I’d called him out, he’d claimed that his interest in Elle had nothing to do with the alliance. He’d sworn that he had straightforward intentions, and that he’d be there to help the Redwoods against the Bitterfangs when the time came.

It was always hard to trust him, though. I took a breath, trying to refocus on the mission at hand. What mattered now was Cali. Nothing else.

“By the way…” Xavier glanced at me. “Any news on Adéluce?”

“I asked Jay and Rishika about going to the lake to find proof that she’s dead,” I said. “And Kira’s going to make some charm for them to help find any remains. They’ll head out as soon as they can.”

“How are they going to look for her, exactly?” Mikah asked. “Take a dive in the lake?”

“Big Mac and Kira said they should be able to do a spell to detect Adéluce’s remains, if they’re there,” I said.

“Are the witches feeling better?” Lola asked. “Because the last time I saw Big Mac, she didn’t even make a snarky comment about my hair. She has to be sick.”

Lola’s assessment was accurate, but it wasn’t the moment for me to confess just how worried I was about my mom’s fiancée.

“The witches seem a little better,” I said. “They’re the ones who suggested the spell. It should work.”

“And what if they *do* find Adéluce’s remains?” Gabriel asked, meeting Xavier’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Then what?”

“Then at least we’ll know that she’s out of the way,” Xavier replied gruffly.

I knew my brother was worried that the wisps could’ve been Adéluce’s doing. My money was on Ganfael, though. I could just fucking feel it in my bones, and I needed to ensure that he wasn’t an issue. If he really was going after Cali because of that goddamn Shard, then he was about to learn the error of his ways.

“Whoa…” Lola trailed off when the warlock’s ostentatious mansion came into view.

“I know,” Gabriel said with a snort.

Xavier drove past the front of the house.

“Where are you going to park?” I asked.

“We need to sneak in, right? We can’t just leave our car in plain view.”

I nodded in agreement, and as we went around back, I quickly went over the basics of the plan. After taking it in, Mikah grumbled about Ganfael’s place having a ridiculous number of entrances and exits.

“So how do we know which one is the *real* front door?” Lola asked.

“Figuring it out is half the fun! Think of all the doors we can break down,” Gabriel quipped.

Lola was not impressed.

After Xavier parked, Mikah asked, “Are we going to split up, then?”

“Yes,” I said. “If Ganfael realizes people are trying to break in from both ends of the house, he’ll get frazzled and won’t know which attack to deal with first. You, Lola, and I will take one of the side entrances. Xavier and Gabriel—you take the back. Let’s enter at exactly five minutes past the hour.”

Everybody nodded—even my little brother decided not to be a reactive asshole—and I led the way across the grounds.

“So, how exactly are we going to get this guy to do what we want?” Mikah whispered.

“He’s a coward,” I said frankly. “It should be pretty easy to scare him into calling off his wisps.”

“And if he doesn’t agree at first, then I’ll be happy to smack some sense into him,” Lola said, her voice laced with menace and glee.

“But what about after we leave?” Mikah asked. “How do we know he won’t immediately send out a bunch of wisps after Cali?”

I frowned. Mikah had a good point. What was to stop the guy from just dispatching his wisps again later?

The thought made my simmering anger turn into fury.

“Okay, listen,” Lola said when I didn’t respond to Mikah. “We can’t figure out what’s going on without confronting the guy, right? So as a first step, let’s just find out what he’s doing and why. And if it turns out he *did* use my face to hurt my best friend, then I’ll kill him and eat his heart.”

Mikah blinked at Lola. Then at me. “Is she joking?”

I eyed Lola. She rolled her eyes, as if the answer to that question was obvious. Flipping her hair over her shoulder, she made her way to the side door. Mikah and I shared a look before shrugging and joining her.

At exactly five minutes past the hour, Mikah and I broke down the side door. The crash was pretty loud, but there was no reaction from anywhere in the house. No alarm—magical or otherwise—went off, either.

Definitely not what I was expecting.

“Do we go in?” Mikah asked.

The lack of an alarm seemed suspicious, but it wasn’t enough to deter me.

I nodded at Mikah, and we made our way into the house. There was still no sign of any occupants—until I heard someone grunt behind me.

I turned to see Lola tripping after us, and I shushed her. She glared at me, holding up what looked like a crushed delivery package.

“This stupid thing got in my way,” she whisper-hissed.

“Just throw it somewhere and come on,” I snapped back.

Lola nodded seriously and threw the package back out the door before following me down the hall. Mikah was in the lead, approaching the big room where we’d seen Ganfael last time. And then, I started hearing shouts and growls.

That meant one thing: Xavier had attacked early, without us.

*God dammit.*

I ran past Mikah and rushed into the main room, already half-shifted. I found Ganfael pinned underneath Xavier, who was holding a claw to the warlock’s eye.

“Are you sending those wisps?” he snarled. “Answer me!”

“You have to tell the truth, Ganfael,” Gabriel said with a sigh. “If you don’t, I won’t be able to stop him from gouging out your eyes—no matter how much the sight would pain me.”

So they were pulling a good cop, bad cop routine? The only problem with that strategy was that *both* of those wolves were bad cops. I’d have laughed if the circumstances had been different. I’d have laughed at the goddamn warlock as well, who seemed pants-wetting terrified of Xavier.

“I don’t know what he’s talking about!” Ganfael choked out. “I can’t control wisps!”

Xavier growled. The warlock somehow managed to shrink back even further.

“I wouldn’t lie right now if I were you, my friend,” Gabriel said coolly. “You don’t want to find out how truly nasty we can be.”

“We also eat hearts,” Lola declared.

Mikah shot Lola a funny look, and Ganfael gasped in fear. I rolled my eyes. This wasn’t going to work.

“Xavier, take a step back,” I ordered. “Let’s try to have a conversation before we resort to maiming.”

Ganfael squeaked in fear. If he was acting scared, he was doing a damn good job of it. With a final snarl, my brother let go of the warlock, and Mikah and Gabriel pulled him up to sit on a chair. They both stood sentry on either side of him as Lola tied his hands to the armrests.

“This is so you can’t do any magic,” she informed him. “Also, to make it easier for me to murder you and use your skull as an ashtray, if push comes to shove.”

Gabriel, of course, was loving her threats. “Lola, do you smoke?”

Lola frowned. “Obviously not. It’s horrible for your skin! The ashtray would be part of the pack house décor. Maybe something to put our keys in.”

Ganfael looked both terrified and lost as his gaze whipped from Lola to me. “Is she serious?”

I didn’t answer. I just took a slow step forward, my gaze fixed on him.

“We won’t leave until you tell the truth, Ganfael,” I said. “Be honest. You wanted to get the Shard back, so you lashed out against us.”

Ganfael was panting, his eyes wide with fear as he stared at us. But then, in the blink of an eye, his expression changed. Darkened.

“Fine!” he hissed. “You’re right! I *do* want the Shard back, and I have the perfect plan to get it!”

# Episode 3725

**Xavier**

I stared at the warlock, trying to process the situation. Ganfael had just basically confessed that he’d had an evil plan. I hadn’t expected his admission of guilt to come so easily. I’d basically tackled him and threatened to gouge his eyes out, though, so perhaps that had nudged him in the right direction.

Deep down, I felt relieved. If Ganfael really *had* sent out those wisps, then I had no reason to get all paranoid about Adéluce. That would be a win.

“What did you just say?” Greyson demanded, glaring at the warlock.

“You heard me!” Ganfael spat. “I’ve had a genius plan to get the Shard back all along!” He frowned. “But I haven’t actually enacted the plan yet. You got here too early. How did you even *know* about it?”

I was both pissed off and confused. “What the fuck are you talking about? You sent those evil wisps to take the shard! Didn’t you just admit that?”

Ganfael huffed. “No! What the hell?”

Gabe stepped forward, uncharacteristically serious. “Ganfael, you have one chance to tell us the truth and get rid of the spell you cast on those wisps. If you refuse, I doubt I’ll be able to hold back Cali’s mates.”

Ganfael’s eyes widened. He looked back and forth between Greyson and me. To my brother’s credit, he looked as murderous as I felt.

“Guys, no!” Ganfael shouted. “I swear—I haven’t done anything yet! Definitely nothing to do with wisps!”

Greyson glared at him. “What *was* your plan, then?”

Ganfael’s expression turned suddenly gleeful. “Oh, it was *so* good. It was a heist, like in my favorite movie—*Ocean’s Thirteen*.”

Lola raised her eyebrows. “You mean *Ocean’s Eleven*?”

Ganfael looked offended. “No! Thirteen! Much better number and movie.”

Lola rolled her eyes.

“Anyway,” the warlock went on, “it was going to be the heist to end all heists! You’d never even have realized the Shard was gone until it was locked away in the super-secret vault I’ve had installed to deter thieves like you!”

Lola scoffed. “Hypocritical much? Didn’t you steal the Shard from the Fae in the first place? Aren’t YOU the original thief?”

Ganfael huffed. “Semantics! Anyway, I would’ve pulled off the plan earlier, but I’m still waiting on my grappling hook. It was supposed to be delivered last night, but it didn’t arrive.”

As I listened to this horseshit conversation, a sense of *wrongness* began to fester in my gut. Because if Ganfael was telling the truth, then what the fuck did that mean for the wisps?

For Adéluce? Shit.

I wanted to wrap my hands around Ganfael’s throat and squeeze until he admitted that this whole heist story was a big fat ridiculous lie. I didn’t get the chance, though, because Lola spoke up.

“Um, would the grappling hook box be around this big?” She held her hands apart.

“Yes!” Ganfael exclaimed. “Is it here? Did it arrive?”

Lola shrugged. “I think I kicked it on my way in. Sorry not sorry.”

Ganfael gasped. “*Kicked it?* Is it ruined now?”

Mikah rolled his eyes. “Your plan was ruined the moment you told us about it. You don’t need the box anymore, anyway.”

Ganfael paused, pondering Mikah’s words for a moment. “Oh, yes,” he said. “You’re right. That’s unfortunate.”

Meanwhile, I was still goddamn pissed off. Because this warlock was either the best actor ever, or he was telling the truth.

Greyson stepped forward, lowering himself to stare into Ganfael’s eyes. “We’ll return the Shard—you have my word as an Alpha. But not before we’ve finished using it.”

Ganfael huffed. “Fine.” He turned to Gabe, his expression shifting entirely, a wheedling smile spreading across his lips. “Gabriel! Since you’re here, do you want to maybe hang out? Like old times?”

Mikah scowled, loudly clearing his throat.

Gabe smirked at Mikah, then refocused on Ganfael. “Sorry, I’ve got plans.”

We all turned to leave.

“Wait! Aren’t you going to untie me?” he shouted.

We all ignored him as we left, making our way back to the car.

“That guy is just the world’s biggest idiot,” Greyson said. “There’s no way he is the one causing the wisps to hurt Cali.”

I ignored the way his words made my stomach drop.

*I think he’s right*.

I wished so badly that Ganfael had been our guy, but I wasn’t shocked that he wasn’t. It would’ve been a hell of a lot easier if he had been, though. Now I was stuck with my only true theory: Adéluce. But if she were alive—if she were the one doing this to Cali—then that meant a whole lot of shit I didn’t want to acknowledge.

What the hell were we going to tell Cali?

She’d be so upset. I knew she’d been hoping like me it was Ganfael, then this whole thing could’ve been resolved. Guess not.

At that moment, Greyson’s phone vibrated.

“It’s Cali,” he said.

I frowned. Why was she calling my brother instead of me? I didn’t have the time to get jealous or mad enough about that, though, because Greyson put her on speaker, and I heard the way her voice was shaking.

“Malakai—he called the pack house and threatened the pack,” she said.

I stiffened. *Fuck*. “Would he really attack so soon?”

“Yeah,” Gabe said. “I heard Greyson killed Lance like it was nothing. I doubt someone like Malakai will let that stand.”

Gabe’s words had a hint of admiration to them, and the urge to glare at him was strong. What the hell? Gabe was *my* friend. He was meant to be proud of *my* kills, not my brother’s. End of fucking story.

“He didn’t say anything about attacking immediately,” Cali rushed to explain. “He just said that we should be worried about the pack summit.”

*We* should be worried? Ha.

Nobody spoke for a moment. I glanced at Greyson. His expression was unreadable, but I could sense how pissed he was.

“Thanks for calling, love,” he told Cali. “We’ll be home soon.”

Before he could hang up, Cali asked the dreaded question. “What happened with Ganfael?”

Greyson glanced at me before he sighed. “It wasn’t him.”

Cali didn’t speak for a moment. I felt like shit.

Finally, she said, “Oh, okay. Well. Thank you for trying. I’ll see you when you get home.”

Cali hung up, and my heart started pounding like I’d just run a marathon. I recognized the feeling that had dug its claws into my chest—it was guilt mixed with fury, and the cocktail was a strong one.

The group was quiet for the whole car ride home. Not even Gabe or Lola made any smartass comments, and somehow, that made everything worse. Failure hung heavy on our shoulders, but I was certain that no one else felt as bad as I did.

*Adéluce*, a small voice in the back of my mind told me. *It has to be Adéluce.*

*No*. I wasn’t going to go there. Not until I had to.

I drove faster than the speed limit, but nobody protested, and we were back home in record time. Cali ran for the door when we walked inside.

“I’m glad you’re all safe,” she said. She patted Gabe’s and Mikah’s shoulders, went in for a hug with Lola, and then hugged Greyson. She lingered there, letting him hold her tight. I tortured myself by noticing that. Fuck, there were just too many things happening inside me right now, and I liked none of them.

“We’ll figure out who’s doing this, baby,” I told Cali, taking her hand after she finally let go of Greyson. “I promise.”

She nodded, pressing her lips together. “I know. That’s not important right now, though—I think we need to be worrying about Malakai’s threat.”

“We’ll handle that as a pack,” Greyson said firmly.

“We should talk about this with the other packs in the area, I think,” she said. “See if they got a call from Malakai, too.”

Greyson smiled a little. “That’s a great idea, love. Come on, let’s call them now.”

Cali looked pleased, and she followed Greyson down the hallway. I knew I should’ve followed—I hated it when they were alone—but I was also too fucking overwhelmed with ideas about who could be sending the wisps. Even though he’d sent Rishika and Jay to search the lake, Greyson didn’t really think Adéluce was doing this—nobody did but me.

They all had humored me before, but I didn’t know if they would again.

I hated this feeling of apprehension.

I put my hand in my pocket, where the medal still sat. For some reason, the idea of examining it out in the open made me feel weirdly self-conscious, so I went upstairs to my room. I closed the door and pulled out the other Adéluce medals from my dresser—the two that were fused together, and the one with the arrow design. Then I pulled out the new silver dollar lookalike and set them all on my desk.

The silver dollar still looked like a normal coin. It was smaller than the others, too. Just a simple dollar. Was I going nuts? Why had I become so fixated on a simple coin? Could it actually be a sign that Adéluce was behind the wisps?

I needed to stop obsessing over the idea that she could be back.

I also needed to check in and see if Jay and Rishika had made it back from the lake yet.

“It’s going to be fine, Xavier. Just chill,” I grumbled to myself.

I was about to throw all the medals back in a drawer, but then, right in front of my eyes, the silver dollar shifted into an exact replica of the other medals.

# Episode 3726

While Greyson tried to get Armin to get Lucian on the phone—apparently, Lucian was in the sauna—I decided to call Mace.

“I haven’t heard from Malakai,” he said, a minute later. I’d just told him that the Bitterfang Alpha had called to threaten us, and that we were checking in with our allies to see if he was targeting them as well.

“Okay,” I said. “That’s a relief.”

“Don’t worry,” Mace said. “No matter what happens, we’ll always have the Redwood pack’s back.”

Now *that* was an even bigger relief.

“Thank you, Mace,” I said. “You’re a good friend.”

“When Silas terrorized the territory and I was certain we’d all get slaughtered, the Redwood pack stepped up,” Mace said. “The Blue Bloods don’t forget that kind of bravery. We’re loyal to those who deserve it. And you, Cali—you will be a good Luna one day.”

Mace was gruff and usually quietly annoyed at everything, so the fact that he’d said something like that so freely made me want to do cartwheels.

“I really appreciate you saying that, Mace,” I said, grinning from ear to ear.

This was the best kind of compliment I could’ve been given right now. It helped me push down all the worry that had been nagging at me as I had waited for my mates to come home.

Saying goodbye, I ended the phone call with Mace and turned to look at Greyson.

He was rolling his eyes. “Yes, Lucian. No, I don’t want to try out your sauna. No, I don’t want to try *any* of your saunas. No, I don’t care that you have ten of them on the estate—I’m not interested. Okay, goodbye.” He hung up as well, then turned to me. “There was no threatening call to the Vanguards.”

“Not to the Blue Bloods, either,” I said. “Are you going to try calling Ava again?”

He’d tried to call her first, but she hadn’t picked up.

Greyson shook his head. “She’ll see the notification and get back to me. But I’m sure we’d already have been informed if her pack had been threatened.”

*Right*, I thought, internally scoffing. *Because she would’ve called Xavier the minute it happened.*

Refusing to go down that road, I refocused.

“What are we going to do about the Bitterfangs?” I asked. “After Lance…”

I trailed off awkwardly, but then Greyson winced, and I rushed to keep talking.

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I know why you did what you did. Even if I was upset, I do understand it at the end of the day, and I…” I paused, trying to speak from the heart. “I trust you, Greyson, no matter what. Always.”

He stood from his desk and walked over to me. The way he moved, the way he looked at me… It exuded so much power that I felt enraptured for a moment. Breathless.

He sat down next to me, his gaze locked with mine. “Please take care of yourself, love. Try not to lose any sleep over the Bitterfang threat. We’ll figure it out. Our pack is strong.”

His confidence, the way he looked so calm, made something ease inside me. I took his hands and looked at our intertwined fingers.

“You always make me feel better,” I said.

He grinned, and I did the same. His gaze flickered to my mouth. “Hey,” he said, looking like he’d just remembered something. “What did Mace say at the end of the phone call?”

“What?”

“I saw you smile really big before you ended the call.” Greyson raised an eyebrow, his tone wry. “He’d better not have been coming on to my mate.”

I snorted, shoving him playfully. “Stop teasing—it wasn’t anything big. He just said that I was going to be a good Luna one day.”

Greyson’s smile was soft, his gaze tender. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me forward until I was straddling his lap.

“Mace is wrong,” he murmured, kissing my cheek. “You won’t be *good*.”

I frowned. “No?”

“You’ll be amazing,” Greyson said with a smirk.

My cheeks flushed. I was sure I was practically glowing at his praise. When he leaned in for a kiss, I locked my arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

This was a lovely moment—here in Greyson’s office, just the two of us. With him, I was safe. Even if an evil wisp decided to drop by, I’d just tell Greyson, and he’d protect me. Simple as that.

And even if I wasn’t actually able to say anything, trapped under the mind control, I was certain that Greyson would sense that something was off and help me fend off the wisp’s compulsion. He was attuned to my every feeling, my every reaction. He would fight anyone and anything for me.

It was that certainty that made it easy for me to let go right now, to kiss him back with everything I had, and allow myself to feel joy. When I kissed him, it felt like everything was going to be okay, like no battle was too scary to face as long as we were together. I was so grateful for him that all I wanted was to make him feel as wanted and loved as I felt when I was with him.

“You’re incredible, you know that?” I murmured against his mouth, sliding forward on his lap.

His breath caught.

“You’re so brave, so strong,” I whispered, trailing my lips down his jaw, his neck, my hands moving up and down his chest. I felt his muscles heaving under my touch as he gripped my hips tighter, squeezing as I inched closer. The heat of him underneath me made me shiver.

“Go on,” he said, nuzzling my neck. “I like where this is going.”

I smiled. “You’re so sweet and caring. And honestly…” I slid my hands under his shirt. His skin was taut, trembling. My voice cracked when I said, “You’re just beautiful. Inside and out.”

When I looked at him again, his lips were parted, his eyes dark and heavy-lidded.

“I love you more than anything, Cali,” he breathed. “Kiss me.”

I did. I glued myself to him, chest to chest and mouth to mouth, rubbing up against him. Our lower bodies were locked, his hard and hot, and the pressure between my thighs felt amazing enough to make me squirm. He kissed up my neck, biting just a little, guiding my hips to grind against him. I choked and broke the kiss, breathing wildly.

I wanted him so badly, I *ached*.

“Are you having a nice time?” he whispered in my ear.

*Nice* was such a huge understatement, I almost started laughing.

I dug my nails into the back of his neck, gasping as I nodded. “I think we should—we—” I was sputtering, fighting to catch my breath till I finally managed, “Why don’t we move this to a bed?”

He gave me a sly smile that sent my heart into a frenzy. “There’s a couch right here.” He patted the leather cushions. “We’re no strangers to that, hmm?”

I let out a ridiculous breathy laugh and went straight for his jeans. There was a time I don’t think I’d ever have been like this, ever been so bold, but it was just how he made me feel.

Against the shell of my ear, he said, “I want you on top. I want to watch, see how gorgeous you are when you come, love.”

I whimpered, my hands moving frantically to unbuckle that damn belt—

The door burst open.

*HOLY FUCKING SHIT!*

I might’ve said that out loud—I had no idea. I basically jumped off Greyson, still panting and turned on beyond all reason, my stomach dropping.

*Xavier! This can’t be—*

It wasn’t Xavier.

*Thank. GOD.*

It was Artemis. She just stood there, seemingly unconcerned that she’d just caught us in a compromising position. She actually seemed dazed, more than anything else.

“Artemis?” I asked, smoothing my hair back. “Everything okay?”

Greyson dropped the hem of his sweater over the front of his crotch—my cheeks flared up—and cleared his throat.

“We’ll pick this up later?” he said, standing up.

“Thanks! That would be fantastic!” I blurted out. Then I cringed so hard I wanted to die.

*Did I seriously just THANK HIM?*

At least Greyson seemed happy—at least until he glanced at Artemis, who was still standing there, saying and doing nothing. He raised an eyebrow, looking her up and down.

“I just realized, I actually have things to do,” he said. “I should call Jay and Rishika, check in on the situation at Crater Lake. See if they’ve found anything.”

He nodded to himself, then took a couple of steps toward the door.

“Wait, no!” Artemis finally seemed to shake herself out of her daze. Was she okay? Usually by now she would’ve had some snarky remark. “You should stay, Greyson.”

My sister’s expression was serious, and I suddenly felt worried. There was always so much going on around the pack house—was Artemis in trouble now, too? Maybe Rishika?

I walked over to my sister, concern overshadowing every other emotion inside me. “Artemis? What’s going on?”

My sister looked between Greyson and me, then took a deep breath. “I’m glad I found you both. We need to talk. I think this is my fault.”

# Episode 3727

**Xavier**

I froze, watching the medal shift and change.

It was now the same size and weight as the other medals.

It had that same circle-arrow design as the latest medal.

And then there was a message, flashing across it.

*Phantom Ship Overlook, alone.*

“I knew it,” I said under my breath. “I fucking *knew it.*”

Adéluce was the one who had been sending those damn wisps after all—and now she was making the medal give me messages.

That meant I wasn’t paranoid or losing my mind, which was good.

What was really fucking *bad* was that I felt rage build up inside me at the speed of light. The vampire-witch just wouldn’t quit. She was the bane of my existence, and she was targeting Cali—*again*. I didn’t think I’d hated anyone so deeply since Silas.

I needed to prove to the others that Adéluce was alive, and sending the wisps. I needed to prove it to Greyson, especially, who’d refused to let me make sure she’d died the day of our fight. I knew he’d only sent Jay and Rishika to the lake to search to shut me up. He was skeptical, and I didn’t blame him. But there was no time for a debate—I had to get the others to rally together so we could go after Adéluce, once and for all.

Determined, I grabbed the newest medal, ready to dart downstairs.

But to my amazement, the second it touched my palm, it shifted back into a silver dollar.

“What?” I almost shouted, bringing it closer to inspect it. “Are you fucking *kidding* me?”

I wasn’t sure if I was asking the medal, myself, or the entire goddamn universe. This couldn’t be happening to me. Without the markings and the message, the others would just think I was being paranoid. That I was hallucinating due to stress, or whatever the fuck.

They didn’t believe that Adéluce could still be around, because *Greyson* didn’t believe it—and that made me furious. I had to prove to everyone that this coin wasn’t normal, and I was going to get that proof right fucking *now*.

I gripped the coin-slash-medal, running out of the room and down the stairs. When I walked into the hallway, the door to Greyson’s study was wide open. I spotted Cali, Artemis, and Greyson. I wanted to go to them—to Cali. I wanted to pull her aside, confide in her, have her hug me and say that no matter what, she trusted me to fix this. But I couldn’t do that right now—not with the medal still looking like a damn silver dollar.

And especially not with the way Greyson had been discounting everything I said and being the absolute worst to me, lately. He thought he was so smart, but I knew he was full of shit. Anger flaring, I huffed and made a move to stomp away, but then Cali looked up.

“Wait, sorry, Artemis—*Xavier!*” she said before I could make my escape. “Are you okay?” She frowned. “You look… What’s wrong?”

I realized that I was probably scowling in anger and frustration. That was bad, because I didn’t want to worry Cali before I had more information.

Forcing a neutral expression, I said, “It’s nothing. I just need to find Big Mac.”

Big Mac would tell me if I was going crazy—no further comment, the end.

“What do you want her for?” Greyson asked. He squinted at me suspiciously. He needed to fuck right off.

“Just something,” I said. I might’ve glared at him.

Unfortunately, Cali caught on, and she walked over to me. Reaching up, she ran a gentle hand over my furrowed brow. For a second, I wanted to lean into it, into her, wanted to kiss and hold her. Just to feel that she was okay, and with me. That everything would be fine.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked. “If you need to talk about something—”

“Then I’ll come to you, I promise,” I said. I took her hand, kissed her palm. The way she looked at me made something in me seize.

She loved me.

And I loved her so damn much.

And Adéluce was after her, *again*, because of me. I wanted to tear the world apart.

“Just…” I shook my head. “Where’s Big Mac?”

“She’s in her room, I think,” Artemis said.

“Great,” I said. I leaned down and gave Cali a quick peck, missing her lips and kissing her cupid’s bow instead, and then I raced away. I missed her mouth immediately, but I needed to focus.

When I got to Big Mac’s room, there was no sound coming from inside.

I knocked on the door.

Big Mac opened it a moment later, glowering at me. “*What?*”

She had bags under her eyes, like she was still worn out from the barrier spell. She definitely looked better than she had yesterday—but still not very friendly. Hell would probably freeze over before Big Mac got friendly.

“Oh,” I said. “How are you doing?

“I’m fine,” she said testily. “What do you want? Because I know you’re not here just to inquire about my health.”

“Uh, do you need anything?” I asked awkwardly. “Like water, or…”

Big Mac sighed deeply. “Xavier. You obviously need something, so stop wasting my time and spit it out.”

I sighed, still feeling guilty. But I had to ask.

“It’s this,” I said, holding up the coin-slash-medal to show her. “It changed while I was watching, then changed back.” I shoved it into Big Mac’s hand. “Can you test it for dark magic?”

Big Mac glared at me, then at the coin. She opened the door wide and let me into her bedroom, immediately turning her back on me. I closed the door behind me—I didn’t want any witnesses to this—and watched as Big Mac pulled a small brass bowl from her chest of drawers.

I realized, belatedly, that Big Mac really had to be off her game—she wasn’t arguing with me or being sarcastic, which was basically unprecedented. But I’d take it. I needed to know what was going on with the coin.

Big Mac sprinkled herbs and some kind of oil into the bowl, and then she lit it on fire. Then she chanted something, closing her eyes. That went on for a minute. Or an hour. It felt like an hour to me, but I didn’t dare tell her to rush. She wasn’t feeling well, sure, but I was pretty sure that if I pushed too far, she’d use the last of her strength to turn me into a cucumber or something.

Finally, she opened her eyes and frowned at me. At this point, I was about ready to bounce off the fucking walls.

“So?” I asked impatiently. “What kind of magic was used on it?”

“Xavier,” Big Mac said slowly. “It’s just a normal silver dollar. I don’t sense any magic coming from it.”

“Wait…” I paused. “*What?*”

“There’s no magic,” she declared. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to find my fiancée, who I think is going to tell me she wants to do something for Valentine’s Day. And then I will have to remind myself to celebrate a silly human consumerist holiday because it makes her happy.” She paused, then added quietly: “At least there will be chocolate.”

Big Mac pushed me unceremoniously out of the room, closed the door behind her, and then went off to find Mrs. Smith. She muttered about beautiful werewolf women trapping her with love and amazing sex the whole time.

In the meantime, I’d basically made up my mind that I was going nuts.

I’d *seen* that fucking coin change. Hadn’t I?

I stared at the coin in my hand, concentrating, willing it to change. And then I realized how silly that was.

Why would I *want* it to change? Wouldn’t it be a good thing if this was all in my imagination? It wouldn’t be *entirely* out of the realm of possibility. I was an Alpha, yes, but we still had our breaking points, just like any other person. I’d never admit that out loud, of course, but all the exhaustion and emotional madness of the past few days (*months*) had possibly just reached their peak.

It was possible that I was so goddamn anxious about Adéluce that my brain had conjured up clues that she was back. That had to be it, because Big Mac wouldn’t have lied to me. She always told the truth, and she was the most powerful witch I knew. Wouldn’t she have found the magic on the dollar, if there was any to find?

I probably just needed a nap or something. And a snack. And Cali in my bed, naked. That would definitely do the trick.

I hoped.

Still feeling a little uneasy, I climbed down the stairs—just as I heard a commotion at the bottom. I spotted Jay and Rishika, and I was immediately on edge.

“What happened at the lake?” Greyson was asking Jay.

I held my breath.

And then Jay spoke. “We found remains.”

# Episode 3728

**Xavier**

Jay dropped a handful of trinkets on the table, and I leaned forward to examine them.

“What am I looking at?” I asked.

“We found this stuff with the remains,” he said. “The charm helped us find these.”

Cali leaned forward too, examining the little pile of jewelry. “I think I recognize some of it,” she said slowly. “I think Adéluce was wearing it during that last fight.”

“Well, unless another powerful witch died in that lake recently, I think we’ve found Adéluce,” Jay said firmly. “I’m guessing there’s anything left at all because she was also a witch, not just a vampire.”

I looked down at the tangled pile of silver and gold and wondered why the hell I didn’t feel relieved. This was the proof I’d been wanting. The jewelry, the body— Adéluce *had* to be dead. So I should’ve been feeling relieved. And yet…

If she was dead, then how could I explain the medals? And the strange things that had been happening to Cali? I was just so certain that it all had something to do with the vampire-witch.

I thought hard, clutching the medal. Was it possible that Adéluce *was* dead, but that her magic was reaching out from beyond the grave? I mean, the idea wasn’t completely crazy. Seluna’s magic had lingered after Cali had done her in, after all. But Seluna had been a demon, not a witch—or even a vampire-witch.

“Big Mac?” I said, stepping toward her and tipping my head, gesturing for her to follow me.

She did, and we stepped a little away from the rest of the group.

“What?” she asked grumpily.

“Can a witch’s magic still work after she dies?”

Big Mac scowled. “Magic doesn’t just vanish, Xavier. It’s like matter—it can’t be created or destroyed. Once it’s out there, it’s just out there.”

I nodded. I wasn’t surprised by this information, but it still made me uneasy. I slipped the medal into my pocket. Was I really just being paranoid?

“Xavier?” Cali walked over to me, looking anxious. “How are you doing?”

“What? I’m fine.”

She didn’t look convinced. “I know you were worried about Adéluce.” She took my hand. Her hand was warm, and it felt good.

I closed my eyes for a moment, just savoring how her skin felt, pressed against mine.

“Xavier? *Are* you okay?” she asked again. “Did you sleep last night? You look exhausted.”

I opened my eyes. “I’m okay,” I said hastily. The last thing I wanted was for Cali to worry about me. The things that were happening at the moment were affecting her way more than me. But the concern on her face made me wonder what she was seeing in me—and if she was right. The reality was, I *hadn’t* slept. I *was* exhausted. I’d been up, taking shifts guarding Cali. Then I’d been out early this morning to confront Ganfael. Which had seemed like a waste of time, but maybe we’d made a mistake. Maybe the warlock had been lying, and he *had* been sending the wisps to torment Cali.

I ran a hand through my hair with a sigh. “I probably just need a cup of strong coffee,” I told Cali. “Then I’ll feel like myself again. And if that doesn’t work, a run will do the trick.”

She still looked worried.

“Xavier, listen, I don’t know what’s happening here, but I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you’ve done. I know how much you’ve taken on,” she said. Her eyes were wide as she stared at me, and they looked so dark and deep that I wanted to disappear into them. “But you don’t have to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders,” she went on. “You don’t have to shoulder such a huge burden all the time. It’s okay to admit that you’re tired.”

I smiled down at her and leaned in, pressing a kiss to her lips. “I’m fine,” I said, speaking against her mouth. “I promise you. I just need some caffeine.”

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Okay,” she said, though I could hear the skepticism in her voice.

For the moment, though, I was grateful for the reprieve. I stepped away from her, toward the kitchen. I slipped my hands into my pockets, and the moment I touched the medal, it emitted a flare of heat.

I pulled it out and looked down at it, just as it began to change. Words formed on the metal surface as I watched.

*Phantom Ship Overlook, alone*

I knew that spot. It was over by Crater Lake. I glanced furtively around, wondering if I should show someone what was happening. There was a big part of me that wanted to just figure this out by myself, but I hesitated. What if this wasn’t really happening? What if this whole medal message thing was in my head?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jay. *Yes! Jay! My friend, Jay!* I was just about to go and show him the medal when the message changed.

*Or she dies.*

My stomach dropped as I stared down at the medal. I didn’t have to guess which ‘she’ the message was referring to.

I couldn’t look at those ominous words anymore, so I slipped it back into my pocket. Adéluce might have been dead, but she was still behind this, somehow. I just knew it, deep down in my bones. I didn’t know what the hell was going on—whether it was the witch’s lingering magic at work, or her back from the dead—but I did know that I had to put an end to it. *Now*.

Greyson wasn’t going to like my having to leave to Crater Lake like this—I knew *that*, too—but screw that. What the hell choice did I have? I had to do what the message said. Even if the whole thing was some kind of sick joke, there was no way I was going to take any chances. Not when Cali was being threatened.

*Or she dies.*

The thought of the message made my blood run cold, and I hurried upstairs and into my room. I yanked open the top drawer of my dresser and threw the medal inside. I didn’t even want to see it anymore. Then I stripped off my clothes in preparation to shift and headed back downstairs. I’d almost reached the front door when I heard someone call my name.

“Xavier!”

I turned to see Cali hurrying toward me. Her cheeks were flushed, and as she approached, I could see that her gaze kept wandering downward, despite her valiant effort to keep looking at my face.

She cleared her throat, apparently trying to pull herself together. “I thought you were going to get some coffee,” she managed to say.

I shrugged. “I changed my mind. I’m going running instead.”

I didn’t give her a chance to ask any more questions. I was too edgy and wound up, and I didn’t want to have to lie to her about where I was going, so I turned on my heel, yanked open the front door, and leapt off the porch. Shifting in mid-air, I hit the ground running and headed straight for the forest.

I could feel her watching me as I ran, and a wave of guilt crashed over me. Thoughts of what happened with me and Ava flashed in my mind. *Fuck*. I needed to tell Cali about that, but how? How could I tell her about that? Even if I wanted to think that moment with Ava had been insignificant, I knew it hadn’t been. I hated lying to Cali—even if this was more of an evasion of the truth.

But it wasn’t the only thing I was lying about. I hadn’t told her anything about Adéluce either. But until I knew what this whole thing with the vampire-witch was really about—until I knew whether I was going crazy, or if the strange things I’d been seeing were real—I was going to keep it all to myself.

What was going to wait for me at the overlook? I swallowed down any nerves and ran. No matter what was ahead, I was going to end it.

The air was cool and crisp as I sprinted through the woods, but running in my wolf form wasn’t giving me the thrill I usually felt. I was uneasy as I approached Crater Lake. Was it going to be Adéluce waiting for me?

Would there be anyone there at all? I couldn’t imagine I’d have to worry about tourists—not at this time of year. There was just too much snow, and it was cold as hell. The wind alone would’ve frozen a human’s ass off.

When I reached the lake, I veered off the main path, toward Phantom Ship Overlook. Then I slowed, blinking. I had to make sure I was seeing what I thought I was seeing.

My heart pounded frantically, and it didn’t have anything to do with the run. There was a figure in my path, on the rocky outcropping that looked out over the lake. My stomach dropped—my eyes could see who it was, but my brain simply refusedto believe it. It couldn’t be. There was just no way.

And I managed to deny it—right up until she turned to face me.

“*Adéluce*,” I breathed.

Her very much alive face stretched into a strangely satisfied smile. “Hello, Xavier. It’s good to see you. Did you miss me?”

# Episode 3729

I shivered in the January cold as I stood on the porch, watching Xavier disappear into the trees. I couldn’t put my finger on what it was, exactly, but my gut was telling me that something wasn’t right. Xavier would never admit that he was tired, but I’d been able to see it in his eyes—he was freaking exhausted. So he’d said he was going to get some coffee, only to shift and take off for a run instead?

I shook my head, thinking hard. I knew that he liked to run to blow off steam—he’d always done that, for as long as I’d known him. But was the steam he needed to blow off connected to his worry about me? Or was it about something else?

Xavier had his doubts about Adéluce actually being dead—I knew that. I’d seen it in his eyes when he’d examined the jewelry Jay and Rishika had brought back from the lake. And I knew he was pissed at Greyson for not letting him verify her death himself after I’d fallen into the lake—but what more did he need? We’d all seen the jewelry, and Jay and Rishika had literally found Adéluce’s dead body.

Xavier should’ve been thrilled—the wicked witch was dead.

Wrapping my arms around my torso, I turned and headed back inside. I was on my way to the kitchen for a hot cup of tea when Greyson stepped out of the living room.

“Cali, do you know where Xavier went?” he asked.

He was clearly annoyed.

“He went for a run,” I said.

Greyson looked like he wanted to ask more questions, but before he could, Artemis came back over to us.

“Cali, Greyson. Hey,” she said awkwardly. “Do you think we could continue our conversation?”

I looked over at her, trying to focus. Yes, Artemis. She’d told us that she thought everything was her fault—my heart dropped even remembering it. But then Xavier had come back in and I’d had to step away. I felt bad, I hadn’t wanted to interrupt her.

“What’s going on?” I asked, exchanging a glance with Greyson. “Why do you think something’s your fault?”

She grabbed our arms and started to tow us forward. “Not here. Come with me.”

She pulled us into the small study near the front door, and, after a quick check to make sure no one else was around, shut the door behind us.

Her behavior was strange, and so paranoid it immediately put me on edge. “What’s with all the secrecy, Artemis?”

She turned to look at me. “Look. Everyone’s trying to figure out why all this stuff is happening to you, right?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know if I’d put it like that, but—”

“What if it’s all happening because of me?”

I stared at my sister, confused. “What? That’s what you’re worried about?”

“Yes. What if this is all my fault?” she repeated.

I shook my head. “What are you talking about? You’re not responsible for creating any mind-controlling wisps, are you? You didn’t send me into any demonic dreamscapes, did you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, maybe not directly, but I’ve been thinking that maybe the Dark Fae court could be behind all this.”

“The Dark Fae court?” Greyson asked. “How would they factor into this?”

She nodded. “Remember how they gave me that warning after I killed Lysander? They said they’d come after Adair and me. And then I bit off Ganfael’s finger, which probably didn’t endear me to anyone, and—”

“Okay, fine, but what does any of this have to do with Cali?” Greyson interrupted.

Artemis took a breath. “I think the Dark Fae are going to come after me for being involved in killing someone in the Dark Fae court. And I think they’ll come after any other Fae I care about. That means Adair, our mom, Torin… and Cali.”

The cold from the frosty air outside felt like it had settled in my bones, and I shivered. “Do you really think that’s what’s happening?”

“Think about it,” Artemis said, her eyes intense. “Fae have an affinity for manipulation magic and wisps, right? I’m telling you, it makes sense.”

I swallowed hard. I guess it did make a certain kind of sense.

“I think it’s probably just a matter of time before they come after the rest of us,” Artemis said darkly.

I thought this through. “Listen, Artemis, I get what you’re saying, and why you’re scared about this, but I really don’t think that what’s happening to me is your fault.”

“Cali,” she started, “I knew you were going to say that, but you have to understand—”

I shook my head. “Think about it. I know this has been scary and we’re all looking for answers, but I don’t want you to take the blame for something that would be out of your control if it were happening.”

I couldn’t rule out the fact that Seluna had been trying to help me, but why? For herself? Or because there was something like the Dark Fae court working against me? Still, it didn’t seem likely. Why weren’t they going after anyone else like my mom or Torin?

I gave Artemis a small smile. “I know you want to help—and you *have* helped—but there’s no way I’m going to let you shoulder the blame for the problems I’ve been having.”

Artemis leaned back against the desk, her arms crossed. “I just think it’s something we should consider,” she said, almost sulkily.

“It’s a good thought,” Greyson said. “It’s smart to think outside the box, and to get creative about problem solving when the problem is this weird, but I think Cali’s right. Thank you, Artemis—I promise, we’re going to do all we can to figure this out. And if anything else comes up, let us know. You never know what might be the key to figuring this out.”

Artemis mulled this over, then nodded. “Okay.” She wrapped me in a tight hug. “And if anything else happens to you, don’t hesitate to let me know, either.”

I chuckled as I hugged her back. “I promise.”

Artemis left the study, leaving Greyson and me alone.

He looked over at me with a smile. “She’s a good one, that Artemis. You’re lucky to have such a great sister. She really cares about you.”

“I *am* lucky,” I agreed. “But she’s got me worried.”

Greyson frowned. “You don’t think she might be right about the Dark Fae court, do you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. But just talking about it reminds me that we’re facing more than just the threat from the Bitterfang pack. Greyson, I’d almost forgotten about that stuff with the Dark Fae court. And what if she *is* right, and the Dark Fae *are* coming after us? That means they’ll try to hurt my *mom*, Greyson—”

“Whoa,” Greyson said, stepping toward me. He put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here, love. We don’t need to put your mom under constant watch just yet. I meant what I said to Artemis—I think it’s smart to consider every possibility, but we really have no proof that the Dark Fae have tried to do anything to any of you.”

“Still,” I said. I didn’t take much comfort in Greyson’s words. There was a chance he was right, after all. “I know you’re right, but what does that prove? So we don’t have proof of anything? So what? That doesn’t mean the threats aren’t still out there.”

There was so much happening that I just couldn’t explain—starting with Xavier’s sudden urge to go for a run. Under any other circumstances, I probably wouldn’t have given it a second thought—werewolves loved to run, and Xavier loved to be out in the woods in his wolf form. But these weren’t normal circumstances. We were as far from ‘normal circumstances’ as it was possible to be. Something was bothering Xavier—I could tell—and he was doing everything he could to avoid telling me what it was.

“Cali?” Greyson asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Did Xavier say anything to you this morning, while you were dealing with Ganfael?” I asked, pushing a loose lock of hair behind my ear.

Greyson looked confused. “Like what?”

“Like anything that would suggest he isn’t actually out for a run right now?”

Greyson’s eyes darkened, going from light gray to the color of iron. Shit. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.

“He’d better not have gone off on his own again,” Greyson growled.

“What do you mean?” I asked, my stomach tightening with nerves.

“I *mean* that I’ve already talked to him about pulling that shit. I told him it was dangerous—for him, and for the rest of the pack—and with this threat from Malakai hanging over our heads, it’s not exactly a great time for anyone to go trotting off into the woods on their own.”

My stomach twisted even more, and I looked out the window of the study. It looked out over the land in front of the house—the land I’d just watched Xavier sprint across before disappearing into the trees. I looked at the dark mass of trees beyond our cleared land. Xavier was out in those woods right now. Alone.

I kept my eyes on the window, and when I spoke, I could hear the fear in my voice. “Greyson, be honest: are we going to war with the Bitterfang pack?”

# Episode 3730

**Greyson**

*Are we going to war with the Bitterfang pack?*

I could hear the fear in Cali’s voice when she asked the question, and I didn’t know how to answer. I didn’t want to lie to her, but I didn’t want to scare her even more.

“I’m doing everything I can to prevent a war,” I assured her, settling on an evasive version of the truth. “Trust me, no one here is glamorizing the idea of it, and neither are our allies. No one wins if a pack war breaks out. We’ve all seen the proof of that firsthand.”

That was true, but really, I wasn’t sure if it meant the answer to her question was no. Historically, wars didn’t begin because they were the logical thing to do.

Cali turned and wrapped her arms around me, hugging me tight. “I’m afraid, Greyson.”

“You don’t need to be,” I said softly, caressing her soft hair. “I’m here. I’m going to protect you.”

“I know, but Malakai scares me,” she admitted. She leaned back so she could look up into my eyes. “The guy was ready to kill his own daughter because she disobeyed him. Who *does* that?”

“Yeah, that was pretty disturbing—if it was actually true,” I added.

“What do you mean, *if it was actually true*?” she asked, frowning.

“We only have one side of that story,” I reminded her. “I know you like Russell and Julia and the rest, but it’s possible they left some details out. It’s also possible that Malakai was just making idle threats in an attempt to get Julia to comply.”

She gave me a level stare. “Do you really believe that?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but hesitated. *Did* I believe it? No. I knew my own father would have killed me—and he’d tried. I had no doubt that Malakai would’ve actually tried to kill Julia. But telling Cali that was something I knew she wouldn’t handle well.

“I suppose anything is possible.” She rolled her eyes. “But I’m not going to worry about Russell and Julia right now,” I added. “They’re not my priority. My priority is you, and doing everything I can to keep you safe.”

I pulled her close again and held her for a moment longer. I loved the way her body felt against mine, and I loved wrapping my arms around her, as if they could somehow shield her from whatever was waiting for us outside the safety of this room.

I was trying to stay calm for her sake, but the fact was, I was anxious. But when I looked down at her, I forced myself to smile reassuringly. “We’re going to take things one step at a time, okay?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Truth be told, the one-step-at-a-time thing was more for me. I just had so much to deal with, it felt fucking *impossible* if I thought of it as a whole. So I had to break it down into smaller disasters—the Bitterfang threat against Cali, her troubling issues with wisps and Seluna, my damn brother taking off again, Artemis’s valid concerns about the Dark Fae court and what they could be planning, and—last but not least—the upcoming pack summit.

I rubbed my head as a headache began to pound in my temples. I reminded myself that I’d *chosen* to be Alpha—and that meant that these burdens fell on me, and me alone.

Vaguely, I wondered how Xavier would fare as Alpha if he was faced with so many challenges. If he were in my shoes right now, he’d probably take off for a run—something I’d never have felt right doing. But that was Xavier. He did things his own way, and everyone else could go to hell.

I knew he thought he’d be a better Alpha than me—*everyone* knew he thought that, he talked about it all the time—but I didn’t think so.

I looked down when my phone rang. When I pulled it out of my pocket, I didn’t recognize the number on the screen, and I hesitated, wondering if it could be another threat from Malakai.

Cali must have been thinking the same thing, because I felt her tense in my arms.

I answered the call. “Hello?”

“Greyson!”

Relief flowed through me when I heard Lucian’s voice—followed immediately by irritation.

“I’m glad I caught you, Greyson,” Lucian went on. “I got the message about Malakai. I didn’t get an actual call from him, but I admit—I wish I did.”

“How could you possibly have received a call from him?” I wondered. “You don’t even have a phone.”

For that matter, how was he calling me now? He’d probably ordered Armin to hand over his cell phone, or something.

Lucian made a dismissive noise. “That’s beside the point. The point *is* that if Malakai *had* dared to threaten the Vanguard prince, he’d be bathing in his own blood right now.”

I rolled my eyes. This was typical Lucian—all talk.

“And how is my dear Caliana?” Lucian asked, his voice silky over Cali’s name. “I assume you have her under constant guard. I could send over some of my own pack to help, if you need the assistance—”

“No. Thank you, Lucian,” I said firmly, cutting him off before I was forced to tell him to go fuck himself. “I’m sure we can handle things ourselves.”

I paused for a moment and glanced at Cali, who was listening closely to my half of the conversation. I hated to bring this up in front of her, especially when she was so anxious and I had just tried to reassure her, but it needed to be said.

“Lucian, listen. I need you to tell me if you hear anything from the Bitterfang,” I told him.

Cali looked up at this, the fear clear in her eyes.

“I don’t know when the moment will come,” I continued, “but I want to know that the Vanguard is ready.”

“I assure you, you have the full support of the Vanguard pack, Greyson,” Lucian said solemnly.

“Thanks,” I said gruffly. “Talk to you later.”

“And please, give my love to my forest rose.”

“*Goodbye*, Lucian,” I said with a grimace.

God, his *forest rose?* *Really?*

Cali swallowed hard. “So, you really do think we’re going to have a pack war.”

She wasn’t asking a question. She took a step back from me and leaned against the desk. She looked thin and tired, and I wondered when she’d last had a solid meal.

“I’m just trying to make sure everyone’s prepared for whatever comes next,” I said. “That doesn’t mean anything’s certain. It doesn’t mean there’s actually going to be a war.”

I stepped toward her and gave her another hug. But as I released her and stepped away, she swayed on her feet. She tried to catch herself on the desk, but her hand slipped, and I barely caught her before she fell to the floor.

“Cali?” I said, my heart racing. “What’s wrong?”

She frowned, like she was confused. “I—I just feel a little dizzy.”

I lowered her into a chair. “Can I get you anything?”

“I’m cold,” she said, and her teeth began to chatter. “Could you get me a blanket please?”

I looked around the room. There weren’t any blankets in the study, but I didn’t want to leave her to go find one. I took her hands in mine—they were cold and clammy. I rubbed them, bringing them to my mouth and exhaling warm air.

“Are you seeing a wisp?” I asked hesitantly. “Or is it the handprint? Is that bothering you?”

I wasn’t sure which would be worse—if she was being affected by more dark magic, or if she was actually sick, in the old-fashioned way. I knew she hadn’t been sleeping well, and it was possible that she was worn down enough to have picked up the flu somewhere.

She pushed herself up, trying to sit up straight, but her arms started to shake. It was clear that she was having a hard time.

“Just rest,” I said, putting a hand on her shoulder. I almost hated to say it—I knew Cali was sick and tired of people telling her to rest—but I didn’t know what the hell else I should do. She *did* need to rest. That was clear. She was pale and shivering, and she couldn’t even sit up. I’d seen her grow weak at times, but there was just something about this that felt different.

Maybe it was the conversation we’d just had with Artemis, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was coming soon. Something big. But I just couldn’t see what it was.

That worried me, because if I couldn’t see what it was, then I couldn’t plan for it. I couldn’t prepare for it, and I couldn’t stop it.

I hated that. I hated feeling helpless. I liked to have a plan—I *needed* to have a plan. Something I could plot out and arrange, and then execute to the best of my ability.

But as Cali shivered in my arms, I just felt helpless. What if I couldn’t fix the way these wisps continued to come here? What if I couldn’t stop it?

# Episode 3731

**Xavier**

I steadied myself. The path I was standing on was narrow—barely a path at all—and just below it was a steep drop down to the lake, which was frozen all the way across. Seeing her standing there—alive and in the flesh—I felt strangely vindicated.

Well, vindicated *and* terrified. I felt both, all at once. What it meant was that my gut feeling that she was still alive—despite the evidence—was right, and that I wasn’t going crazy. She was alive! But it also meant that she was *fucking alive*, and that was hella bad.

How the hell had she survived? My mind was spinning with questions that I couldn’t answer, but I had one overriding thought—she was alive, and I did *not* want her to stay that way. I needed to make a move. I needed to finish what I’d apparently only started, but when I growled and shifted my weight in preparation to lunge, Adéluce waved her hand.

It was more of a flick than a wave—almost dismissive—but the gesture sent a powerful blast of magic straight at me. It was strong as a bolt of lightning and it threw me backwards, knocking me to the ground.

“Don’t even think about it,” she said lazily, “or I’ll send you to the bottom of Crater Lake. Do you know how deep that lake is, Xavier? *Fathoms* deep. No one will find your frozen corpse. Now.” Her gaze flicked over me. “Why don’t you shift back so we can talk? That *is* why I summoned you here in the first place.”

I growled. I didn’t appreciate being told what to do—not by anyone, but *especially* not by this murderous witch.

She smiled. “Unless you *would* rather become a werewolf popsicle.”

My hackles went up. I should never have hesitated. I should have lunged at her immediately and ripped out her fucking throat before she even had a chance to use her magic. But it was too late for that now.

Reluctantly, I shifted back to human.

She looked at me, her eyes glinting dangerously. “I suppose it’s a shock to see me.”

I tipped my head. “‘Shock’ might be an overstatement. I’m *annoyed* to see you—fucking irritated as hell, actually. Is that what you meant? But, yeah, I’m also surprised. You should be dead.”

She laughed, the sound like the scrape of a rusty saw. “Wishful thinking, Xavier.”

“We found your remains. And your jewelry,” I told her.

“And yet here I am,” she said, spreading her hands.

“Maybe.”

She raised an eyebrow, a look of irritation flickering across her face. “*Maybe?*”

I shrugged. “Yeah, maybe. Maybe you’re a ghost.”

She shook her head. “I’m not a ghost, I assure you.” Her eyes flashed. “Did you really think that killing a vampire-witch as powerful as me would be so easy? Could you truly be that foolish?”

“Why did you want to see me?” I demanded.

“Whatever is your hurry, Xavier Evers?” she asked. “Aren’t you enjoying our conversation?”

I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t come out here to make small talk. What the fuck do you want?”

She took a deep breath. “Hmm, where should I start? How about your pesky little half-Fae? Why don’t we start with her?”

This time, I *was* kind of shocked.

“Cali? She’s got nothing to do with your vendetta against me,” I said. “She had nothing to do with Henri and René’s deaths. She wasn’t there. I didn’t even know her at that point in my life. You want to blame me, fine—whatever. But leave Cali out of it.”

Adéluce’s face contorted with rage, and when she spoke, her voice was a murderous hiss. “You never need to remind me of the part you played in the murder of my family, Xavier Evers. I can assure you that I will never, *ever* forget it.”

I wanted to point out that I hadn’t known at the time that her family was being targeted, and that I never would have agreed to track them down if I’d known that a child would end up dead because of my actions. But I knew it would be useless to try. I’d already explained all of this to her before, and she hadn’t listened then—why would she listen now?

I ground my teeth in frustration. It shouldn’t have come to this. I never should have let Greyson stop me from making sure she was really dead in the first place. Greyson might’ve been the Alpha when he’d made that call, but I’d known better. I should have followed my instincts, no matter what my brother commanded.

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. I didn’t know what Adéluce wanted Cali for, but if anything happened to my mate because I hadn’t been allowed to verify the vampire-witch’s death, I would *always* place the blame for it squarely at Greyson’s feet.

Adéluce took a breath, and her sudden rage seemed to fall away. She looked at me, her gaze turning thoughtful. “Do you have any idea, Xavier Evers, what it’s like to suffer the way I have suffered? Any idea at all?” She looked around as a cold, cruel wind whipped off the lake and swirled around us. “For years, I’ve been grieving alone, but now…” She looked at me, her dark eyes like burning coals. “Now, it’s time for me to share my suffering. With you.”

“Fine,” I spat. “*Fine*. You want to make me suffer? Do it. Do whatever you want. But what does any of this have to do with Cali?”

Adéluce glared at me. “My *word*, I thought you were smarter than this. Do I *really* have to spell it out for you? The kind of suffering I’m talking about can’t be achieved with whips or thumbscrews—I’m not talking about *physical* pain,” she said, looking disgusted. “It would be too easy to harm you, or to kill you. That would be swift, then over. Where’s the suffering in that? Perhaps your little mate would grieve for you, maybe your brothers would miss you, maybe a few others would notice—but what about *you?* You are the one who truly deserves to suffer. But death would mean being shielded from the pain that I have lived with since you murdered my family. *And that’s not good enough*!” she screamed.

Her voice echoed, bouncing against the trees and the rocks, returning to me again and again.

She stepped toward me. “I want my cake, and to eat it, too.”

I was barely listening. I was watching her carefully. She was too close now, and I didn’t want to miss my chance to rip her head off. I glanced to my right. I could grab her, pin her arms, and try to throw us both over the edge of the rocky outlook. The frozen expanse of Crater Lake was just below us. I knew that hitting it would hurt like hell, but the chances were good that I’d survive the fall. But Adéluce would be stunned, and if I managed to keep hold of her, I’d be able to squeeze the life out of her. And then, when she was out, I’d be able to shift and rip her head off.

Adéluce paused and looked at me, searching my face. She smiled, but her expression was still wrathful, and the effect was terrifying. “You’d be a fool to try it, Xavier Evers.”

“*What?*” I burst out, my head spinning. Could she read minds now too?

She shook her head. “You can’t kill me, Xavier. Not yet.”

I smiled right back at her. “I think *I’ll* make that decision.”

Adéluce’s expression hardened again. “I think you should listen to what I’m telling you, first.”

I groaned. “How much more of this am I going to have to take? I didn’t realize I’d been invited to a fucking TedTalk. Is *this* what you meant by ‘suffering’?”

If I was hoping to antagonize her, I failed. She didn’t react to my taunt. The only change was that her eyes seemed to grow somehow darker. That didn’t seem good.

“I am offering you a choice, Xavier Evers,” she said quietly.

“A choice,” I repeated flatly. “Really.”

“Really. A chance to either kill Caliana, or to save her.”

Hearing her say Cali’s name made something snap inside me. I was going to end this. There was no fucking way she was going to touch a hair on my mate’s head. I would *never* do anything to hurt Cali.

“I am telling you,” I snarled, “leave her out of this. You’ve lost your fucking mind if you think I’d ever do anything to harm Cali, never mind kill her.”

She shook her head, like I was missing the point. “That’s exactly what I’m giving you a chance to prove.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I snapped.

Her tone went hard as the ice on the lake below us. “You have a choice—either you leave her, or I will make sure she dies.”

# Episode 3732

I took a deep breath, then another, and another, trying to calm my racing heart. I was freaking out, but I was trying to chill. I didn’t want to make too much of this—whatever *this* was. I tried to remind myself that all that was happening was that I was feeling dizzy and cold, and that I’d felt far worse than that in the last year.

“Should I get your mom?” Greyson asked. He looked me over, clearly anxious. “Big Mac, maybe? Torin?”

I shook my head as I took another deep breath. The dizziness was starting to dissipate, and the cold that felt like it had wrapped itself around me seemed to be loosening its grip. I could suddenly feel the warmth of the study, and of Greyson’s hand wrapped around mine. My jaw unclenched, and I stopped shivering.

“No, don’t call anyone. I’m feeling better,” I said.

“*Cali*.” He didn’t look like he believed me.

“I really am,” I assured him. “Look,” I said, sitting up in the chair and trying to look like someone who was feeling better.

He still looked worried and unconvinced. “I don’t know. Maybe we should still have someone look you over.”

“Come on, Greyson,” I said. “I feel fine.” It was true. The dizziness that had swept over me was totally gone. Like a wave that had crashed and then receded. To prove it, I got to my feet and lifted one foot off the ground, demonstrating my perfect balance. “See? Amazing, right?”

He shook his head. “Yeah, it’s amazing. But I really think you should sit back down. You should take it easy for a while.”

“I will,” I promised him. “But I’m also not going to let this unstable magic—or whatever the hell is happening to me—control my life. I’ve given up too much time to Seluna and Letifer and all the rest of this nonsense. I’m not going to lose any more. And you shouldn’t let it control *your* life, either. Don’t you have things you need to be doing?”

Greyson blew out a gusty breath. “I want to stay with you, but…”

“But there’s a lot you need to be dealing with right now,” I finished for him.

“I don’t want to just leave you alone,” he said, rubbing a hand across his jaw.

I rolled my eyes. “We have a pack house full of people who can pitch in to keep an eye on me.”

“That’s true. But I still want someone to check you over. Maybe Torin?”

“I’m really not feeling sick anymore,” I told him again. “There’s nothing that needs to be healed with Torin’s magic.”

Greyson stood, looking decided. Then he called out for Torin.

I leaned back in the chair with a sigh. My eyes went to the window again, and to the dark woods beyond the front yard. I thought of Xavier, and wondered when he was going to be back. I knew there was a chance he’d be gone for a long time, but he *had* implied that he was just going for a regular run.

I glanced at the clock over the desk and wondered how much longer I should wait before I let myself get genuinely worried. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking of the Bitterfang wolves, out there plotting who knew what. Xavier was a strong werewolf, but—like Greyson had pointed out—he was out there alone.

For a moment, I thought about going after him, but I knew it would be useless. Even if I possessed the skills to track him—which I absolutely didn’t—I wouldn’t be able to catch up to him.

I shook my head. I was going to have to try not to dwell on it. Xavier always came back. Whatever was bothering him, I knew he’d always come back to me. That was never in question.

“Hey!” I looked up to see Torin in the doorway. “Greyson, you call me?”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, thanks for coming so fast.”

“Of course!”

“Could you make sure that Cali’s okay?” Greyson asked him.

Torin considered this. “Yes? But I’m not a doctor or anything.”

Greyson shook his head. “That’s okay. Please—if you’re not busy right now.”

Torin grinned. “I’m never too busy for my best friend,” he said. “I’ll take the next guard shift.”

Greyson clapped Torin on the back. “Thanks. Appreciate it.” He came and kissed me on top of my head. “Don’t give him a hard time.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ha ha.”

He kissed me quick on the lips. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Then Greyson left, leaving me and Torin. I reached for his hand and squeezed it. “Thanks for being my guard.”

“Oh gods, Cali, of course!” He smiled. “Not that I wouldn’t have volunteered. Actually, I was about to come find you anyway. I need some advice.”

“Advice? On what?” I asked.

He helped me sit up a little straighter and held his hands over me, summoning his magic. I felt a slight tingling sensation, but no other changes. I’d felt fine even before Torin had walked in—the dizziness had long passed. I felt like myself, if a slightly less energetic version.

Satisfied, he stepped away from me and sat on the desk. “Okay, the advice.”

Suddenly, I felt a little trepidation. I really hoped he wasn’t going to ask about my parents’ marriage, though I was pretty sure he’d moved on from his crush on my dad. And there wasn’t much insight I could offer about making heart-shaped pancakes—

Oh god, *Valentine’s Day*. The thought of it was so overwhelming, I almost felt dizzy again. It was so far, yet so close all at once.

“So, Kevin asked me to spend the night,” Torin said.

I exhaled slowly. That wasn’t what I’d been expecting, but it was a giant relief to hear. It was the perfect thing to think about to distract myself from everything else.

“Well, Torin, you’ve come to the right person,” I told him, leaning forward. “Seriously. If you’d brought this problem to Lola, who knows what advice you might have gotten.”

Torin laughed. “I don’t think I need Lola’s kind of advice. Despite what the rest of the pack might think, I *have* been in relationships before.”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” I said, trying to sound like I *wasn’t* surprised by this information.

“But this is the first time I’ve been in one with a human. And we *are* fundamentally different,” he pointed out.

I nodded. “Yeah, I guess I can see that that might be difficult. I mean, I should know. When I first met Xavier, I didn’t know he was a werewolf. I had no idea. If I’d known right from the start, I probably would’ve run for the hills.” I paused, trying to figure out how to ask my next question tactfully. “Are you planning on telling Kevin you’re Fae?”

Torin looked down at his hands. He fidgeted, suddenly looking nervous. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, when he didn’t go on.

“I know I’m not supposed to reveal that I’m Fae—humans aren’t meant to know about us. And I have this worry that if I do tell him, he might not believe me. I mean, that would be reasonable, if you’re just a human without any knowledge of the supernatural world. And then what if he wants some kind of proof, and then I do some magic, and it freaks him out?”

He looked up at me, anguish in his eyes.

I nodded slowly. “Yeah, I can see that it might spook him. And you’re right—not everyone believes in a supernatural world.”

Torin looked down again, his expression sad.

“How do you feel about Kevin?” I asked.

“I really like him,” he admitted. “A lot. And I don’t want to lie to him.”

I thought of my mom, and her advice to keep my Fae identity to myself. She’d said that it really wasn’t a good idea to reveal it to others.

“Not telling Kevin isn’t exactly *lying*,” I pointed out to Torin. “In this case, it’s just keeping both of you safe. Maybe that’s the move, here. And at some point, if your relationship with him keeps growing, there will be a time when you feel comfortable telling him everything.”

Torin took this in. “Yeah,” he said, nodding, “I think that’s a good way to think about it.” He took a deep breath. “I think that’s what I’ll do. I’ll keep it a secret, for now. But I still have to decide how to answer him about staying over at his place.”

“Oh, right. Well, that’s a little easier,” I said. “Do you *want* to stay over at his place?”

He thought for a moment, looking up at the wide beams of the ceiling. “I do… But maybe just not right now.”

“Why not?” I asked curiously.

Torin shrugged. “There’s just a lot happening, isn’t there? I just don’t feel like I can leave while all this stuff is going on with the pack. It would make me feel like I’m abandoning everyone when they might need me. But I do want things to keep going with Kevin.”

“Right.”

“I don’t want him to think that I don’t want to spend the night with him.” He gave me a hopeful look. “So what should I say?”

# Episode 3733

**Xavier**

I snorted—almost a laugh. “You’ve got a great sense of humor,” I growled. “Warped as fuck, but great.”

Adéluce furrowed her brow. “*Humor?*”

“In what world do you think I would ever leave my mate?” I demanded.

She took a step toward me, a cold smile twisting her lips. “In a world in which *I* pull all the strings, Xavier Evers.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I snapped. There was something about the satisfied look on her face that I just didn’t like.

“Either you leave Cali forever, or I will take her from you, and from everyone else who cares for her,” she said, her voice like ice.

“You’ve got this backwards,” I snarled. “The only one who is going to die – again - is *you*. And if you don’t start to be a little more careful with these empty threats of yours, I’m going to make that happen a helluva lot sooner than later.”

She was close enough to me that I could almost see the tiny little pinpoint pupils of her dark eyes. I wanted her to come just a little closer. I knew I had to be careful—she was a vampire-witch, after all, and a powerful one. But there was no amount of magic in the world that could keep her alive once she got close enough for me to rip her head off.

My breath came fast. “Why don’t you just kill me now? Here? While you have the chance?” I asked, taunting her.

Adéluce sneered at me. “Where’s the fun in *that?*” She raised an eyebrow. “But, lest you get too cocky, thinking you can fight your way out of this—”

Quick as lightning, she flicked her hand and shot a surge of magic at me.

I stumbled backwards, trying to avoid the worst of it.

“*Fuck*,” I hissed, as sharp, electric pain coursed through me.

Adéluce stepped toward me and stood over me, her eyes blazing like hellfire. She opened her mouth, and I saw her long, lethal fangs glistening. “You obviously aren’t ready to take me seriously, dear. So I will give you time to think things over. But know this—should you refuse to heed my warning, Xavier Evers, *I* will make the choice for you, and your Caliana will die. You won’t know where, you won’t know how, and you won’t know when. It will simply hang over you like a curse. You will wake up at night, drenched in sweat, worrying, wondering if it’s the night your mate will die.”

She narrowed her eyes as she glared down at me. “And if you have any doubts about whether I can get to her, know this—*I already have*.”

I stared at her, processing everything… I went white hot with anger. Adéluce *was* the source of the mysterious wisps. She *was* the one who’d been tormenting Cali, making her feel weak and helpless.

Anger surged through me, shaking off the pain from her magic. I leapt to my feet and lunged for her, but she moved away at what looked like the speed of light, easily avoiding me.

“You have until midnight tonight. You will meet me here and let me know what you’ve decided.” She spoke easily, as though we were arranging a lunch meeting. “I will say it again—if you don’t accept my generous offer by midnight tonight, your mate *will* die. If you refuse, if you do nothing, if you pretend this conversation never happened, she will waste away while you and all who hold her dear watch it happen, helpless to do anything to relieve her suffering. But if you *do* take my deal, she’ll live. It’s really very simple.”

“You leave Cali the fuck alone,” I snarled. Rage pounded through my blood like poison. I wanted to grab this witch and rip her head off with my bare hands. I would’ve done it, too, but I found I was having trouble moving, like I’d suddenly been encased in cement.

*Shit*. She was using magic on me.

She smiled as she saw the frustrated look on my face.

“One more thing,” she added, holding up a long, thin finger. “I can’t have you running about, telling everyone what’s happened here. I don’t need that kind of trouble.” The easy look on her face disappeared in an instant, replaced with the ice-cold fury I’d seen there before. Moving at her supernatural speed, she was up in my face in a quarter of a second, her freezing hands grabbing my face roughly. “*No one* will know. Cali will never know about any of this.”

I couldn’t move. This was my chance to kill her, and I couldn’t move my arms. I was sick with enraged frustration. I tried to spit in her face, tried to tell her that I would never leave Cali—*not in a million years*—but I couldn’t form the words. I couldn’t move my mouth.

She smiled again. “Now, let’s make sure that sharp tongue of yours doesn’t betray our little understanding. In any capacity.”

Her smile widened until her fangs flashed. For a moment, I wondered if she was going to bite me—drain my blood and leave me for dead. But she didn’t move. Her grip tightened and she began to mumble under her breath.

A second later, my tongue began to burn. Almost instantly, it felt as though it was on fire. The pain was so intense, I couldn’t breathe around it, and the world started to turn black at the edges.

“Until midnight,” was the last thing I heard her say.

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When I opened my eyes, I was looking up at the gray winter sky. I had snow on my face, and I wondered what the hell I was doing there for only a moment before everything came rushing back to me.

I leapt to my feet and looked around, ready to fight Adéluce… But she was gone.

I was alone on the rocky path overlooking the lake, right where she’d left me.

I put a hand to my jaw. It hurt, and my tongue felt like it had been slashed up with a razor blade. I looked out at the frozen lake, trying to piece everything together. Had that really just happened?

Reaching down, I grabbed a handful of snow and shoved it into my mouth, trying to ease the pain in my tongue, but it didn’t help. My whole body ached, and I was exhausted. I didn’t have any idea how the hell I was supposed to get back to the pack house.

Behind me, I heard someone crunching through the snow toward me. I turned and tried to shift—but I didn’t have the strength. And if I didn’t have the strength to shift, I didn’t have the strength to fight whoever was coming at me, so I headed for a huge pine to my right. I needed to hide.

But I tripped over a root and fell, smashing my chin on a rock.

“*Fuck*,” I breathed. I put my hand to my chin, and when I pulled it away, my fingers were covered with blood. It was all over the ground, too. That wasn’t good.

The steps were getting closer, and I turned to see someone emerging from the trees. I squinted—my vision was blurry, and I couldn’t see who it was. Was it Adéluce, back to finish me off?

The figure came closer. “Are you all right?”

Finally, I could see that the figure was a park ranger—a woman. She looked nervous as she glanced around, then knelt beside me.

“Where are your clothes?” she asked. “You’re going to freeze to death.” Without waiting for a response from me, she shrugged off her uniform coat and draped it around my shoulders. “Are you here by yourself?” she asked, looking around again.

I needed to tell her to get out of here—Adéluce could be back to attack at any moment—but I couldn’t get any words out. My mouth wasn’t cooperating.

She frowned. “Did you hurt your head?”

I was getting frustrated. I tried to tell her that I’d been cursed and that she needed to get out of this place—to run while she could. But despite my best efforts and the fact that I did actually make some sounds, what I was saying clearly wasn’t what she was hearing. It was clear this woman thought I was suffering from mental illness, a drug addict or both.

She shook her head. “I don’t understand,” she said quietly. “Do you speak English?”

I nodded, frustrated. I took a deep breath to try again, but she put her hand up to stop me.

“What’s your name? Let's start there.”  
 *Xavier. My name is Xavier Evers.* But I couldn’t bring myself to say it. Right now I felt like *nothing.*

She bit her lip. “Listen, you’re bleeding, and you look like you might be in shock. I’m going to run to my truck and grab my supplies. You need medical attention. I’ll do what I can and then we’ll get you to a hospital. You stay right here, and I’ll be right back.”

But I didn’t do any of that. As soon as she stepped away, I shot to my feet. I took off her coat, left it on a rock where she would find it, and stumbled away. I managed to shift, and then I started to run, determined to get back to the pack house.

Back to Cali.

# Episode 3734

Yawning, I blinked my eyes open, rubbing the sleep from them. I was still in the study, and when I looked over, I found that Torin had pulled the desk chair over so he could sit beside me.

“Have a good nap?” he asked, smiling.

“I fell asleep?’ I asked in surprise.

“You did.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I’m not very good company, today.”

“That’s okay,” he said, “it actually gave me some time to put your advice into practice.”

“My advice? What advice? I gave you advice?” My brain was still sleep-muddled and slow.

Torin frowned. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I said slowly. Then I remembered. “Oh, wait, I gave you advice about Kevin! That’s right.”

“Thank goodness,” he breathed, looking relieved. “Yeah, you told me to be *mostly* honest when I talked to him, and to tell him that I really do want to spend the night with him, but that I just can’t do it tonight.”

“Right. And you told him that?”

Torin nodded. “I did.”

“How’d he take it?”

“He was totally cool with it,” Torin said in amazement. “He said we’d just do it another time.”

“That’s great,” I said grinning. “See? I knew it would be that simple. I’m glad it worked out.’  
 “You were right. Thank you, Cali,” he said sincerely. “It was the right way to go. I should never have let myself get so stressed out when there was such an easy fix. *Almost* honesty is the best policy. At least when you’re a Fae dating a human.”

I laughed. “Just don’t write that on my tombstone.” I sat up and looked around. “What time is it? Do you know if Xavier’s come back yet? How long have I been asleep?”

“You’ve only been out for twenty minutes or so,” Torin said, glancing at the clock behind the desk. “And no, I don’t think Xavier’s come back. I mean, I haven’t heard anything, but I’ve been in here with you, so I can’t be sure.”

I got to my feet and stretched. “Well, maybe I’ll just go look around, see if he’s back.”

I felt antsy. If he wasn’t back, I might have to go look for him, though I knew Greyson wouldn’t like it. But I had to do something. I just couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t quite right.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Torin asked uncertainly. “I just don’t know if you should be… I told Greyson I’d guard you, and—”

“And I appreciate that,” I interrupted, “but I’m not *going* anywhere just yet. I’ll be in the pack house, where the rest of the pack is. No matter where I go, I’ll always be under someone’s watch. That’s what Greyson wants.”

“I don’t know…” Torin said, looking unconvinced. “Do you mind if I go with you? Just kind of… shadow you?”

I sighed. “Fine.” I didn’t want to get him into trouble with Greyson for letting me out of his sight. That definitely wouldn’t be fair to Torin who was just doing his best with my whole…*mess*. I walked to the study door. “Come on, then.”

He shook his head. “You go ahead. I’ll count to five and then I’ll follow you at a distance. That’s how shadowing works.”

I tried to hide my smile. I was happy to have Torin shadow me if it made him feel like he was keeping his promise to Greyson. I *had* agreed to have people guard me—asked for it, even—and I appreciated this slightly subtle method.

As I walked into the hallway, I took a deep breath. I didn’t know if it was Torin’s healing or the power nap, but I was amazed by how awake and energetic I felt as I looked around. The dizzy spell I’d had in the study was a distant memory now.

The front door opened, and I turned to see Xavier step into the pack house, breathing hard. He brought a rush of freezing air into the house with him, and he looked around almost frantically. He looked wild—his hair was mussed, he had dried blood on his chin. His eyes roved, searching, until they landed on me. Then he rushed forward and pulled me into his arms.

“Cali! Are you okay?” he asked quickly.

I wasn’t sure what to say. His wild appearance had taken me completely by surprise. If anyone should’ve been asking that question, it was me.

I pulled back so I could look him over. “Yeah, I’m okay, but Xavier! What happened to you?”

He opened his mouth to answer, then shook his head, like he’d changed his mind. “No, it doesn’t matter.”

“*What* doesn’t matter—”

“I just need to make sure you’re safe,” he said quickly.

I frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be safe? I’ve just been home,” I said, starting to feel worried. He was just acting so strange…

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Torin watching us from the doorway of the study. Xavier was naked from his run and dirty, like he’d fallen in the woods. I knew he wouldn’t want anyone seeing him acting so strangely, so I took his hand and pulled him toward the stairs.

“Why don’t we go upstairs?” I suggested. “You can clean up and get dressed.”

He didn’t argue with me, and didn’t resist as I led him forward. Xavier wasn’t usually so compliant—he usually wasn’t compliant at all—which only added to my anxiety. Why wasn’t he saying anything? Why wasn’t he resisting my coddling? Something had rattled him, but he wasn’t saying what it was.

And what the hell *had* happened to him? Why was he covered in dirt? Why was his face all bloody?

As we reached the stairs, Greyson stepped out of the kitchen.

“Cali, I—oh, Xavier, you’re back.” He scowled, looking Xavier over. He took in his mussed appearance and the blood on his face. “What the hell happened to you?”

Xavier’s response was quick, sharp. “None of your business.”

“Great,” Greyson said, heavy with sarcasm. “I’m on my way out. I have to take care of something. Rishika and Sage are coming with me. You and I will talk when I get back.”

Xavier didn’t respond as Greyson strode away.

I could tell that Greyson was irritated with his brother. He was fed up, and I could understand why, but I was irritated myself. Despite their differences, they *were* still brothers, and Xavier was clearly not in a great place at the moment. They needed to both learn when to give it up and help each other.

“Torin, I’m fine, you can stop shadowing me now,” I said, turning to the Fae as he crept out of the living room. “I’m with Xavier. He’ll keep an eye on me. You’re relieved.”

Torin nodded and I led Xavier up to my room.

“Why was he watching you?” Xavier asked quickly. “Is something wrong? Did something happen to you while I was gone? Did you get hurt?”

“No, we were hanging out. On wisp watch,” I said with a shrug. “Greyson was just being careful, I think. I’m fine.”

Xavier didn’t look like he believed me.

“I really *am* fine,” I told him again. “You need to stop worrying about me and let me take care of you for a change,” I said, pushing him down onto the bed. “Now, I’m going to go into the bathroom and get you a washcloth. Let’s get that blood off your face, and then you can take a nice, hot shower, okay?”

But as I turned to go, Xavier grabbed my wrist. He pulled me back and looked at me, hard, like he was trying to memorize my face.

“I was worried about you,” he said, words coming fast. “I was so worried, Cali. I—I couldn’t get back here fast enough.”

“Back from where?” I asked, frowning. “I thought you were just out for a run. Where did you go?”

My voice caught, and I felt tears gathering in my eyes. I was frustrated and scared. And Xavier wasn’t helping things by not responding.

“Why won’t you tell me what happened out there?” I demanded. “Why won’t you tell me where you were?”

“Cali, I—” He started to answer, then stopped himself. The color of his eyes seemed to deepen, and he grabbed me, pulling me close and threading his fingers into my hair as he crushed his lips to mine.

I felt Artemis’s command not to be able to kiss either of my mates shatter. I needed this—I needed to kiss him. To understand. It felt like I was being ripped in half—torn between the deep feelings of anxiety I’d been dealing with, and the desire spreading through my body like fire.

But Xavier’s kisses were hungry and desperate, his lips searing pleasuring onto mine. He pulled at me, desperate for my touch.

“Xavier,” I murmured, pulling slightly away. My lips were pressed against his as I tried to speak. “I want to know where—”

His hands slipped beneath my shirt. They were freezing against my skin, and I gasped. Xavier leaned in, plunging his tongue into my open mouth—*plundering me*—and I stopped trying to talk. I didn’t need an explanation—not right now.

I just needed *him*.

# Episode 3735

**Xavier**

I wasn’t dreaming. At least I prayed I wasn’t dreaming. I hoped that Cali was really here, and I wasn’t unconscious in the snow somewhere, being menaced by Adéluce.

There was something kind of darkly funny about this—all this time, Cali had been so worried that she was losing her mind, but maybe I’d been losing mine, all along.

What had just happened at Crater Lake, though… That couldn’t have happened. Could it? Could Adéluce really have cast that spell? Could she really have given me until midnight to accept that fucked up offer she’d made?

I’d been trying to piece everything together since it had happened, but I couldn’t do it. It was like I was in a stupor. I’d never been hungover, but this was what I imagined it would feel like—like I couldn’t put two thoughts together. All I could think about was Cali.

I needed to feel the touch of her skin, hear the sound of her voice, see with my own eyes that she was safe and well.

She’d asked me more than once what had happened and why I was so dirty and bloody, but I’d given up trying to tell her. Every time I’d opened my mouth to answer, the words had refused to come. I’d had trouble breathing, and my throat had felt dry and tight. I knew I should tell Cali everything, let her know that Adéluce had threatened to kill her—she needed to know. But I literally couldn’t do it.

Was it because of the spell Adéluce had put on me? Was it because of what she’d whispered when she’d grabbed my face, right before I’d passed out? Was it the curse? She *had* said not to tell anyone what had happened between us.

But if that were the case, it would mean that I believed her—and I *refused* to believe her.

Maybe there was a simpler explanation—maybe it was just that I didn’t want to scare Cali. She had so much hanging over her already, maybe I just didn’t want to add to it, and my subconscious was forcing me to leave her in peace.

She had to be safe. She just had to be.

And right now, she *was* safe. She was in my arms—the safest place in the world—though she’d never felt more delicate. She felt like a bird clasped in my hands; like if I made one wrong move, I could break her. I knew that was crazy, that it was my fear talking, but I was just so scared to lose her.

I kissed her harder, my hands moving across her skin, and let myself be consumed by the feel of her, by my love for her. I loved her so much, more than anything or anyone I’d ever loved before. I’d never felt for anyone what I felt for her—the love, the passion, the protectiveness, the intensity.

“Do you know how much I love you?” I breathed, looking down into her eyes.

Her lips were red and kiss-swollen as she looked up at me. “*Yes*,” she breathed.

I was already naked, but I wanted to feel her skin against mine—all of her skin.

I grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head. She ducked out from under it and shook her hair out, so it fell in waves around her shoulders.

I kissed her lips, then made my way down her neck to her shoulders. Her skin was so fucking soft; it was like kissing satin. I kept kissing her as I stroked the black lace of her bra. I slid my fingers beneath the cups and felt her shiver as they brushed against her breasts.

“*Xavier*,” she whispered. She arched against me, pressing her hips into mine. She rocked against me, and I felt myself growing hard.

“Oh fuck, *Cali*.” The pressure felt like an electric shock. My hands palmed over her breasts, and she sucked in a sharp breath.

I reached around and unsnapped her bra, then yanked it off and flung it to the side. I was getting hotter and hotter, and losing patience fast.

She was already fumbling with the button of her jeans. She pushed them down over her hips, revealing black underwear.

I stepped back to look for a moment, drinking in the sight of her.

“Xavier,” she said, blushing. She moved to cover her breasts, but I stopped her.

“Don’t,” I said sharply. “Don’t. Let me see you.”

Her eyes blazed and she dropped her arms, letting me look at her perfect breasts. She wriggled fully out of her jeans and sat down on the bed, then scooted back until she was leaning against the headboard. She took a deep breath, making her chest rise and fall, and I watched her body move, feeling almost mesmerized.

“You’re *mine*, Cali,” I said, my voice low. “You’ve been mine from the moment you walked into this house.”

She nodded. “I’m yours.”

I held her gaze as I crawled onto the bed. “And now I’m going to fuck you, and make you remember that first time, when I made you mine.”

She nodded wordlessly. Her breath was coming fast, and it came faster still when I ran my hand up her calf. I stopped at her knee, but just for a moment, just until she quivered. When she did, I put a hand on the inside of each knee and pushed them apart.

“*Oh god*,” she moaned, dropping her head back.

“I haven’t even touched you yet,” I said, smirking.

She looked up at me. “But I *want* you to,” she whispered. “I want you to *so much*.”

With a growl, I pushed forward and dug my fingers into the lace of her panties, ripping them off and throwing them to the ground. I wedged myself between her legs, licking her up and down until I descended on her clit. I needed to taste her, to fill all of my senses with nothing but her. Cali moaned as I circled her clit with my tongue, sucking to give her the right amount of pressure.

“Do you want more?”

She whimpered, then said, “Yes.”

Her body shook as I slid two fingers inside of her. “You’re so wet,” I said against her skin. “So ready for me.”

She sank her fingers into my hair, pulling at the root as I continued to lick her and pump my fingers into her. When I inserted a third, she gasped, digging her nails into my scalp. It felt good. Way too fucking good.

“Come for me,” I said.

She moaned and rocked hard against my hand and mouth. Then she shattered against my touch. Then, I began to kiss up her body, taking her taut nipples in my mouth one by one. My cock was hard, straining, begging for release.

I laced my fingers through hers and pinned them to the mattress. I held her gaze as she reached between us, her hands hot on my cock as she guided me inside her. Staying like that, I leaned down to her ear. “Say my name, baby.”

“*Xavier*,” she moaned, trying to buck her hips against mine.

I couldn’t hold back any longer.

I loved this woman with every fiber of my being. She’d brought me back from the brink of losing everything—my wolf, myself. She loved me despite myself. I would never stop loving her, not even after my dying breath.

“I love you, Cali,” I said.

“I love you too.”

Then my mouth found hers. We rocked in rhythm, making the bed creak as I found our rhythm. When she started to shiver, I paused for just a split second, waiting until she started panting. Then I started again. Then I stopped again, teasing her.

“*Xavier*.”

When I pushed into her again, she melted around me.

The way she felt orgasming around me pushed me over the edge, and I lost control. I picked up the pace, thrusting into her as I came, so hard it felt violent. I collapsed over her, breathing hard. She wrapped her arms and legs around me, laughing and kissing my shoulder.

“That was *incredible*,” she murmured.

“Mmm,” was all I could manage. My mind was mush.

I rolled to the side and pulled her close, curling around her, big spoon little spoon-style. I didn’t want to let her go. I just had to keep her close to me. I wished we could stay like this forever—just the two of us, connected in a way that no one else could ever understand.

Cali rolled over so she could look at me. Her face was flushed and her eyes sparkled, but as they scanned my face, she began to look concerned again. She ran a hand gently down my cheek. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on with you?”

I should have known she wasn’t going to let this go. I hated to lie to her, but what the hell choice did I have? I’d tried to explain it to her, but I literally hadn’t been able to. And even if I *could* tell her, I didn’t know if I would. Would it be the right thing to do? But what good would the truth do if I couldn’t do anything to stop it? If I told her, the only thing she’d be able to do was worry.

No. My only option was to stop Adéluce first. I could always tell Cali about everything later.

I looked past Cali’s shoulder, at the clock on my bedside table. If Adéluce had been telling the truth, then I only had a few more hours. And I knew I had to be smart—Adéluce was very good at hiding, so how was I going to hunt her down?

Maybe I could talk to Big Mac? Or Kira? But would I be able to explain anything to them?

“Xavier?” Cali was still looking at me expectantly.

“I was out running,” I said. “I lost my footing and fell. I hit my chin.”

I could tell she wasn’t buying it—and why would she? I wasn’t accident prone, and werewolves didn’t often slip.

But she didn’t call me out on the obvious lie. She just pressed a kiss to my lips. “I’m going to get a washcloth to clean off that blood.”

She slipped out of bed and turned toward the bathroom. But then she took a step—and immediately collapsed.

# Episode 3736

**Greyson**

Rishika, Sage, and I had almost run the entire perimeter of the pack’s land. When we reached the spot where our land met the Blue Blood’s territory, Rishika paused.

*Sage and I can check out this section,* she said, looking back at me. *You keep an eye out?*

I nodded and she and Sage took off, sprinting down the rough path between the tall evergreens. I scanned the area, then tipped my head back and looked up at the sky, where the clouds were thick as cotton balls. The air was frosty and damp, and it smelled like it might start to snow soon, but I was glad I’d come out on patrol. It was good to get a feel of things on the ground for myself, and more than that, I needed the fresh air. It felt good to clear my head—especially after seeing Xavier stumble into the pack house like he’d just gotten back from a wild fucking weekend.

Where the hell had he been? I wondered if I was going to get any explanation from him at all. Did he even understand the level of danger the pack could be facing at this moment? The Bitterfangs had made it clear that they weren’t interested in dropping their grudge against us, yet Xavier had decided he could just check the fuck out? I wasn’t holding anything back from him, or from anyone else in the pack, but trying to make him understand the depth of the danger we were facing felt like talking to a brick wall.

I shook my head as I paced back and forth. I felt edgy as hell, and I just couldn’t stand still. I was beyond sick of dealing with my brother—it felt like I was always having to chase him around, check up on him, make sure he was doing what I’d asked him to do. This had to be what it felt like to deal with a spoiled, cranky toddler.

And it didn’t help my mood that Cali had been right there, ready to nurse Xavier’s wounds when he’d shuffled in. She was the one who needed to be cared for, not Xavier.

It was probably for the best that I’d just walked away. I needed to cool down—and *not* blow up at Xavier in front of Cali and the rest of the pack.

Rishika and Sage jogged back toward me.

*See anything unusual?* I asked.

*Nothing. No trespassers that we could sense,* Sage reported.

*No sign of the Bitterfang pack,* Rishika confirmed. *Or anyone else, for that matter.*

*That’s good*, I said. *But we still need to stay vigilant.*

Rishika scanned the trees. *We could do another pass of the whole perimeter if you want?*

*We could?* Sage asked. She sounded winded.

I considered it for a moment, but shook my head. *No, I don’t think that’s necessary. We’ve been running patrols regularly. If the Bitterfang were gathering anywhere nearby, or even scouting, we’d have scented them. No, if I can make it to the pack summit before Malakai actually tries anything, I feel like there’s a good chance I’ll be able to explain the circumstances and get the other packs on our side. If I can do that, we might be able to avoid a pack war.*

*Do you really think that’s possible?* Rishika asked.

*I do,* I admitted. *But I also know that I can’t bank on that possibility*. I shook my head. *Let’s head back to the house.*

I was leading the way back toward the house when I heard the sound of feet running toward us. I looked around, but I recognized Jay’s scent before I saw him.

*Greyson!* he called when he saw me. *You have to come quick.*

*What is it?* I asked, my stomach growing tight. *What’s going on? Is it the Bitterfang?*

*No*, Jay said. *It’s Cali.*

I didn’t wait to hear anything else. I just took off, running for the pack house at a dead sprint, my heart pounding frantically.

Behind me, Jay was working hard to keep up*.*

*She collapsed*, he told me.

*Fuck.*

I thought back to when I’d last seen her, standing at the foot of the stairs with Xavier. Did *he* have something to do with this? Had he said something to upset her?

I growled. I *never* should have left her side. This was all my fault.

When I reached the porch, I shifted to human and burst through the door, breathing hard and looking around.

“Upstairs,” Zainab said, pointing. “Xavier’s bedroom.”

I raced through the kitchen and took the stairs three at a time. When I pushed open the door to the bedroom, I saw Cali lying in the bed with her eyes closed, and I went cold. I paused for a moment, looking at her still, pale face.

What the *hell* was happening to her?

I finally realized that Xavier was sitting next to her. He still looked like hell, though he had pulled on a pair of black joggers. He said nothing to me as I moved closer to Cali.

I knew that he and Cali had been having sex—I could smell it in the room. It filled me with rage, but when I got closer to Cali, that anger just fell away. Up close, I could see that she looked truly sick. She was pale, but her face was also slick with sweat, and her breathing was fast and irregular.

Her eyes were half-open, and she smiled when she saw me, but it was weak, and it looked like she was trying to make *me* feel better.

“Hi,” she said, her voice ragged.

I took her hand. Her skin was damp and almost hot, like she was running a high fever.

“I came as soon as I heard, love.”

She smiled again, and then her eyes drifted shut.

I put my hand on her chest, waiting until I felt it rise and fall with her breath. I could feel her heart beating beneath my palm, so I knew she was alive, at least.

“What the hell happened?” I demanded, looking around.

Artemis, Orla, and Lola had filed into the room behind me.

Orla hurried to Cali’s side and put a wet compress on her forehead. “I don’t know,” she murmured. “I don’t know.”

I looked at Xavier, and as the others gathered around Cali, I grabbed my brother’s arm and yanked him into the hallway.

He didn’t fight me—he just let me drag him down the hall. I shoved him into my room and slammed the door behind us. Then I rounded on him.

“What the *hell* did you do to her?” I exploded.

Xavier looked miserable. He opened his mouth to speak, then seemed to change his mind and closed it again.

I was *seething* with rage. Shaking with it. I couldn’t get the image of Cali out of my head. I’d seen her looking sick and scared before, but there was something about this time that was freaking me the fuck out. It was like she was standing at death’s door, with the way she was shaking and floating in and out of consciousness.

“Cali wasn’t feeling great—she was dizzy earlier—and if you hadn’t run off like some petulant child, you would have *known* about that,” I snapped. “She needed to fucking rest! She needed to be taken care of. But instead, you fucking *slept* with her! And now… What? Now you have *nothing to say?*”

Xavier seemed to snap out of whatever zone-out he was in, and shoved me back a step.

“You need to back the fuck off,” he snarled. “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, man. I didn’t do a damn thing—”

“Then what *happened?*” I shot back. “What the fuck happened? And where did you go?”

Xavier looked like he was struggling with something. He shook his head. “—had to go—went to—Crater Lake—”

“CRATER LAKE?” I bellowed, incredulous. “Are you *kidding* me? What, you didn’t believe Jay and Rishika, so you had to go search for Adéluce’s body *on your* *own?* You really felt like you had to personally prove she was dead? What the *fuck*, Xavier?”

“No!” he protested.

“Then what was it?” I demanded.

“It was—” He stopped, shaking his head and looking furious, opening his mouth like he was trying to figure out what to say.

“You have *got* to be fucking *kidding me!*” I snarled. There was a knock at the door, and I whipped around. “*What?*”

There had been plenty of times I’d come close to wanting to kill my brother, but this had to be the worst of it. He couldn’t even defend himself against what I was saying. He knew he was full of shit, he knew he’d done the wrong, selfish thing, but he couldn’t admit it. I was going to wring his fucking neck.

Lola pushed the door open and edged inside. She glanced between us for a moment, looking unimpressed. “Well, if you two would stop fighting for a second, you might want to know that Cali’s awake—”

“She’s awake?” I asked quickly.

Lola nodded. “Yeah, she is. And she’s asking for you.”

# Episode 3737

I felt a cool cloth move across my forehead.

“Cali? Sweetheart? Is that too cold?”

My mom’s voice sounded like it was miles away.

“No, it’s good,” I rasped.

“I’m trying everything I can.” I heard Torin’s voice next. “But my magic’s not working on her.”

The compress on my forehead felt soothing, but it did barely anything to combat the pain that was spreading through my body. The mark on my shoulder was the source, but the pain radiated from there, making my whole body feel like an open wound.

I tried to open my eyes, but it felt like my eyelids weighed about a million pounds. I just couldn’t lift them. And I was just *so* tired. It was all I could do to ask for my mates.

But where were they? Why weren’t they here?

Even in my barely conscious state, I’d be able to tell that Greyson was angry with Xavier. Furious. But that wasn’t right. If anything, Greyson should’ve been angry with me. *I* was the reason why he was upset. I needed to tell him that.

“Cali? Baby, I’m right here.” Xavier caught my hand.

“Love, I’m here.” Greyson was at my side an instant later.

Relief washed over me. They were with me, and at least they’d been able to control their anger toward each other enough to come to my side. *I* was the one who’d caused them to go for each other, so I took some solace in the fact that I could at least bring them back together.

As hard as it was, I forced my eyes open and squinted, struggling to bring them into focus. They were looking at me with twin expressions of worry on their faces. I never thought they looked much alike, but they shared a similar bone structure—something that was always obvious when they were anxious.

I smiled, though it hurt to move my face. “Thanks for coming back,” I said in a hoarse whisper. I was trying to speak loudly enough for them to hear, but I couldn’t tell if I was even audible. I swallowed and tried again. “I know you want to know what happened—I wish I could tell you, but I don’t really remember.”

“Anything at all is good, love,” Greyson said, his voice tense.

“All I remember is that I was walking to the bathroom, and the world just kind of fell out from under my feet,” I said, thinking back to that terrifying moment. “That’s the last thing I remember. The next thing I knew, I was in this bed, in pain.”

Xavier leaned in. “Are you still in pain?”

Reflexively, I started to tell him that I was fine, but as I shifted to look at him, I winced as I put pressure on my shoulder.

“Is it the mark again?” Greyson demanded. “Can I look at it?”

But as he reached to pull the blanket down, a jolt of fire pierced through me. I screamed and pulled away. He couldn’t touch me! He just couldn’t!

“*Fire!*” I cried out. “I feel like I’m on fire! It’s my shoulder!”

My eyes were squeezed shut, and in the darkness, I could see images of Seluna flashing in my mind’s eye. I kicked the blankets off and pushed myself out of bed. I was stumbling and clawing, but I had to get away—the fire was *burning me alive.*

“Cali, you’re okay,” Torin said, trying to stop me from getting out of bed. “You’re not on fire!”

“Caliana Rose, can you hear me?” My mother’s calm, clear voice was like a jet of cool water, and it pierced right through my violent thoughts. I sagged back against the bed. “Take a deep breath, sweetheart. In and out.”

I tried to do as she said, but the pain was only intensifying. My breath was coming fast and hard—if the fire didn’t burn me up soon, the pain would.

“Someone get Big Mac!” Greyson barked, but his voice sounded far away, too. “Hurry!”

“Cali? What can we do?” Xavier asked, sounding desperate.

I tried to answer, but I couldn’t move my mouth. I couldn’t form words. I couldn’t even *think* words. The pain was too intense. It was consuming me, along with everything that I was.

That was when I heard it—her voice. Seluna’s voice, echoing in my mind.

*I needed you to help me, but you ignored me.*

*You didn’t say* how *you wanted me to help!* I retorted. *Why are you doing this to me?*

Her cruel laugh rang in my ears as the burning pain grew hotter, like the heat of a thousand suns. My throat was on fire, and I clutched at the Shard. It burned my fingers.

“Someone get this off me! *Please!*” I rasped. “It’s burning me alive!”

I tried to rip it off, but it was too hot. I couldn’t touch it. I waited for Xavier’s hand to reach for it, or Greyson’s, but nothing happened. Why wasn’t anyone *helping* me?

Distantly, I heard Greyson and Xavier’s arguing voices.

“It’s supposed to be protecting her!”

“She’s screaming that it’s killing her!”

I couldn’t tell which voice was which, but I couldn’t take it any longer. I took as deep a breath as I could manage and ripped the Shard from my neck. I threw it as far away as I could and pushed myself upright, gasping.

When I managed to open my eyes, I could see my reflection in the vanity mirror over my dresser. I stared at my reflection in horror. There was an angry red mark where the Shard had burned my skin.

Greyson bent to pick up the Shard from the floor. He looked at it for a moment, then at my mother. “You said this thing was supposed to protect her—not *burn* her.”

My mom looked terrified. “It *was* supposed to protect her.”

The pain was so intense, it was hard to catch my breath. “Don’t blame my mother,” I gasped out.

“I’m not blaming anyone,” Greyson said, “I’m trying to understand what the hell just happened, and why something that’s supposed to be protecting you has turned against you.”

My mom shrugged, though she looked like she was shaking. “Maybe the Shard’s power has been worn out? But that really shouldn’t be possible.”

Greyson’s hand closed over the Shard. “Well, whatever the explanation, Cali should stop wearing this thing.”

I wasn’t going to argue with that. I pressed my hand to my neck, which was still stinging from the burn. I looked down at the angry red skin, wondering if it would scar.

Then I shook my head. That was a stupid thing to be worried about at a time like this.

“I’m here, get out of the way,” Big Mac announced, pushing her way into the room. She shoved Greyson and Xavier aside and stepped toward me, looking me up and down. She took in my pale, sweaty face, the twisted sheets, and the red, stinging burn on my neck.

I watched as her face registered shock, confusion, and finally fear—none of which made me feel even a little bit better. It never felt good to see Big Mac look overwhelmed by a situation.

I gasped as the pain in my shoulder spiked again. Twisting around, I craned my neck to look at it, wondering if I could see the source of the pain. And I found, to my horror, that I could. My skin was mottled—shifting colors of orange and red, almost like roiling flames—and the handprint was glowing bright red.

Fear boiled up inside me, stealing my breath. I felt dizzy and lightheaded. The room shifted and I thought I was going to faint again. I screamed, but softly, more like a gasp.

“Cali?” Xavier took a step toward me.

I took a breath and screamed again, this one coming out louder, more primal. Terror was coursing through me. My skin was *moving*; it was changing colors. My body was not my own. I was transforming into something I didn’t recognize, and it scared the shit out of me.

“Cali!” Greyson rushed to my side.

My mom gasped. “Oh god, sweetheart, what is it?”

“What’s *happening* to me?” I cried.

I looked around for help, but as I did, the room began to move. It shimmered, like I was seeing it through a haze of sudden heat. The faces of my mates, and my mother, and Big Mac, and Sage and Zainab standing at the door began to melt in the overwhelming heat.

I blinked, trying to clear my vision, but when I opened my eyes again, I was no longer in my bedroom. I was in a desert, and the flat sand landscape extended as far as I could see. I looked around in wonder. Above me, red clouds drifted lazily against a dark purple sky.

“Cali? Say something?”

“Can you hear me, Cali?”

“Open your eyes!”

Greyson’s voice, Xavier’s voice, my mother’s voice—they all faded away. It was almost peaceful. After a moment, I heard nothing at all but the steady thrum of my own heartbeat.

*Where the hell am I?*

# Episode 3738

I looked around in confusion at the strange, otherworldly place I’d found myself in.

“Hello?” I called. “Greyson? Xavier?”

Silence answered back. No Greyson, no Xavier. My family wasn't here with me, either. Everyone was gone.

*How did I even get here?*

“Xavier?” I called out again.

The only response I got was my own echoing voice.

*Well, that’s not creepy at all…*

Suddenly, a path appeared before me, and I started down it. The heat was unbearable—oppressive and smothering. My mouth was dry, and my throat burned. My eyes stung, and sweat pasted my clothes to my body. I tried to lift my shirt over my head—I wasn’t above running around in this weird place in my underwear if it meant an escape from the heat—but it wouldn’t budge. No matter how hard I tugged, the shirt wouldn’t come off. My pants were the same.

*What the hell? Why can’t I take off my clothes?*

Was this some kind of fever dream? If so, shouldn’t I have been in control? Because I definitely didn’t *feel* like I was calling the shots.

My shoulder burned like it had been freshly branded, and I could only walk a step or two at a time before I had to stop, to try to catch my breath, to do anything I could do to block out the pain. The heat only made the pain worse, and the slightest brush of my clothes against the mark was like being struck by lightning.

At the rate I was going, my journey down the path felt endless. Where was it even taking me? After all the agony, the heat, the clumsy, draining steps, where would I end up?

I paused, panting and bending over as the pain became too much to bear. I let out a groan, hissing through my teeth.

“What am I doing here?” I called out. My voice echoed, like before.

Maybe I didn’t *want* to see what was at the end of this path. This place wasn’t exactly a cozy vacation spot. What if whatever was waiting for me was even worse?

My shirt brushed against the mark, and my knees buckled with the force of the pain. I couldn’t keep myself from crying out in agony—I didn’t even try. It wasn’t like there was anyone around to hear me anyway, right?

I couldn’t imagine anything worse than this.

A sinister-looking shadow passed over me, and I craned my neck up to see strange creatures soaring overheard. They were nightmares on wings; misshapen and unlike anything I’d ever seen before.

A new, terrifying possibility occurred to me. *Is this the demon world? Did Seluna bring me to her home somehow?*

I looked around, suddenly feeling like someone was watching me. But nobody was there, and there was nowhere for anyone to hide. I was just smack dab on a barren desert path on what was basically a dried-up yellow-brick road. Panting, I looked down the never-ending path. I had two choices: I could stay here, writhing in pain and waiting for someone to find me—or maybe for one of those flying creatures to eat me—or I could keep going and try to find someone who could help me.

*Why aren’t Xavier and Greyson here with me?*

Being here at all was bad enough—being here *alone* was torture.

The path led me up a hill, and at the crest I looked down and saw a dark shrouded figure sitting in a chair.

“Hello! I need some help!” I called.

The figure didn’t react.

I half-ran, half-stumbled down the hill before face planting into the hot desert sand. It scorched my face and I scrambled to my hands and knees with a whimper.

“Please, help me!” I begged the figure.

The hooded figure, whose face I couldn’t see, didn’t say anything. They just raised a bony hand and pointed. I struggled to my feet and approached them.

“Why won’t you talk to me? I need to get back to the pack house. To my family, my friends. Help me. Please.”

But the figure just kept pointing.

“Hey!” I grabbed the figure by the shoulder and they dissolved into dust at my feet. I skittered back with a cry. “No—oh my god!”

*Well, great. What am I supposed to do now?!*

I looked back at the path. I had no idea how far I’d walked, or how far I’d have to go in the other direction to find help, assuming there was any help to be found. I looked ahead, in the direction the figure had pointed. The desert stretched out endlessly in front of me.

All I could do was keep going. Keep walking through this hellscape.

I took another step forward, but another bolt of pain radiated through me and I collapsed to my knees with a cry. The world began to spin around me, and suddenly I found myself back in the pack house.

Greyson and Xavier were beside me, both of them looking stricken. I tried to speak, tried to tell them what had happened, tell them about the strange dream I’d had, but the pain was too intense. I couldn’t form words. I could barely breathe around the agony.

My mom pressed a cold compress to my forehead, but it only gave me the barest amount of relief. A single drop of rain on a parched desert. My dad was standing nearby with a bowl of water.

On my other side, Torin was telling someone, maybe Lola, that he didn’t understand why he couldn’t heal me. It felt like I was watching them through a fog, like I was watching everything play out without really experiencing it firsthand.

Greyson leaned in close, his face creased with worry. “Tell me what I can do to help you, love. Please.”

I wanted him to hold me, to comfort me, to make the pain go away, but my skin was on fire and I was certain his touch would only make it worse.

My gaze skittered over to Xavier.

“Fight this,” he said. “I know you can do it. You have to. I need you.”

He squeezed my hand, and nothing could have prepared me for the white-hot pain that jolted through me, like he’d just poured acid on my nerve endings. I screamed, and he jumped back, releasing my head.

“What the hell did you do?” Greyson barked at Xavier.

And then, suddenly, I was back in the desert. The pain was gone, and my body went limp with relief. I’d been in so much agony for so long, I almost couldn’t process the absence of it. Even as I slowly pushed myself to my feet, my muscles ached with residual strain. Still, it was better than the magic heat that had felt like it was burning through my whole body.

I pulled in a deep breath and looked ahead. This time, there was something that looked like an oasis, with a single tree, a small pool of water. The air was cooler, the dry heat less oppressive. A woman was seated at a table near the water.

My mouth had never felt drier in my entire life. I needed that water, and I needed it now.

I raced ahead, ready to dive into the pool headfirst. Shock and disappointment slowed my steps as the water dried up right before my eyes.

“No…” I collapsed to my knees. Already, the pain was beginning to build again. If my body hadn’t been so overheated, so impossibly dry, I would have wept. “No… Please, no.” I looked to the woman, who was still seated, hunched over the table with her back to me. “Please, help me. I need to get home!”

The woman didn’t respond. But there was something familiar about her that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

I grimaced as I struggled to my feet once again and approached the table. The woman was working on a large jigsaw puzzle. I stepped closer, curiosity pulling me forward. The woman ignored my presence as she added a piece to the mostly completed puzzle.

I gasped. The puzzle was a picture of my face. Then the woman turned to me and I stumbled back in shock.

She looked like me, only much older—as if I’d aged fifty years. She met my gaze, her eyes cold and empty, then turned back to her puzzle.

*What the hell is this place? Is this a dream? Is this another world?* I couldn’t even begin to wrap my head around anything that was happening—it was all so strange, and the pain made it impossible to think beyond one second at a time.

Slowly, I stepped forward again. It was then that I noticed the puzzle was missing a piece.

“Have you brought the missing piece?” the older version of me asked me.

“N-no,” I stammered.

A gust of wind blew the pieces away, and they burst into flames.

Older Cali stood and turned to face me, and her face morphed into Seluna’s.

I stumbled back as Seluna’s clothes burst into flames, and she smiled. “It took you long enough.”

# Episode 3739

**Xavier**

It physically hurt to see Cali like this. What the hell was going on? I didn’t understand what could have happened to her. When I’d left, she’d seemed fine. But now…

God, I couldn’t even bring myself to consciously think the words, to think of the horrifying worst-case scenario that kept nagging at my mind.

*What if—*

I shoved the thought to the deepest corner of my mind. *No.* Cali wasn’t going anywhere. She was going to be fine. She’d been in tight spots before, god knew, but she’d always been okay in the end. This time wouldn’t be any different.

I glanced over at Greyson, who was glaring at me with more hatred than I’d ever seen. I’d never admit it to his face, but he tended to be the more levelheaded of the two of us. The one who could be counted on to not lose his shit in a fit of rage.

Clearly, that wasn’t the case today. He’d already made it clear that he somehow blamed me for this. *Maybe he’s right. Maybe this* is *my fault. Maybe this is nothing more than Adéluce making good on her threat, and now Cali’s suffering because of it. Because I failed her.*

I didn’t know how to *fix* this. And I needed to. But when I’d tried to hold Cali’s hand just now and she’d recoiled in pain, it felt like it had cracked my chest wide open.

I would *never* do anything to hurt Cali intentionally like this, and somewhere in that pissed off brain of his, my brother had to know that. Just like I knew he’d never do anything to hurt her either.

But it wasn’t like I could explain myself. I couldn’t explain *anything* that had happened recently. The latest threat to Cali’s life, Adéluce, where I’d gone earlier—any of it. Every time I tried, my throat clenched shut, my jaw tightened so hard my teeth ground together, and my tongue felt like it was on fire.

And every time Cali moaned in pain, that panic in my gut intensified.

I should never have mocked the vampire-witch, or threatened her. She’d warned me that Cali would suffer, and said that she’d already been making her suffer. That she was the source of so much of what Cali had been fighting lately.

I hadn’t believed Adéluce. Hadn’t *wanted* to believe her. She was manipulative, a liar, and shrewd and powerful and sadistic enough to make good on her threats. But believing Adéluce would mean accepting that she was in control here. That I had to do what she said, or Cali would pay the price.

I still didn’t want to believe that conniving bitch, but how else could I explain what was happening to Cali right now? It was like Adéluce was showing me what would happen if I refused to take her seriously.

I took one more look at Cali’s pained expression, and my decision was made. I couldn’t use my tongue to tell anyone about Adéluce’s deal, but maybe I could mind link? I had to try to let Cali know what was happening to her.

I sucked in a breath, trying to ignore the pain and tightness in my throat as I reached out to Cali.

*Cali…*

Immediately, I was struck by a blinding headache. A deafening crackling noise, like static, filled my ears, and I clapped my hands over them.

*Fuck!*

So I couldn’t mind link to explain anything to her, either. Had Adéluce thought of everything? She wasn’t *that* clever, was she?

No, there had to be a loophole somewhere, a way to get through to Cali.

Greyson glanced at me again, frowning. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

I reached for my phone. Maybe I could text him, write down what was happening. But as soon as I pulled up the message thread and began to type, my fingers went numb. No matter how hard I tried to direct them over the touchscreen, they just wouldn’t move.

I started to tremble, but not out of fear or pain. It was rage. Pure, lethal rage. That fucking bitch thought she had me cornered, but there had to be a way out of this. There had to be a way to let Cali and Greyson and the others know what we were up against. To warn them about Adéluce’s plan. There just had to be. If only because the alternative—the mere *thought* that she’d beaten me—just wasn’t fucking acceptable.

If I could just tell them the truth of who was behind all of this, if I could tell them that Adéluce was using some dark magic spell or curse, maybe Big Mac or Kira would know what to do. How to counteract the spell, to fend it off and shield Cali once and for all against that vampire-bitch’s manipulations.

That was all I really wanted—to shield Cali, to protect her from pain and suffering. Adéluce’s head on a spike wouldn’t hurt, either, but if I had to choose, I’d choose Cali’s safety. I’d always choose her safety.

She couldn’t die. I wouldn’t let that happen. But what Adéluce was trying to do was rip me away from her, one way or another. I couldn’t let any version of her plan happen.

But when I tried, I couldn’t communicate with the witches, either. Adéluce had really boxed me in here—if I was going to outsmart her, I needed to be more creative about it.

I turned to Big Mac again, weighing my words carefully and steeling myself against another onslaught of pain. “Can you detect any… dark magic?”

I was half-shocked that the words had actually come out—that my tongue hadn’t started to sizzle in my mouth right then and there.

The witch glared at me. She clearly hadn’t picked up on my plight, or what asking that question could have cost me.

“Don’t you think I’ve been trying?” she snapped. “I can’t detect *any* magic on Cali, dark or otherwise. Whatever is causing this, it’s not a curse or a spell.”

“So you have no ideas at all?” Greyson pressed.

“If I had to venture a guess, I’d say this is the effect of the magic stabilizing, post-Seluna. But I don’t understand why it’s suddenly become so bad, but it’s been affecting the witches too as you saw with the barrier,” Big Mac said. “But everything I know about the destabilization has led me to believe Cali would get better over time, not worse.”

I wanted to shout, ‘It’s because of Adéluce,’ but I stopped myself. Or maybe the magic stopped me. Either way, a new idea began to take hold.

*If everyone’s magic has been affected by the imbalance, wouldn’t Adéluce’s be on the fritz as well?*

The thought brought with it such a strong and immediate glimmer of hope that I clung onto it desperately.

Maybe Adéluce had been bluffing. Maybe this situation Cali was in had nothing to do with the vampire-witch, and she’d simply used the magic imbalance as a cover.

And I’d been stupid and afraid and protective enough of Cali to buy it.

Clearly, Adéluce still had *some* power—her keeping me from communicating was proof of that—but maybe that was as far as her magic could take her.

*Was there a chance that was true?* Either way, Adéluce was playing me perfectly, just like she always did. She’d always had a knack for capitalizing on my fear of losing Cali, and she never hesitated to use it against me.

A new wave of rage built inside me, the kind I knew I wouldn’t be able to control if I wasn’t careful. Now wasn’t the time to lose my shit. And nobody here deserved to be the person I lost it on. No, that honor was reserved for Adéluce.

*It’s time to deal with Adéluce. Maybe give her a midnight surprise with the business end of a wooden stake.*

But first I had to make sure Cali was okay. I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving her when she was in this state. Also, Greyson would kick my ass right into the spirit world if I even tried.

“Do you think this will pass?” I asked Big Mac. “Will Cali recover like she always does?”

The witch shook her head helplessly. “I really don’t know.”

Torin sighed. He looked almost as wracked with guilt as I felt. “I wish there was something I could do. Anything. I *hate* this.”

Cali’s face tightened, and she moaned in pain again. She gasped for air, looking as pale as a ghost. The handprint had stopped glowing. That was good, right? Or was it bad?

Orla turned to Tom, her face white with terror. “Call an ambulance. Something’s very wrong.

Her words sent a ripple of horror through the room—one I felt in my heart.

*This can’t be happening.*

Sure, Cali looked rough, but she’d been in tough spots before and had always come out on top. She was more resilient than the rest of us put together. She’d bounce back from this too… Wouldn’t she?

Tom spoke to the ambulance dispatcher in a low voice, and I looked around the room. I knew the anguish on everyone’s faces had to match my own. We didn’t call ambulances here. We’d never needed to. Human medicine wasn’t necessarily going to help a magical problem, was it?

I thought back to Adéluce’s threat again. She’d warned me that she could hurt Cali, and now this had happened to her. The timing couldn’t be a coincidence, no matter how much I wanted to pretend otherwise.

I couldn’t put it off any longer. I had to find Adéluce and kill her before it was too late.

# Episode 3740

**Greyson**

I stood on the porch, watching the ambulance pull into the driveway. I’d heard the sirens, and had pried myself away from Cali’s side to meet the paramedics. Someone had to let them in, and it wasn’t like I was any goddamn use inside anyway.

I hated how helpless I felt. My mate was fighting for her life in there, and all I could do was sit back and watch. I was the Alpha who’d defeated Silas, Letifer, and so many other threats. I’d been to the Fae world and back. I’d won the Lupo Finale. I’d dealt with vampires, witches, revenants, gator shifters, and some of the scariest, meanest werewolves in existence, and I’d always come out on top. So what the hell was wrong with me, that I couldn’t do this *one* thing? Why couldn’t I protect my mate, the woman I loved more than I’d ever thought possible?

The paramedics rushed toward the door, carrying a stretcher, and I directed them inside to where Cali was waiting for them. I glanced at the empty stretcher as they carried it inside, and my heart lurched at the sudden realization that it wouldn’t be empty for long. In just a few minutes, they’d be carrying it back out, and Cali would be on it.

Fuck, I was going to be sick.

My mind was racing to understand what the hell was going on. Why had this happened so suddenly? Was Big Mac right and it was the magic stabilizing? But why weren’t any of our usual methods doing a damn thing to help?

It wasn’t until Orla had asked for an ambulance that it had even occurred to me that Cali could be sick from something other than magic. She was half-human, after all—it was entirely possible that whatever was ailing her could be something mundane rather than magical.

*But if that’s the case, wouldn’t Torin be able to heal her?*

If this was a flu, appendicitis, whatever, Torin would’ve been able to fix it, right? So what did it mean, that his magic was no match for Cali’s pain? Was this bigger than magic all together somehow?

I couldn’t even begin to make sense of it all. It was a Gordian knot—impossible to untangle—and in the meantime, it physically hurt to see my mate suffering like this. She was so weak, and in so much pain.

The paramedics carried Cali out to the ambulance. One of them had put an oxygen mask over her face. She was still writhing and groaning, even on the stretcher. The oxygen mask didn’t look like it was doing much good, either—she was still pale as a corpse and panting like she could barely breathe.

I wanted nothing more than to look away, to not have to witness Cali like this, being hauled off to a hospital because even though we had a house full of werewolves and witches and Fae, none of us could do a damn thing to help her. But I forced myself to watch as she was loaded into the ambulance.

What good could a hospital do that we couldn’t? This felt like a Hail Mary pass—like one last, desperate effort to do something, anything. I wanted the human doctors to help Cali, but if I was being honest with myself, I didn’t know if they would.

Modern medicine was an amazing thing for humans, but Cali wasn’t just a human, and my gut was telling me that whatever was wrong with her, if Kira and Big Mac and Torin and Orla couldn’t fix it, then all the fancy medical treatments in the world wouldn’t be able to, either.

My stomach clenched, and for a moment I thought I was going to be sick over the porch railing.

*Keep it together. Cali needs you. Don’t you dare fail her now. At least, not any more than you* *already have.*

Tom and Orla climbed into the back of the ambulance with Cali while everyone else made plans to follow.

Rishika sidled up to me, her expression creased with worry. “How are you doing?”

I kept my eyes fixed on Cali as the ambulance doors shut, one at a time. I couldn’t muster up the strength to answer Rishika. I knew I wouldn’t be able to get a single syllable out without my voice breaking. And if I allowed myself to start breaking, I worried there would be nothing to stop me from shattering altogether.

Rishika seemed to understand. She squeezed my hand. “I’ll see you at the hospital. I’m going with Artemis.”

I nodded, then headed inside to get my keys.

On the way in, I bumped into Xavier, who looked like he was on his way out. He was probably heading to the hospital too. Cali would certainly want us both there—and she would hate that we were fighting while she was so sick, so I tried to push down the knee-jerk anger I felt for Xavier. We needed to be a team right now, if only for Cali’s sake.

“Why don’t we ride together to the hospital?” I suggested.

He shook his head. “I’m not going.”

*What?*

I frowned. “What the fuck do you mean, you’re not going? Of course you’re going. You have to go. Cali needs you.”

I hated to admit it, especially to Xavier’s face, but it was the truth. If Cali woke up and Xavier wasn’t there, she’d be beside herself. And if she *didn’t* wake up…

I pushed that thought away, too.

Pain flashed across Xavier’s face, and it looked like he wanted to say something. But instead of explaining what the hell he could possibly be thinking, he just shook his head. “I can’t.”

Shock crashed into me, and all the anger at my brother that I’d been trying to tamp down came rushing to the surface.

“That’s it? That’s all you have to fucking say?” I growled. “Did you not see how sick she is? What the fuck is so important that you have to take care of it *right now?* When Cali could be—”

I didn’t say the word. I didn’t need to. Xavier’s flinch told me he’d gotten the message, loud and clear. Again, he looked like he was struggling to come up with a response, but instead of actually telling me a goddamn thing, he just shoved past me and headed toward the woods. Once he hit the tree line, he shifted and took off running.

*What the fuck?*

For a moment, I considered chasing the bastard down and beating some sense into him, if that was what it took. I probably would’ve enjoyed the catharsis, considering his recent behavior. But I didn’t have time for that right now. Cali still needed us, and I, for one, intended to show up and be there for her. Especially since that was apparently too damn much to ask of my brother.

Maybe he was even more upset than I was and just couldn’t bear the sight of her suffering. I was sympathetic to that—more than he’d ever know. But it didn’t make it okay that he was running away when Cali had never needed him more.

I knew what was important to Cali, and I was going to honor it and be by her side—screw Xavier. Maybe he’d come to his senses eventually, but that wasn’t my problem right now. I had to do what I could to take care of Cali, including being there to hold her hand and cushion the blow when she realized Xavier had blown her off.

The drive to the hospital passed in a blur, and before I knew it, I was parking in the lot. It was so surreal, just being here. Knowing that Cali was somewhere inside, being treated.

A new wave of guilt slammed into me. Should I have taken her to the hospital earlier?

The thought was a punch to the gut, and that feeling followed me as I entered the ER, and soon the rest of the pack trickled in after me. Xavier’s absence couldn’t have been more noticeable. Everyone else was here, even people who weren’t all that close to Cali, so why wasn’t he?

Rishika hurried up to me. “I just spoke to the nurse. Cali’s been taken to the ICU, but they won’t let anyone in to see her except family, so Artemis, Tom, and Orla are with her. We’re supposed to wait down here.”

I wasn’t about to wait out here for news. I had to see Cali, to be there for her, to help her through this.

“Where’s the nurse’s station?”

Rishika led me to a stern-looking nurse, and I put on my best smile I could muster given the circumstances.

“I’m here to see Caliana Hart,” I said.

The nurse eyed me skeptically. “Are you family?”

“I’m—” I stopped myself. I wasn’t family, but I *was* her mate. Not that the nurse would understand what that meant. “We’re engaged. She’s my fiancée.”

The nurse glanced at Rishika, who smiled. “They’re planning a June wedding.”

“She’s upstairs.” The nurse handed me a pass and told me how to get to Cali’s room.

Rishika nudged me as I headed to the elevator. “Quick thinking.”

“I’ll let you know how she’s doing as soon as I know more.”

I took the elevator to the right floor, found the ICU, and immediately saw Cali in a hospital bed, hooked up to tubes and wires. A machine was beeping in distress while vital signs flashed on a monitor. I didn’t know what any of it meant, but I had to assume it wasn’t good. Cali certainly didn’t look any better. Seeing her unconscious in the hospital bed rocked me to my core.

*What’s wrong with her? Can’t they help her?*

Tom, Orla, and Artemis were talking quietly to a doctor at Cali’s bedside, and I joined them.

“We’re still waiting for a few tests, but we’re baffled,” the doctor was saying. “We can’t find anything wrong, but your daughter’s body is failing.”

# Episode 3741

I was too confused to be frightened—or at least as frightened as I probably should’ve been.

“What are you doing here, Seluna?” I demanded. “What happened to old me?”

The demon shrugged. “I had to get your attention before it was too late.”

I huffed out a breath. Wasn’t it bad enough that she’d been torturing me? Sending those wisps after me and putting me through the worst agony I’d ever felt and trapping me here in this crazy fever dream? Now she was expecting me to play twenty questions?

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” I demanded. “Stop speaking in riddles and just be straight with me for once—too late for what?”

“Speaking in riddles? I thought I made myself perfectly clear when I begged you to help me all those times. I didn’t think it was necessary to tell you that you’d have to be *alive* in order to provide that help. Kind of thought you’d be able to work that one out on your own.”

I gasped. “Wait. Am I *dying?*”

Seluna let out a long-suffering sigh. “This is on me. I shouldn’t have assumed you were clever enough to have reached such an obvious conclusion on your own.”

Now I was too shocked to be offended. “Let’s go back to the part where you told me I’m dying. What are you talking about? How am I dying?”

“You’ve been dying ever since you killed me. Humans decay over time, like anything else—except you’ve sped the process up by a very significant margin. That’s why you’re here. I needed to talk to you, before you stop being able to talk to anyone at all.”

I stared at Seluna, searching for sincerity in her haughty expression. Could I really believe anything she said at this point? She’d made my life hell for months now, all so she could use me for her own ends. Was this just another attempt to manipulate me into doing what she wanted?

I wanted to believe it was really that simple. That I wasn’t dying. That Seluna was just up to her old tricks, trying to make me miserable. But then I thought back to how I’d felt before I’d arrived in this dreamscape, or whatever it was. I couldn’t remember a time in my life when I’d felt worse. When I’d been so sick, in so much pain. But it hadn’t even occurred to me that I could be *dying*.

“You are literally running out of time,” Seluna continued, “and you didn’t have much left when you arrived here. Are you going to help me or not? You won’t be any good to me dead.”

One of the winged creatures swooped down and settled on Seluna’s shoulder, glaring at me with angry red eyes.

*Of course her pets are just as horrible as she is.*

“Why should I help you?” I demanded. “You’ve made my life miserable. You tried to take over my body. You pushed me and pushed me, tried to make me choose. And now you want my help? How could you do all that to me?”

Seluna grinned, not the least bit repentant. “Perhaps I found it amusing. Demons do love to make humans squirm.”

“I’m also Fae.”

“Oh I know. That’s even better—makes the angst more special. And don’t sell yourself short, dear. You’re more than just a half-Fae. You’re also a *due destini* mate. That’s what attracted me to you in the first place.” Her grin widened. “The power inside you is strong. The love you have for your mates is seemingly unbreakable. I wanted some of that. It was the only thing that could bring me back.”

“And it was also the thing that destroyed you!” I exclaimed. “If you hadn’t tried to force me to choose, I wouldn’t have had to kill you.”

I still wished things had gone differently, that I hadn’t been forced to kill the demon, even after everything she’d done to hurt me and the people I loved. But Seluna had sealed her own fate, and there was no going back now.

The creature squawked at me, and Seluna frowned. “Yes, that’s why we’re here.”

I took a step back. *Did Seluna bring me here so she could kill me?* It defied logic, considering she was asking for my help and warning about my impending death, but maybe demons weren’t sticklers for logic. Maybe some of this was just Seluna having fun, like she’d said before.

Either way, I wasn’t going to let her kill me. Could I summon my magic in here?If so, I could blast Seluna and get the hell out of here. But, as I tried to summon my power, Seluna tsked.

“Caliana, your magic is no good here. Not in my world.”

I swallowed my frustration. “So that’s where we are? This is the demon world?”

She shrugged. “If it were the demon world, you would already be dead. But as I’ve mentioned several times now, I need you alive. Unfortunately, dear Caliana, we need each other.”

A denial rested on the tip of my tongue. After everything she’d done to me and the people I loved, there was no way I’d ever help her, and forcing me to come to this place was kind of the worst possible way to ask for my help, anyway.

Suddenly, voices echoed around us. I looked around, but it was only Seluna and me standing in this godforsaken wasteland. The voices continued, and I was shocked to find that I recognized them. My mom, my dad, Artemis, and Greyson—and they were standing in a hospital room. *My* hospital room. I vaguely remembered being in the back of an ambulance with my parents, and EMTs talking in medicalese and asking my parents all sorts of questions.

*What’s happening? Am I really dying?*

I listened for Xavier, but I couldn’t find his voice. *Why isn’t he with them?*

Xavier would never leave me, especially in a time like this. I couldn’t make out what my family and Greyson were saying, but I could feel the intent of their words—their worry, their panic, their sadness and heartache…

I tried to mind link with Greyson, to tell him I was alive, just trapped in this dreamscape, but I couldn’t seem to make contact. It was like talking to a wall.

Then a voice I didn’t recognize cut my family off. A woman. Her voice was distinct enough for me to make out what they were saying.

“We’re doing all we can, but Caliana isn’t responding. Unless there’s a sudden turnaround in her condition, you should all be prepared for the worst. Caliana will die.”

“I’m not dying!” I screamed. “I’m trapped! With a demon who’s supposed to be dead and out of my life!”

My voice echoed and faded, and the sound of my mother’s sobs told me she hadn’t heard me. I was cut off from them, my voice silenced.

And then, finally, I hit my breaking point.

I’d suffered for months. I’d fought battle after battle to finally regain my freedom. I’d been manipulated, controlled, forced to hurt the people I loved, and for what? Just so I could die now because of some evil demon magic?

*No. No way.*

I turned on Seluna with a snarl. “You brought me here. Send me back! My family is suffering. They don’t want me to die. I don’t *want* to die. Send me back. Let me show them I’m okay.”

Seluna’s smug smile faded. “But you’re not okay, Caliana, and you won’t be until you finally do what needs to be done.”

*Oh my god! I just* can’t *with these riddles!*

I closed the space between us and shoved Seluna as hard as I could. The creature on her shoulder hissed, but Seluna barely budged.

“I killed you once before—I’ll kill you again if I have to!”

My hands burned where they’d made contact with Seluna’s fiery skin, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. What part of me *wasn’t* burning after what she’d put me through? And hey, if I really was dying, then none of this mattered anyway, did it? She had nothing left to use as leverage.

“Whatever this is,” I continued, “it’s gone far enough. Send me back.”

“You’re not the only thing that needs to go back,” Seluna said.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Seluna grabbed the creature from her shoulder. It combusted and fell to the ground. The demon dropped down, scooped up the ashes, and held them out to me. “Look familiar?”

Horror took my breath away. Was she saying what I thought she was saying? That we hadn’t found all the ashes? But that was impossible! We’d tracked them all over the damn country. We’d fought Adéluce for them at Crater Lake. The search for the ashes was supposed to be over. I was supposed to be free. Balance was supposed to be returning to the world.

“No… No! Xavier already took your damn ashes back to the demon world.”

The demon rose, her eyes dark with fury. “Not all of them.”

# Episode 3742

**Xavier**

The image of Cali looking so wasted and sick haunted me as I raced back toward Crater Lake. And my fear only worsened with every footfall. What if she got worse? What if the hospital couldn’t help her and her condition became even more dire while I was away? Would the time we’d just spent together be our last?

I thought back to our New Year’s date. It seemed so long ago now, but that was maybe the last time things had been truly happy and easy between us. We’d thought Seluna was gone. We’d thought Adéluce was gone. We’d thought Cali’s choice was the only thing standing between us and the future.

As wonderful as that time with Cali had been, I couldn’t bear the thought that it could be the last time we’d been happy together. I wanted more. A thousand more happy days together. I wanted Cali to be with me forever.

And if our time was already up—

I pushed myself to run faster.

I couldn’t think like that. That was why I was here: to fight for Cali’s life, for her future, for *our* future. This was the exact reason why I was going after Adéluce—to put an end to her torturing Cali. To show Adéluce that she didn’t own me.

*Hold on a little longer, Cali. I’m gonna fix this.*

It was nowhere near my biggest concern, but I was kind of pissed off at Greyson for being so quick to assume that I’d just bail on our mate. Given any kind of choice, I would *never* leave her—let alone at a time like this. Greyson should’ve known better than to assume that of me.

I’d tried to tell him the truth, but Adéluce’s spell had prevented me from saying anything. Still, Greyson should have known something was wrong. He never would’ve been able to guess that Adéluce was still alive and making our lives hell, but couldn’t he have given me the benefit of the doubt just *once?* Didn’t he know that there was nothing I wouldn’t do for Cali? That I’d give up my life for her in a heartbeat if that was what it took to ensure her safety? Her happiness?

My thoughts turned away from my asshat of a brother and back to Cali. Leaving while she was so sick was the hardest thing I’d ever done. But what was I supposed to do? She was getting worse by the second, maybe even dying, and I was the only one with the information and power to make a damn difference.

I was glad Orla had thought to call an ambulance—human medicine probably couldn’t hurt, under the circumstance—but I seriously doubted it would be able to change the tide of what Adéluce had done to Cali, what she was still doing even now.

No, it was up to me. I was the one who’d put a target on Cali’s back, and now I had to be the one to take it off.

And if everyone at the pack house was thinking the worst of me for Cali at a time like this, then fuck them. I knew what I had to do, and I’d deal with the fallout later. The most important thing right now was saving Cali.

The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced Adéluce was behind everything. She was responsible for Cali’s sudden decline. I didn’t have the first idea *how* she’d managed to do it, with magic being all fucked up, but I knew she was responsible.

I wished, more than anything, that I could have told Cali what was happening. That I could have warned her, and explained why I had to leave. I’d tried, of course, and it had failed spectacularly.

I reached Crater Lake in record time, and slowed as I approached the Phantom Ship Overlook. It suddenly occurred to me that I’d come out here very impulsively. I didn’t have a plan to kill Adéluce other than doing it. I’d rushed right to the meeting point without scoping it out first, or looking for opportunities to gain the upper hand.

Fuck. I was screwing this up already. But I didn’t care. All the planning and preparation in the world wouldn’t mean a damn thing if anything happened to Cali while I was gone. I didn’t have time to be clever about this.

*But that doesn’t mean you can be an idiot. Adéluce is dangerous—she’s proven that more than once.* And, as a vampire-witch, that bitch was pretty much the worst enemy a werewolf could face. Vampires had a definite speed advantage over werewolves, and were just plain difficult to kill. Witches had powerful, lethal magic.

Maybe I didn’t have time to think up a clever plan, here, but I still had to be smart. Adeluce wasn’t going to let her guard down unless she believed I’d come back to make a decision about her ridiculous ultimatum. All I could do at this point was try to convince her that she’d won, and then make my move. And *then* savor the sound of her head being torn off.

*Maybe I could even bring it back to the pack house as a trophy if she doesn’t turn to ash. Put it on the mantelpiece in the living room.*

I smiled at the thought, but that smile faded when I reached the overlook. Adéluce was nowhere to be seen. I looked around with a growl. I hadn’t come all this way, leaving Cali behind to suffer without me, so Adéluce could play games.

I looked around. Was Adéluce already here, watching me? Waiting for me to arrive at midnight to see how I would respond to her ultimatum? *What the hell am I going to do now?*

A low, feminine chuckle made the hairs rise on the back of my neck, and I spun around.

Adéluce was standing behind me, a sickening gleam in her eyes.

Somehow, just by looking at her, I knew I wouldn’t have time to convince her I was genuinely here to take the deal. I’d been stupid to think I could’ve fooled her, anyway. She’d always been one step ahead of me—why should that stop now?

I had to make my move *now*, while I was already shifted, and take her by surprise.

I lunged at her with a snarl, my teeth bared, aiming for her throat. I slammed into a wall of air, so solid it knocked the wind out of my lungs. I crumpled to the ground with a whimper, gasping for breath.

Adéluce tsked as she walked over to my prone form. Her expression was dark and cold. “Do not make that mistake again. You should know by now, Xavier, what happens to those who underestimate me.”

She raised her hands, and I felt something wrap tight around my neck, squeezing until I couldn’t draw in even a tiny gasp of air.

She leaned in close. “Do I make myself clear?”

I let out a wheezy grunt, and moments later, the band around my throat vanished and I could breathe again. For a few seconds, all I could do was lie there and breathe, utterly defeated. What a sight I’m sure I was—an Alpha, defeated. I grit my teeth, grinding them against each other. I couldn’t think like that.

But what the fuck could I do if she made me like this?

“Besides,” Adéluce added, “even if you somehow did manage to kill me, Cali would still die. I’m the only one with the power to save your poor, suffering mate. Don’t forget that.”

I shifted back to human, still panting, but I couldn’t move. Another invisible force bound my limbs. “What do you mean, you’re the only one with the power to save Cali?”

Adéluce laughed. “Haven’t you ever wondered why I gave up the ashes so easily?”

My stomach dropped like it had been filled with stones. I thought of the hell we’d gone through to get those ashes. She thought that was *easy?*

“I mean, sure, you figured out a few things faster than I’d anticipated. Kudos for that, by the way. But in the end, you did exactly what I wanted you to do. I could’ve hidden those ashes for eternity if I’d wanted to.”

I grappled for some sense of control. Something to stave off the helpless rage that was surging inside me. Adéluce might’ve always been a few steps ahead, but I was nobody’s fucking puppet—and certainly not hers.

“I found the ashes and returned them to the demon world. They’re gone now.” I hoped I sounded more confident than I felt. What did she mean she’d given them up easily? What had she done to them? To Cali?

“Are they? Are they truly all gone?” She held up her hand, and I braced myself for another onslaught of her magic. But instead, she wiggled her fingers at me, showing off a diamond ring that glittered in the moonlight. “Or did you leave something behind?”

# Episode 3743

**Xavier**

I stared at the diamond ring on Adéluce’s finger, confusion and dread washing over me. *What the hell is she talking about? Is this just another round of her mind games?*

I just couldn’t accept what she was suggesting—that after all that fucking work, after everything we’d gone through, and all of Cali’s suffering, we’d failed to completely destroy the ashes. That *I’d* failed to completely destroy them.

Adéluce wasn’t even looking at me. Her gaze was locked on the diamond ring sparkling on her finger. “Everything you’re saying is true, and yet Cali is only getting worse. Why do you think that is?”

She put some of the ashes into the diamond, which meant that magic wasn’t balancing out. It never had been. It was still fucked up because all of the ashes hadn’t been returned when I’d gone to the demon world. Like a needle in a haystack. Everything mostly back to normal, except one small piece out of place. Small enough that not even Vander—the Keeper of All fucking Nature—had noticed.

*Fuck.*

If I could move, I’d have choked the fucking life out of the vampire-witch, wiped that smug look right off her face. I fought against her hold on me, ready to tear her throat out first.

She cut me off with a sharp slap, and pain exploded across the side of my face. If I hadn’t been a werewolf, she probably would’ve broken my jaw with the force of the blow.

“You’re a failure,” she snapped. “If you’d truly done your job, would Cali still be suffering? Maybe you should’ve worked a little harder.”

I didn’t want to believe what she was saying, but I couldn’t argue with her logic, either. It was so clear, right in front of me. How had I not seen this? How the *fuck* had I not seen this?

I only knew one thing—that I desperately wanted Adéluce to be lying, even though I knew she wasn’t. She was gloating, which was worse. What was her plan here?

“So, what’s the next part of your twisted plan?” I thought back to our search through New Orleans, our race to Crater Lake, the obstacle course from hell that we’d had to go through to get the ashes, and then the fight on the lake after we’d found them. How could all *that* have been fake? We’d fought so hard. We’d nearly died. All for nothing?

Adéluce shrugged. “I mean, yes, the game has been delicious. But the ashes weren’t fake. You stole them from me and took them to the demon world. You just didn’t take *all* of them, as I know you’ve realized by the expression on your pretty little face,” she said. “I tilted the scales to keep things unbalanced, but small enough to keep it undetected. I kept just enough of the ashes to keep the imbalance in place while making it seem like you’d recovered them all.” She shoved the ring in my face. “They look beautiful on my finger, don’t you think?”

A sudden memory clicked into place. Back in New Orleans, the swamp witch we’d met, Melusine, had told Cali that some of Seluna’s ashes could still be in New Orleans. We’d written off her suspicion when we’d found the ashes at Crater Lake, but now it all made sense. Adéluce had been in New Orleans at the time, after all. She’d had plenty of time to turn the ashes into a diamond, with magic or without.

“I see you’re still in disbelief,” Adeluce said. “How very like you, Xavier. And fair enough. It’s not as if we’ve ever been honest with one another.” She slipped the ring off her finger. “If I destroy this right now, how might your precious mate fare? Should we find out?”

No. She couldn’t destroy it. Then there would be no hope of bringing all the ashes back to the demon world, and I didn’t know what that might mean for the rest of the world, let alone Cali.

I thought back to seeing Cali on that stretcher, how sickly she’d looked. I didn’t want to think catastrophically about things, but she hadn’t been well. At all. At the rate she was declining… I swallowed roughly, that same helpless rage and despair rising higher inside me.

“Stop.” Whether this was part of Adéluce’s game or not, I wasn’t going to take any chances. We’d play, if that was what she wanted. “But how do I know there aren’t even more ashes out there? We met a swamp witch who said that some of the ashes were in Cali.”

“I suppose it comes down to who you choose to believe—some random swamp witch, or the witch who actually possesses the remaining ashes. I will say that if you do choose to save your mate’s life and leave her forever, the rest of the ashes would need to be returned, or she’d eventually die anyway. I know what you think of me, Evers, but I’m a woman of my word—if you leave, Cali will live, and the rest of the ashes will be returned to the demon world. I also give you my word that the ring contains all the ashes that remain in this world.” She shrugged, like she didn’t really care if I believed her or not. “Really, I’d suggest you take the deal and leave your mate forever, before Cali joins the spirit world and it’s all pointless anyway.” She tapped her fingers against her chin. “Though, now that I think about it, there’s a good chance Seluna might just drag Cali’s spirit to the demon world so she can torture her for eternity. Maybe this deal is evergreen, after all.”

My teeth ground together, and I ignored the flare of pain in my still-healing jaw. This was so fucking *maddening*. I hated it. I hated that I was being forced to accept terms that I had no say in.

Adéluce grabbed me again and lifted me to my feet. “Is it possible you’re still having doubts? What more do I have to do or say to convince you?”

I tried to jerk out of her grasp, tried to shift, but I couldn’t so much as twitch. Whatever spell she’d put on me was a hell of a lot more powerful than any of my own innate abilities. I could still speak, though.

“I don’t understand. How are you able to use your magic?” I asked. “If what you say is true, if the magic is still unbalanced because of the ashes in that ring, then why are you able to use your magic so effectively?”

She smiled. “Because I plan ahead.”

She shoved me and I soared backwards, slamming into a tree. White-hot pain shot up my spine and I crumpled to the ground again, still unable to move.

“If anything, my magic is stronger now than it has ever been.” She flexed her hands. “So it would be wise for you not to test me. Do you remember what I said about the deal? That it expires at midnight? Tell me, have you checked the time lately?”

“Of course I fucking haven’t,” I snarled.

She made some kind of witchy hand gesture and a large clock appeared, floating in front of me.

“Only two minutes to midnight,” she said in a sing-song voice. “Time is slipping away. Just like Cali’s life.”

She snapped her fingers and the clock gave way to the image of a hospital ICU room. Greyson, Tom, Orla, and Artemis were all standing around a bed, and in the bed lay Cali, hooked up to more machines than I could count. She looked absolutely wasted, like she’d declined dramatically even since the last time I’d seen her.

A doctor stood at Cali’s bedside, shaking her head. “I’m so sorry, but there’s nothing we can do.”

Orla began to sob, and Artemis and Tom were teary-eyed too.

I tried to call out for Cali, but my mouth wouldn’t cooperate. My throat closed up again, and my tongue burned. Fucking Adéluce and her fucking spells! This was all her fault! She was toying with us, playing with my mate’s life, just so she could torture me.

Adéluce snapped her fingers again and the image vanished. “Unless you agree to leave Cali and never return in the next forty seconds, she will slip into a coma. She could remain in that state for days, weeks, months. Who knows? She might have some good days. She might even regain consciousness long enough to talk—if she lives beyond a few days. But make no mistake, she will waste away and die. And it won’t be pretty. Is that what you want? To watch her die slowly and painfully, knowing you could have stopped it?”

And it was then that I realized there was no escaping this. I couldn’t kill Adéluce right now, even if I wanted to. Not with the hold she had on me, both physically and mentally. Not if I wanted Cali to survive.

I poured every ounce of malice I had into my glare. “*Fine*. I’ll do whatever you want.” I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t let Cali waste away like that. Even if I found some way to kill Adéluce now, I’d never be able to live with myself. “I’ll take your deal.”

“Lovely.” She smiled, then grabbed me by the throat.

# Episode 3744

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. What did Seluna mean, we hadn’t gotten rid of all the ashes? A chill rippled over my burning skin, and my stomach clenched so tightly I thought I might vomit.

I wanted to believe she was lying to me—it wasn’t like I felt anything even *resembling* trust for the demon. But what could she possibly have to gain from lying now? If I really was dying—and that didn’t seem outside the realms of possibility—then could she be right? Had we failed to return all the ashes after all?

*How is that even possible?*

We’d found the urn at Crater Lake—I was the beacon that had led us on that journey, through that terrible gauntlet. We’d nearly died retrieving the ashes from Adéluce, and now… what? We hadn’t been quite thorough enough, so now I was dying?

*What the hell? Why was I not told about this? Why didn’t I get a sign, or a vision, or anything that might have told me that some of the ashes were still out there?*

I racked my brain for a solution, anything close to an explanation, and thought back to what Melusine had said—that some of the ashes were inside me, and still in New Orleans.

*Do I need to go to the demon world myself? Is that what it’ll take to draw the last of Seluna’s essence from my body?*

But Big Mac had said that no one could ever return from the demon world.

“You’re wrong,” I said. “You have to be. I can’t go to the demon world. I won’t. You need to just accept that you’re dead and stop torturing me. All this time, you’ve just been trying to cling to the damn magic you infused in me—which I never asked for, by the way. I never wanted it! So just leave me the hell alone and get over yourself!

Seluna’s eyes narrowed. “There are no ashes inside you. There never have been. My magic still clings to you because of the ashes that have not yet been returned. Once the final pieces have left this mortal plane, so will my magic.”

I frowned, shaking my head. “But Xavier returned the ashes. I know he did.”

“He didn’t,” Seluna said. “Not all of them, in any case. There are still ashes out there—ashes you need to return to the demon world before the magic imbalance kills you, and likely everyone around you.”

*Everyone… Oh god.* My head spun with the weight of this revelation. Again, I thought I was going to be sick all over the hot sand. I bent over, retching and coughing even though nothing came up. My skin flashed hot, then cold. *I’m dying. The magic is killing me. And if those ashes aren’t returned, I’ll eventually end up dead. And maybe I’ll drag the people I love along with me.*

This was worse than my very worst nightmare. Where could we even *begin* to look for the rest of the ashes?

*Do we go back to New Orleans? How am I supposed to go anywhere when I’m apparently so sick I require hospitalization? I can’t even help myself now!*

Suddenly, Seluna grabbed me by the hair and forced me upright.

I screeched at the sharp pain in my scalp. “Let go of me!”

“Don’t you *understand?*” she snarled. “There’s no time—no time to grieve, no time to worry, no time to wonder and whine and think, ‘Woe is me!’ You are the only one who knows about this! You have to wake the fuck up and go get those ashes!”

“Don’t you think I *want* to wake up and get the hell out of here?” I snapped back.

Maybe it was because I was dying, or because I knew that Seluna’s power—as painful and terrifying as it was—was now limited, or maybe it was because I’d finally been pushed to a breaking point. The fear I’d once had for the demon was no longer as powerful as my hate and anger for her. I wasn’t afraid of her anymore, only afraid of how powerless and trapped I was in this realm.

“I don’t know *how!*” I continued. “That’s the whole problem. And even if I do wake up, what am I supposed to do? Tell Greyson and Xavier the ashes aren’t all in the demon realm? Where the hell would we even start looking?” It had taken nearly everything for us to find and retrieve the ashes that Adéluce had taken, and it was absolutely devastating to realize we weren’t done yet. The task of finding more of the ashes now felt more than daunting—it felt impossible. Futile. I felt utterly defeated just thinking about it. I pulled in one breath after another, but I just couldn’t seem to draw in enough air. “Besides, you’re the one who trapped me here, aren’t you? *You* tell me how to get out of here. And while you’re at it, why don’t you tell me where the remaining ashes are, if you’re so powerful?”

Seluna slapped me so hard, my head snapped to the side. “Snap. The fuck. *Out of it!* Are you a Fae? Are you a *due destini* mate? Pull yourself together and do this, or else we’re both done for. Do you hear me?”

It was all I could do to stagger away from her. I couldn’t handle hearing her talk to me this way anymore. It felt like I was actively dying, now—my heart pounding against my chest like a caged animal, my lungs threatening to close up shop for good, the fiery desert spinning around me. And in the middle of all that, I heard a faraway beeping that was getting faster and faster, along with frantic voices.

*What’s happening?*

I forced myself to stand upright and meet Seluna’s eyes.

“Get away from me!” I screamed, and I didn’t know how it was possible, but my Fae magic erupted from my hands, and I blasted Seluna back several feet.

Seluna didn’t take long to recover. She stood, wiping the blood from her lips with a rueful smile. “Well, look what the Fae had in her. I underestimated your guts. Tell me—how mad are you, really? I know you must hate me.”

I did. I really did. Probably more than I’d ever hated anyone in my entire life. This demon had uprooted my life and taken so much from me, body and mind. She’d broken me into pieces, wounded me so deeply that even now, even if we did find the last of the ashes, I didn’t know if I’d ever fully recover.

“You should know better than to underestimate me,” I spat. “That’s how you ended up dead in the first place.”

Pure, hot rage built within me, like a volcano about to erupt, and I screamed again and loosed my magic on the demon. Helplessness fueled my rage—even wielding such intense magic, I still didn’t know how to get out of here, how to fix any of this.

All I wanted was to be back in my body, back with my mates, with my parents, with my sister and my friends.

*Am I ever going to have that again?*

I wished I knew. The odds didn’t look good. What if my body gave up before I got the chance to go back and tell Greyson and Xavier we needed the rest of the ashes? What if I was stuck here forever, and I never got a chance to tell any of the people I loved how much they meant to me?

No matter what came next, I knew one thing for certain: this was all Seluna’s fault. Because she was selfish. She just had to involve others in her evil schemes. She just had to use me as her pawn, and I’d been paying the price for that selfishness ever since.

It was that demon bitch’s turn to pay, so I poured ever more fury into the magic I shot at her. The magic moved toward her, rippling through the hot air. Seluna barely missed the blow, moving out of the way at the last second.

I narrowed my eyes at Seluna. “If I get out of this, I’m going to make sure you die for good.”

The demon gave me a wicked grin. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

Then the beeping in my ears crescendoed.

Suddenly I heard Greyson’s voice. His mind link.

*Love,* he said. *Can you hear me?*

Then, just as abruptly as I’d found myself in this hellscape, I was ripped out of it. A white, shining light engulfed me. The beeping was louder now, and closer—almost like it was right next to me.

I peeled my eyes open and found myself in a hospital bed. My entire body felt heavy, as if I’d been hit by a truck. I could barely lift my head, and gave up, but when I turned I saw who was next to me: Greyson. I gasped, then saw that my parents and Artemis were there, too.

Greyson leaned forward. “Cali?”

I’d made it back.

# Episode 3745

**Xavier**

I struggled to pull in a breath. “Why the fuck are you choking me?” I wheezed. “You wanted the deal, and you got the deal.”

Adéluce gave me a razor-sharp smile. “I want to see you suffer, to give you a glimpse of what lies ahead for my favorite werewolf.” She tightened her grip on my throat, and it was all I could to sputter and gag under the pressure. “But make no mistake—this is *nothing* compared to the pain you’re going to feel every day for the rest of your goddamn life.”

She released my throat and I crumpled to the ground at her feet. This time, at least, I was able to find my footing and stand up—though I couldn’t do much else.

“Don’t you dare do that again,” I warned her, my voice rough. Even as I said the words, though, they felt like an empty threat—I hadn’t been able to stop her from doing a damn thing so far, after all—but that didn’t mean the tables wouldn’t turn at some point in the near future.

And that fool’s hope was all that kept me from falling into complete despair—that and the promise that Cali would be safe. If, at the end of this, those two pieces of knowledge were all I had, I’d be able to live with that.

So I’d accept her deal for now, in order to save Cali, but I *would* find a way out of this. No matter what.

“Before we get into the full terms of the deal, allow me to make one thing clear: these terms are non-negotiable. I’ve had a lot of time to consider them, and I’ve chosen them very carefully.” She smiled. “But let’s face it, you don’t have any leverage here anyway. I’ve got all the cards.”

“Just get on with it,” I gritted out. “What do you want from me?”

“Oh, Xavier. That’s just it. I want *everything*. Everything you hold dear.”

A chill rippled down my spine.

“Now, here are my terms: in exchange for my returning the last of Seluna’s ashes to the demon world and stopping Cali’s deathly decline, you will end your relationship with her. This means you will no longer be with her, by any definition—physically, romantically, sexually, emotionally. She cannot be in your life whatsoever.”

“You can’t do that,” I growled.

Adéluce rolled her eyes. “I can. And I am. Or would you like Cali to continue seeing wisps? I have to say, I didn’t see that Fae Shard coming; it was a pesky little thing holding my magic back from speeding up her decline,” she said. “But we find a way, don’t we?”

“So that *was* you?”

It made sense. With the Shard on, Cali was somewhat protected from the effect of the ashes. Remove it, and she’d be more susceptible to Adéluce’s magic. Whatever she’d ended up doing had clearly been powerful if it’d hurt Cali while she had still had the Shard on.

*Fuck*.

“Of course it was me, Xavier. Just like all your pack witches’ problems with their magic. The magic imbalance is such a gift that keeps on giving, isn’t it?”

“Leave them all out of this,” I said.

“Noble, but there are no happy endings here. Or, at least, not for you. I want you to spend the rest of your days pining, yearning for her, knowing that the best thing for your precious Cali—the *only* thing—is for you to stay away. And while you ache for her, you will suffer twice over, because she’ll be left with your brother. And even then, you will only know an ounce of the suffering you’ve inflicted on me. You do all that, or she dies. The decision is yours.”

God dammit. I hated that she knew exactly what to say to piss me off.

I clung to my two sources of comfort. *Cali will be safe this way. And Adéluce can babble all she wants, but I’ll still break through this deal somehow. I* will *be free of her. Cali and I will* both *be free of her.*

“And, just like things played out today, you won’t be able to reveal our agreement. You won’t be able to explain it to anyone. Nobody will know what you’ve done, what you’ve given up, or what this cost you. I know you’ve already tried and failed to ask for help, so you should know I’ll hold you to it.” She smiled. “And while Cali will undoubtedly be hurt by your inexplicable rejection, I’m sure that eventually, over time, she will forget all about you. You will be a sour memory for her, at best, while she lives out her life far away from you.”

I shook my head. “That’s where you’re wrong. Cali would never forget me. Have you forgotten about our mate bond?”

“I haven’t, but don’t you also have a mate bond with another woman?”

I froze. *Ava*. It shouldn’t have surprised me that Adéluce knew about my bond with Ava, but it was still unnerving as fuck that she knew so much about me.

“That situation is completely different,” I said. For instance, Ava had been dead for several years, and I’d spent most of the time since her death and resurrection outright hating her. I would never, *ever* hate Cali. What Ava and I had was nothing like what Cali and I had. “I don’t see what my bond with Ava has to do with any of this.”

Adéluce shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Or maybe it does. Perhaps a witch such as myself can’t do anything to break a werewolf mate bond, but who knows? The bond may just break itself. I’ve found time has a way of tidying things up.” She paused for a moment. “Hmm… Is there anything I’ve left out?”

I could think of a few things—like the fact that she was going to end up choking on all her bullshit, right before I ripped her head off.

After a beat, she asked, “Do you have any questions?”

“No.”

Her brows rose. “Really? None at all? I have to say, I didn’t think you would accept this so easily.”

“I don’t have any questions because none of this will matter in the long run,” I said. “No matter what you do to me, I’ll find a way to overcome it.”

She snorted, then burst into full-on laughter. “Oh, that’s a good one. That’s the thing I love about you, Xavier—you’re so ready to cling to false hope with everything you have, aren’t you? But hey, who am I to ruin your dreams?” She made a show of pretending to wipe the laugh-tears from her eyes. “There’s just one more thing.”

I bit back a sigh. “What more could you possibly want from me?”

She raised a hand, and I braced myself for another blast of magic, or another slap. Instead, she grabbed my wrist and slashed a sharp nail across it, leaving a thin line of blood in her wake.

Then she looked me dead in the eyes, extending her fangs. “Do you accept my deal, Xavier Evers?”

It took every ounce of control I possessed—not to mention the control magic she was still using on me—not to spit right into those hateful eyes of hers.

Instead, I made myself nod.

“Say it, Xavier. I want to hear it.”

*This is for Cali. To save her.*

I pulled in a deep breath and spoke through gritted teeth. “I accept your deal.”

Adéluce raised my bleeding wrist, chanted something in a language I’d never heard before, then allowed my blood to drip into her fanged mouth.

A shiver rippled down my spine, and suddenly it felt like my heart was being ripped from my chest. I fell to my knees with a pained groan, too weak to stand.

*What the hell is she doing to me?*

Images of Cali passed through my head, then faded away into distant darkness. A visceral, primitive scream jerked me back into the present, and I was shocked to realize it was my own.

I snapped my mouth shut, my teeth clacking together as a wave of nausea slammed into me. Suddenly, a sharp pain burned behind my ear.

Adéluce chanted some more, and then all the pain stopped.

“You’re free to go. Our bargain is sealed. I’ll send the ring to the demon world immediately.” She smiled wistfully. “Oh, I so look forward to all the suffering you’re going to endure, even if it’s only a fraction of what I’ve had to live through.”

I slowly rose to my feet, swaying unsteadily. This vampire-bitch could wax poetic about all the sadistic shit she wanted to do to me, but it didn’t matter. Because in the end, she wasn’t going to win.

I clung to those fragments of hope—*I’m saving Cali; I’ll find a way out of this*—like the lifeline they were. Adéluce might think she’d won, but I’d prove her wrong soon enough. Nothing could keep me away from Cali, or her from me. I had my mate, my friends, and the power and knowledge of two witches behind me. Hell, I even had my asshat brother. Together, we’d never come up against a challenge we couldn’t overcome, a villain we couldn’t defeat. And Adéluce would be no different. She’d cornered me now, but I’d find a way out. And the next time I killed her, I’d make sure she couldn’t come back.

“I won’t let you get away with this,” I said. “It will never work. Cali is too smart—she’ll know there’s something wrong. She’ll figure it out.”

Adéluce didn’t seem concerned. “Then I suppose you’ll have no choice but to make her hate you.”

# Episode 3746

**Greyson**

I couldn’t take much more of this. Cali was hooked up to all kinds of wires and tubes. She looked like someone out of a hospital drama, someone who was dy—

*No. Don’t fucking go there, Greyson.*

I shied away from the thought, even though the doctor had just as good as told us that Cali’s prognosis was… not good. And it didn’t take a doctor to know that, either. I hadn’t wanted to admit it, then, but I’d known back at the pack house that Cali’s life was in danger.

God, I hated seeing her like this. She looked so sick, my heart just couldn’t take it. I felt like I was about to break. I could fight Silas, Letifer, Adéluce, and everything else that went bump in the night, but seeing my mate like this was just unbearable. Watching helplessly, knowing she was fighting for her life and that I couldn’t do jack shit about it—it made me want to scream, to sob, to smash everything, to burn down the whole goddamn world.

It wasn’t like this was the first time that Cali had faced something dangerous. She’d been in peril what felt like countless times. But at least then, I’d been able to do things to help her, to protect her, to save her. We’d even been able to work together and protect each other.

But this? There was no ‘together’, here, and it was painfully clear that I’d failed to protect her. This was the worst thing I could think of. I couldn’t do anything but sit by and watch her suffer, watch her waste away.

*I can’t save her.*

She’d been writhing in pain since I’d arrived at her room in the ICU. Sometimes she screamed, other times she just whimpered. And as awful as it was to watch her suffer, to watch her go through so much pain, those few seconds between pain-filled bouts when she went completely still were even worse. Every time that happened, I held my breath, along with everyone else in the room.

But then, without warning, her eyes opened.

“Cali?” My voice broke on her name, my heart tripping over itself, and I cleared my throat. “Cali, love, can you hear me?”

Her eyes drifted shut again, and I tightened my grip on her hand, just shy of causing pain. The doctors must have finally stabilized her. This was the best sign we’d gotten from her in the hours since we’d arrived.

I hadn’t left her bedside once, and I fucking dared anyone to try to remove me. I wasn’t going anywhere while her life was on the line. I wasn’t giving up a fucking second of watching her breathe.

I looked over at Orla, Tom, and Artemis. Tom was holding Orla, and Artemis had a hand on her mom’s shoulder. They were all red-eyed and sniffling, watching Cali from the other side of the hospital bed with the same desperation I was feeling.

I turned my attention back to my mate and squeezed her hand again, a little softer this time.

“I love you so much,” I whispered. “Did you know that? You brought me back to myself. You’re the only reason I can do anything. Do you know what your love is capable of, Cali? Please don’t leave me, love. I need you here with me. We all do.” I pressed my lips to her cold fingers. “I’m not giving up on you. You’re the strongest person I know.”

*Whatever happens, she’s going to be all right. She is. She has to be.*

Then Cali squeezed my hand.

The machines began to beep wildly, and when I looked back up at Cali’s face, her eyes were open again.

“Greyson?” she rasped. “What happened?”

My heart exploded with pure joy, and I couldn’t hold back the sob of relief that tore my chest open. Tears slipped down my cheeks as I wrapped my arms around her as gently as I could and caught her in a sweet kiss. She kissed me back weakly, her fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt.

This was the happiest I’d ever been in my life. Cali was awake. She was okay.

I hadn’t lost her.

I buried my face in her neck and cried a little more, and she held me tight, whispering, “I love you. I love you.”

Once I’d gotten ahold of myself, Orla, Tom, and Artemis all rushed forward.

“Cali!” Orla burst out. “How are you feeling?”

Tom rushed to the doorway to call for a nurse while Orla and Artemis crowded around Cali to take their turn giving hugs and talking with her. I made room, but my hand never left Cali’s. I’d just come way too close to losing her. As far as I was concerned, I was never letting her go again.

And she looked *good*. Better. So much better. Color had returned to her cheeks. She seemed lucid and present and no longer in pain.

*But is it going to stick?*

I hated myself for even thinking it, but I was still so goddamn afraid of losing her. Her illness, or whatever the hell it was, had just come on so fast. What was to say she wouldn’t relapse?

The nurse came in and did a double-take at Cali’s appearance.

“You’re awake!” She smiled. “How are you feeling?”

She rushed to Cali’s side and, after asking us to step back, checked Cali’s vitals. Her confusion only seemed to worsen the longer she looked at Cali.

“Everything seems to be normal,” the nurse said, looking a little baffled. “You’re completely stable now, but I’m not sure how.”

I mind linked with Cali. *Don’t worry, love. We’ll protect you. I won’t let anything else happen to you.*

My joy doubled when she replied. *Thank you, Greyson. I love you so much.*

“I’m going to get a doctor,” the nurse said. “I want to make sure all this makes sense, and it’d be good to get another opinion on Miss Hart’s quick turnaround.”

“Thank you,” Orla said, and the nurse left.

Orla immediately threw her arms around Cali again. “My little girl. I’m so relieved you’re awake.”

“What happened?” Cali asked.

“We’re not entirely sure,” Orla admitted, “but we think it was the handprint. The lingering magic taking its toll on you.”

Cali’s face scrunched up in confusion. “I sort of remember that.”

I took her hand again. “What else do you remember?”

“I remember… being at the pack house, and…” Her brows knit together as she looked up at me. “You and Xavier fighting?”

I winced, hating myself a little for the fact that that had made the list of things Cali could remember. But as much as I wished she hadn’t been a witness to that, it only reminded me how pissed off I was at Xavier. He was still off wherever the hell, doing god only knew what. I still had no fucking clue why he’d bailed when Cali had never needed him more.

*He should be here. He’s a fucking coward, running away when things get tough.*

Sure, I’d been forced to step away while the paramedics had loaded Cali onto the gurney, and we’d been separated for the journey to the hospital, but otherwise, I hadn’t left her side. I’d been there while she’d suffered on the couch. I’d been there when the doctor had told us she was dying, and then I’d stayed and held her hand, believing in her, loving her, until she woke up.

Where the *hell* was Xavier?

I gritted my teeth. I had to stop thinking about it. If I kept ruminating, I’d probably explode, and that was the last thing I wanted to do right now. Cali was still so delicate, and this was supposed to be a happy occasion.

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking off some of the tension that was coiling my shoulders together.

Cali looked distant for a moment, and it scared the shit out of me. She wasn’t losing consciousness again, was she? Or seeing things? Was she relapsing right now, in front of me?

I squeezed her hand again. “Stay with us, okay?”

Cali gave me a weak smile. “Of course. It just… It feels like I was just in the pack house a minute ago, and then I woke up here. It’s… a lot.”

“I know, love,” I said fervently. “How are you feeling?”

Artemis handed Cali a paper cup full of water, and she released my hand to take it. She took one sip, then another. “I feel good. Weirdly good, actually.”

The band of fear curled tight around my chest eased a bit. “Should we check on the handprint?”

It had stopped glowing before we’d brought her to the hospital—luckily—but what kind of state could it possibly be in now?

Cali nodded. “Let’s do it. I want to see.”

Artemis peeked out into the hallway to make sure there were no hospital staff heading over, then Orla helped ease the gown down over Cali’s shoulder.

We all gasped at what we saw—or rather, what we didn’tsee.

The handprint was gone.

# Episode 3747

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. For the first time in months, when I looked at my shoulder, all I saw was smooth, unblemished skin. The handprint was gone, along with any signs that it had ever existed. It was like it had been completely erased.

My fingers shook as I pressed them to the spot where the handprint had been. I tensed, half-expecting pain. Half-expecting to feel raised skin on my shoulder, and the pattern of the handprint.

But all I felt was my cool fingertips.

“I don’t… How… How is this possible?” I stammered. A sob slipped through my lips, and I covered my mouth with my hand. I didn’t know what to say, how to feel—though I was feeling a lot. There just weren’t words to describe my joy, my confusion, my fear, my relief.

Would the handprint come back? Did this mean I was finally free of Seluna? That balance had been restored to the world’s magic?

Tears blurred my vision before spilling down my cheeks in hot trails. “It’s gone,” I sobbed. “It’s gone. It’s all gone.”

My mother wrapped me in her arms and stroked my hair. “It’s over, sweetheart. It’s finally over.”

I hugged her back with my free hand. Greyson was still gripping the other hand like he was never letting go. There was so much love and support around me, I almost couldn’t take it.

My mom smoothed my hair back, and my dad leaned in to press a kiss to my forehead.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” he whispered.

Artemis stood a little farther down the bed, simply because there wasn’t a whole lot of room with my parents crowding in on one side and Greyson on the other. She squeezed my ankle through the thin hospital blanket. “You did it, Cali. You’re free.”

I couldn’t believe it. I *wanted* to believe it, but I was terrified of being wrong. How long had that handprint been torturing me? How long had I been at the mercy of Seluna and the remnants of her magic? I’d almost forgotten what it felt like to exist without all that power weighing me down. And now that it seemed to be gone, I could barely wrap my head around its absence.

But what on earth had caused it to vanish? What could’ve changed? Was it just that I’d endured the last of the magic rebalancing? That things had gotten scary for a while, but I’d been strong enough to see it through and recover?

I racked my brain for any clue that could explain what had happened to me. I’d been honest when I’d told Greyson and my family that I didn’t remember what had happened since we’d left the pack house earlier. But the more I thought about it, the more I started to *almost* remember a dream I’d had…

I felt like Seluna had been there. And we… We’d had a conversation, or something? It felt like it had been an important conversation, somehow. But I couldn’t recall what we’d talked about, no matter how hard I tried.

Did that dream have anything to do with all this?

“How did this happen?” I asked. “Does it have anything to do with the magic—”

I snapped my mouth shut as the doctor came in with the nurse from earlier, both of whom were smiling from ear to ear.

“It *was* magic,” the doctor said, clearly having heard my last few words. “It’s a miracle, actually. You went from multi-system organ failure to completely stable in a matter of minutes. How are you feeling, Caliana?”

“Um, good,” I said. “A lot better than before.”

I obviously couldn’t tell the doctor the truth: ‘Oh, I was under the influence of some magical demon mark. You know how that goes. But the balance of magic has been restored, so now all is right in the world!’

The doctor nodded. “I’m so glad to hear that,” she said. “You do look a lot better, though I’d still like to run a few more blood tests. It looks like you’re out of the woods, but I want to confirm it against your lab work to make sure. It was such a random event, but you declined very quickly nonetheless. We want to make sure we don’t miss anything.”

“I understand,” I said, though my stomach clenched at the thought of what they might find. Hopefully nothing else and this nightmare could be over for real.

“I’ll let you know as soon as we get your blood work back. From what I can tell, today’s episode aside, you’re a perfectly healthy young woman, and I’m hoping your labs will confirm that.”

Artemis turned to me with a grin. “I’m going to tell Rishika and the others.”

I glanced at Greyson and mind linked, *You don’t think I need to worry about the blood tests, right?*

But now that I thought about it, I remembered that my mom had been in hospital for a long time, and no one had ever figured out she wasn’t human. That made me relax.

Greyson shook his head. “Don’t worry. They’re not going to find anything. Humans don’t generally believe in werewolves and Fae, so there’s no test for that.”

I nodded and relaxed. He was right. They wouldn’t find anything out of the ordinary. They couldn’t. Which meant it was probably best to just let them do their thing. We didn’t want to give anyone any reason to suspect there was anything out of the ordinary going on, at least by human standards. They could do all the tests they wanted, but at the end of it, I’d be able to go back to my not-so-ordinary life.

I sipped at my cup of water as the doctor turned to my parents. “I think given the circumstances, we don’t need to hold her overnight, but I’d like us to do check-ins. The nurse will organize everything, okay?” She glanced at Greyson. “You’re the fiancé, right?”

I almost spat water everywhere. *Fiancé?!* How much did I miss? I definitely didn’t remember being proposed to, or saying yes!

Greyson gave me a sly little smile before turning his attention to my doctor. “Yes, that’s me. I appreciate you letting me be here for Cali. This is… not how we’d hoped our day would go, and I appreciate everything you’ve done for her.”

The doctor smiled. “Well, her miraculous recovery is probably the best wedding present you could ever receive.”

Greyson nodded. “It certainly is.”

While they had that chummy conversation, I blushed so hard I half-expected the doctor to order more tests.

“The nurse is just around the corner,” the doctor added, looking from Greyson to my parents and back. “I’m sure the three of you can work on the release paperwork together.”

“We sure can. Thank you, doctor,” Greyson said. He glanced at me and winked before his voice slipped into my mind. *I’m so damn happy you’re okay.*

I couldn’t help smiling in return. *Thanks, fiancé.*

*It does have a good ring to it, doesn’t it?*

I felt myself flush all over. I hadn’t expected Greyson to go that route in order to get into the hospital room, but I was glad he had. Waking up and seeing his face along with my family’s had been such a relief.

Once the four of us were alone, my parents turned to Greyson with wide eyes.

“*Fiancé?*” my dad repeated.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I just said it so they’d let me in the room—there’s no box to check for mates in a human hospital.”

My parents seemed relieved, and I couldn’t blame them. Today had to have been one hell of a roller coaster for them.

I shook off my embarrassment over Greyson’s ruse and cleared my throat. “So, what do you think happened to me? Do you think the magic has finally balanced itself out, and that’s why I got better? Was that the last stage of the ashes being returned? One last huge surge of awful before the dust finally settled?”

Greyson shrugged. “I have no idea, but I certainly hope that was it.”

I hoped so too. *Does this mean that all of this Seluna shit is finally over?*

It felt too good to be true—so much so that I was afraid of saying it out loud. I’d been stuck in this awful situation for so long that the idea of freedom was almost too perfect to think about, because I wouldn’t be able to bear it if I was wrong. But something in my gut told me that yes, it was over. Finally. After months of torture and pain, nightmares and hallucinations, I was free of Seluna.

Artemis came back in, Rishika and the rest of the pack in tow.

“We’re so glad you’re okay!” Rishika burst out.

I smiled, looking at all the people crowding into the room to celebrate my recovery. People who cared so much about me.

My smile faded when I realized one very important person was missing.

I turned to Greyson. “Where’s Xavier?”

# Episode 3748

**Greyson**

It wasn’t surprising that Xavier was one of Cali’s first concerns after waking up, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t getting under my skin. I was working overtime to keep my expression neutral so she didn’t realize how disappointed I was.

*I’m the one who came to the hospital to be by her side. Xavier couldn’t even be bothered. He rushed off for whatever selfish reason, as always. Still, Cali’s asking about him. I know that she loves him and that he’s her mate, too, but does she have any idea how that makes me feel?*

“I have no idea where he is,” I said, keeping my voice even. It wasn’t Cali’s fault that she was so worried about Xavier, even if he didn’t deserve it.

“Really?” Cali’s face collapsed into worry. “It’s just hard to believe that he would abandon me at a time like this with no explanation. He must have a good reason for not being here.” Cali’s eyes flitted toward the door, like she was hoping my brother would come walking through it at any moment.

I didn’t say anything. There was nothing to say, really. I was tired of defending my brother, especially to Cali. Xavier was going to have to dig himself out of this one all on his own. It wasn’t like he was making a point of keeping me in the loop about what was going on in his life. I didn’t have the slightest idea why he’d run off in the first place, and I couldn’t help but think about how he seemed to be disappearing more and more lately.

I gave Cali’s hand a reassuring squeeze, just as Orla came in to help her get ready to leave.

“Want to walk with me to get her discharge papers?” Tom asked.

“Sure,” I said, still a little distracted by Cali’s preoccupation with Xavier. I understood it completely, but I didn’t like it one bit.

“Thanks for helping everyone through this,” Tom said as we headed to the nurses’ station. “Watching my daughter flirt with death is one of the most horrifying things I’ve ever experienced.”

“I can’t argue with that,” I said.

Tom suddenly pulled me into a hug, and I was surprised by how not awkward it was. I relaxed into it, realizing that the comfort was doing wonders for me. I’d been more tense about Cali’s condition than I’d realized.

The nurse appeared with the discharge papers in hand and cleared her throat politely. “Sorry to interrupt. I have all Cali’s paperwork right here.” She turned her attention to me. “Congratulations on the engagement, by the way. Have you guys set a date for the wedding? Do you know where you’re honeymooning, yet?”

I cleared my throat a little louder than I meant to. “Um… It’s still a work in progress,” I said. Tom was smiling easily behind me, and I was grateful that he was being so cool about my little fib.

As we looked over Cali’s discharge notes, I couldn’t help but think about being married to Cali, and how amazing it would be. I wouldn’t care if we honeymooned in our backyard—as long as I was with her, nothing else would matter. If we were married, there would be no Xavier, no asking after him, no wondering where he was or who he was with. It would just be me and Cali, together, like we were meant to be.

Artemis wheeled Cali out of her room in a wheelchair. The sisters were chattering excitedly as they made their way toward us, relief written across both of their faces.

“So, shall we get her home?” Artemis asked in a sing-song voice.

“Please!” Cali said breathily. “I can’t wait to get out of here. No offense,” she said, shooting the nurse a look, “but I don’t love hospitals.”

“No patient does,” the nurse said with a smile and a wink. “You remember to get plenty of rest and drink lots of liquids; we don’t want to see you back here.”

“I will, thank you,” Cali said, a little shyly.

The nurse hurried off and we all piled onto the elevator, me taking over wheelchair pushing duties from Artemis.

“This is so unnecessary,” Cali said as she fidgeted in the wheelchair. “I don’t need to be in this thing. I can walk on my own.”

“Yes, sweetie, but it’s hospital policy,” Tom said. “You have to be wheeled out, or they won’t discharge you.”

The elevator opened on our cheering pack. I wheeled Cali out, feeling proud of the Redwood pack and the way we always stuck together, no matter what.

*With the exception of Xavier. He only cares about himself. Funny that he wants to lead a pack he isn’t even an active member of, most of the time.*

I knew that Xavier would disagree and didn’t see anything wrong with his behavior, but he and I differed on that. I shook my head and sighed. I refused to keep thinking about him. If my brother was okay with acting the way he was, that was on him. I wasn’t going to take up any more of my mental space with his antics.

I drove Cali, Orla, Tom, and Artemis back to the pack house, with the other pack members bringing up the rear. Cali still seemed a little tired and out of sorts as I helped her into the house, where the rest of the pack was waiting to greet her. Even though I knew she was tired, she took her time talking to each of the pack members, assuring them that she was okay and that she was out of the woods, so to speak.

“Has anyone seen Xavier?” she asked.

Ravi shrugged. “We thought he was at the hospital with all of you.”

I could sense Cali’s concern, even before she turned to look at me.

“Why isn’t he here?” she asked me.

“I wish I had an answer for you,” I said, trying hard to mask my growing annoyance. In that moment, I couldn’t have cared less about Xavier, but it tore me up to see how much his absence was upsetting Cali. She didn’t need this right now. She needed to rest and take it easy, not worry about whatever mess he was probably getting himself out of—or into.

*Why doesn’t he realize that his recklessness doesn’t only affect the pack, but Cali, too? I’d have thought he’d at least give a shit about her, of all people.*

This should’ve been a joyous occasion. Cali was home, the balance of magic had finally been restored, and Cali was healthier now than she’d been in a long while—but because of Xavier, we couldn’t even focus on that.

“Greyson, are you going to send someone to look for Xavier?” Cali asked.

I hesitated, knowing that I had no plans to do any such thing. *And why should I? Xavier left without explanation when Cali needed him most.* But I knew that if anyone else had gone missing—Rishika or Zainab or any other pack member—I would’ve wasted no time sending out a search party. As the Redwood Alpha, it was my job to look after the pack… Which meant I was going to have to push my anger aside and round up a team to go looking for my brother. It would reassure Cali and give her a little relief from her worry—and honestly, that was enough of a reason to do it.

“I’ll have Rishika and Ravi go look for him,” I said.

“I’ll go, too,” Cali said. “And before you tell me no, you should know that I’ve never felt better, and I’m really worried about my mate.”

My jaw tightened at the word ‘mate’. *Some mate Xavier is. Is this the kind of thing that mates do? Abandon their deathly ill partners with no explanation?*

“Cali, I know you’re feeling better, but I don’t think it makes sense for you to go tonight,” I said carefully. “You just lived through a near death experience—let’s not push it. Please. Okay?”

“Fine, fine, maybe going out with a search party is pushing it,” she conceded. “But there’s no way I’m going to be able to sleep. I’m going to wait up until Xavier’s back, safe and sound.”

I gave a stiff nod. “And I’ll wait with you.” I turned to Ravi. “Could you and Rishika go track down Xavier?”

Ravi nodded. “Yes, of course. We’ll find him.”

“Great. If you don’t find him within the hour, come back here and we’ll decide what to do next,” I said.

“Thank you, Greyson,” Cali said as Ravi left to go get Rishika. “I know you and Xavier haven’t been on the best of terms lately, but I’m glad you’ve agreed to this.”

“I can see how worried you are. It’s a no brainer,” I said.

I looked down at my mate, still in shock at how completely she seemed to have recovered. It almost seemed too good to be true, but it wasn’t. She was better. The handprint was gone. Everything was right in the world again. I leaned down and kissed her.

Ravi and Rishika were just about to head out when Xavier came walking through the front door. Cali immediately broke away from me and rushed into his arms.

I only managed to watch them for a few moments before my anger got the better of me.

“Where the *hell* have you been?” I snarled.

# Episode 3749

I wrapped my arms around Xavier and covered his face in kisses, to the point where even if he’d wanted to answer Greyson, he couldn’t. A million questions were clanging around in my head, begging to be asked, but right now all I really wanted to do was hold him.

*I knew he’d be back. He always comes back. Nothing can keep us apart.*

I covered his mouth in more kisses, unable to stop myself. Even the millions of questions circling around inside me took a back seat to simply enjoying having him back here with me, where he belonged.

I could feel Greyson’s eyes on us, and I sensed his anger at Xavier. I was annoyed too, but right now that was getting overridden by the fact that he was here. He was okay. It wasn’t like him to not have been there for me… Something big had to have happened, for him to have stayed away from the hospital. I had to know what was going on with him. Being pissed off could wait for a moment.

I pulled back and looked him in the eye, finally noticing his appearance. He didn’t look injured—there wasn’t any blood or bruising on his face like there had been before—but he looked so… *tired*.

“Are you okay?” I asked. I’d seen him tired before, plenty of times, but this was different. “Where were you?”

Xavier’s eyes showed a flicker of something that I couldn’t quite place. Instead of answering, he pulled me close and pressed his lips to my ear.

“Cali,” he whispered. “So glad you’re okay.”

I wrapped my arms around him even tighter. “I’m glad, too. The doctors say I’m a miracle. I feel totally fine—and the handprint’s gone.” I turned around so I could show him my shoulder.

“That’s amazing, Cali,” Xavier said with a smile. He pressed his lips to my shoulder. “I’m so glad.”

“I have to go take care of a few things,” Greyson said tightly. He turned and left without another word.

Xavier barely even glanced at his brother, and I decided that now wasn’t the time to worry about whatever was going on between them. At this moment, I only wanted to check for myself that Xavier was really okay.

“What happened, Xavier?” I asked again. “You weren’t at the hospital, and nobody knew where you were. I was so worried.”

Xavier started to say something, but then he stopped and closed his eyes, as if something had overwhelmed him. He shook his head hard, almost like he was trying to dash something from his mind.

“Xavier?” I squeezed his shoulders. The annoyance was creeping in again, *fast*. Why wouldn’t he just answer me? “What’s going on? What’s wrong?” Something was definitely upsetting him. At first, I’d thought that he was just happy and relieved to see me, but now I realized there was something else going on under the surface. He just didn’t seem like himself. “Whatever’s wrong with you, I want to help. But you have to tell me what’s wrong.”

Xavier looked away for a moment, and I wondered if he was trying to avoid me. It certainly seemed like it.

*Seriously, why isn’t he answering my questions? Did he do something that he doesn’t want me to know about?*

I reached up and moved his face so that he was forced to look me in the eye. “Xavier, whatever it is, no matter what, I’ll help you—but you have to talk to me.”

Xavier heaved a big sigh and stroked my cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m confused,” I said, unable to hide the irritated tone my voice took on. “What are you sorry about? Are you sorry for running away? Or are you sorry for not telling me why?”

A pained look flashed across Xavier’s face, but he stayed silent.

“Hey, Cali,” Big Mac said as she came into the room. “Your mom said that you were back home, and she wanted me to come check on you.” Her eyes fell on Xavier. “But I can come back if this isn’t a good time.”

Xavier turned toward Big Mac, seemingly happy about the interruption. I held back a heavy sigh.

“Now is good,” I said curtly.

“Good news is, the magic balance really seems to be restored,” Big Mac continued. “I’m already feeling stronger, and I assume that you and the other Fae are feeling the same. Just to be sure, Cali, you should try your hand at some basic magic tomorrow.”

I tore my gaze away from Xavier. “Sure, yes, I’ll make sure to do that.”

I hoped that by then, I’d know why my mate was acting so strangely—without that knowledge, I doubted I’d be able to concentrate enough to practice my magic.

Big Mac clapped me hard on the shoulder, nearly sending me flying. “Good to have you back,” she said gruffly. “And Xavier, please put some fucking clothes on. Sheesh.”

Then she turned on her heel and headed off, mumbling about werewolves, nudity, and the craziness of pack house life.

Xavier didn’t respond. He had a distant look in his eye that gave me the chills. Once again, I pulled his face toward mine and looked deep into his eyes. To say they were turbulent was an understatement.

“Come with me,” I said. I pulled him along behind me, hoping that if I got him alone, he’d feel more comfortable about opening up.

I led him to an empty study and closed the door behind us.

“Now we’re all alone,” I said. “It’s just you and me. You can say whatever’s on your mind, Xavier. No judging, no shame. Whatever it is you’re afraid to tell me, this is your chance.”

I stood there waiting, hoping that he was finally going to let me in on whatever had him acting so strangely.

“I’m sorry,” Xavier said. “I know I owe you an explanation…” He hesitated. “But I can’t give you one.”

I stood there, thrown, waiting for him to say something, anything else. He didn’t.

*Why is he acting this way? Did he do something so terrible, so awful, that he’s afraid to tell me about it? Did he run into trouble with the Bitterfangs and let things get out of hand?*

“Xavier, I’m your mate,” I said, trying to stay calm. “We have to trust each other, or what’s the point? Even if whatever we have to tell each other is horrible, or uncomfortable, we owe it to each other to be honest, anyway.”

Xavier smiled wistfully. “You’re right. We’re mates.” He pulled me into a tight hug. “Still, I’d rather not talk about it—not right now. I know I’m asking a lot, but I just need you to trust me. Know that I love you and care about you, and my not being entirely forthcoming has nothing to do with that.”

I pulled back as a tickle of anxiety settled inside me. *But why can’t he tell me? Why won’t he just say it?* “Did you… Did you kill someone?”

Xavier chuckled and shook his head. “No, nothing like that.”

I felt a bit of relief, but I still just didn’t understand what was holding him back. I wanted to press him—even demand that he tell me what was going on—but I had a feeling that wasn’t the right move, and that it wouldn’t make much of a difference anyway.

Xavier walked over to the window and stared out into the darkness. I watched him, wondering what the hell had happened to him while he was gone. To Big Mac’s point, he *was* naked, and that had to be because he’d shifted while he was away. Without warning, he grabbed me and pulled me in close to his chest and held me, rocking us both back and forth ever so slightly. He pulled away just a little so that his lips could connect with mine, and he kissed me deeply.

“Xavier,” I breathed between kisses, hoping that this was the beginning of him relaxing and finally feeling comfortable enough to open up to me. He ran his fingers through my hair as his kiss intensified, and we both stumbled back toward the desk. I plopped down on top of it and he filled the space between my legs, his breath coming hot and sweet against my face.

I leaned back so that he could plant kisses from my mouth to my chin and down my neck, sending waves of heat scorching through my body. I was torn between my passion and desire for him and my need to find out the truth about where he’d been and what he’d done.

*Maybe he just needs this right now… To be with me, for me to prove that I’m with him. I’m safe. I’m healed.*

I finally calmed the questions, anxiety, and anger in my brain, letting his rough hands explore every plane, valley, and peak of my body. I closed my eyes, giving myself over to him. He could do whatever he wanted. If it would make him feel better, I was willing to let him avoid things for now.

My eyes shot open as he abruptly pulled away from me, running his hands roughly though his hair. His gaze was fixed somewhere beyond me, and he had a frightened look in his eyes. I followed his gaze and looked behind me, but there was nothing there except the darkness beyond the window and the emptiness of the room.

I turned back to face him. “Xavier, *please*, tell me what’s wrong.”

He finally looked at me, shaking his head ever so slightly. “I can’t do this.”

# Episode 3750

**Xavier**

It was taking everything I had not to freak out. There was nothing I wanted more than to ease Cali’s—and my—mind, but that wasn’t an option.

“Xavier, what’s wrong? Please, just tell me! Whatever it is, we’ll get through it together,” Cali said. I could hear the thinly veiled anger in her voice. I knew I was frustrating her, but there was nothing I could do about it. “I know you’ll feel better once you tell me what’s going on.”

I wanted to answer her, but the only thing I could focus on was Adéluce. She’d just appeared behind Cali and was lingering near the window, her awful face screwed up into a scowl. I didn’t know if I was hallucinating, or if she was really in the room. Cali obviously couldn’t see her, but to me, her presence felt too real to be fake.

I was also feeling that same sharp pain behind my ear—just like when Adéluce had drunk my blood, earlier. As Cali and I had kissed and things had begun to heat up, Adéluce had raised her hands to reveal red, sinewy strings that seemed to be attached to Cali—as if my mate were nothing but a puppet to the vampire-witch.

Adéluce’s words had echoed in my head: *There are no happy endings here.*

Every syllable had seemed to send an electric shock down my spine, and I’d pushed Cali away, feeling tortured and crazy at the same time. It was an awful feeling to have when all I wanted was to be with my mate. But if I violated the deal I’d made with her, it would put Cali in danger again.

Whether Adéluce was really in the room or not, it didn’t matter. She’d made it clear that she would kill Cali without any hesitation. Maybe it was an idle threat, just a warning or a way for the vampire-witch to manipulate me, but I couldn’t gamble with Cali’s life. Even though Adéluce hadn’t given me much hope, I still believed I’d be able to find a way out of this. I was determined to get help from Big Mac or Kira.

*There has to be a way. There always is, right?*

Either way, no matter how much it hurt, right now, I had to push Cali away. She wasn’t safe with me right now. Not like this—with an entire curse hanging over my head.

Cali’s eyes were already brimming with tears, and I felt like someone had just ripped my heart out.

*I’m doing this to her. I’m hurting her, and I can’t even explain why. Fuck. I have to fix this. There’s no other option; I will break the deal and kill Adéluce if it’s the last thing I do.*

“I’ll see you in the morning,” I said to Cali, my voice sounding strained, even to my own ears.

“*What?*” she said, confusion coloring her features. She reached out and grabbed my hand. “Why are you doing this? Why won’t you just talk to me?”

My throat tightened and I said nothing. I couldn’t say anything that would matter—Adéluce had made damn sure of that. I pulled my hand away and left the study, closing the door behind me. My heart felt like it was breaking with every step I took away from the woman I loved.

I could hear Greyson’s voice coming down the hall. He was the last person I wanted to see right now. I knew that he was going to pull his usual Alpha shit and blame me for everything that was wrong in the world, and I would have to just sit there and take it, because I couldn’t explain what was actually going on.

I turned in the other direction, hoping to find Big Mac or Kira instead. Adéluce had made it so that I couldn’t directly ask them about her spell, but maybe I could find a way to have them discover it on their own. They’d been able to detect dark magic before—maybe they could do it again.

Adéluce had claimed that she’d returned the last of Seluna’s ashes to the demon world, and I’d been skeptical at first. However, based on Cali’s mysterious recovery and what Big Mac had said about the balance of magic being finally, fully restored, it seemed like the vampire-witch had kept up her end of our shitty bargain. That didn’t mean I trusted her.

I stopped in my room and quickly got dressed, then went to find Kira. She was in the kitchen chatting with Torin, and I pulled her away.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You certainly don’t look it.”

“I’m not,” I said. I tried to ask if she could sense what was wrong, but the words just wouldn’t come. My throat constricted and my tongue began to burn. It was like I’d just gulped down a cup full of burning hot coffee. “Shit!” was all I could manage, my frustration reaching a fever pitch.

*How can I convey what I want if Adéluce keeps me from speaking if I even* think *about what she’s done to me.*

I wasn’t going to allow myself to feel hopeless. There had to be a way to outsmart the vampire-witch.

Kira’s forehead was creased with concern. “What is it, Xavier? Talk to me.”

I took a deep breath, waiting for the burning pain in my mouth to recede. I remembered that I’d been able to ask Big Mac if she could detect any dark magic earlier, before I’d actually agreed to Adéluce’s terms. Maybe I couldask the question again.I opened my mouth and attempted to ask Kira the question, but I couldn’t. I balled my hands into fists and let out a frustrated groan.

Kira gave me a strange look. “Um… I don’t know what’s going on, but I wish I did?”

I shook my head. “No, no, it’s nothing. Thank you,” I said, before stomping away.

I went outside, worried that the others were going to question me and that I’d have to deal with the tightened throat and burning tongue again. This was no way to live. I had to figure out what was wrong with me and plan my next move. I stopped and closed my eyes, mentally replaying Adéluce’s terms in my mind.

*She said that I can’t be with Cali—that I have to break up with her—and I can’t tell anyone, and I can’t talk about it.*

And just like that, I was livid. Adéluce *was* ruining my life—worse yet, she was ruining Cali’s life. Just the thought of it was crushing my spirit. There had to be a loophole, some way to get around Adéluce’s spell—but how?

I heard the door open behind me, and I knew it was Cali. I could sense her. I was too afraid to turn around. I didn’t want to see that look in her eyes again—the sadness, the despair.

“Xavier?” she said. She came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my torso. I sighed at the amazing sensation of her laying her head against my back. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask any more questions. I don’t understand, but… I want to let you know that everything’s going to be okay.”

I wanted more than anything to believe that, but so far, everything that had happened suggested otherwise. I wasn’t giving up, but I also didn’t want to torment my mate. There was nothing I could do to ease her worry right now, and every second I spent with her was so damn painful, with things being the way they were.

Even though I knew it was probably the right thing to do, I didn’t pull away. I let her hold me, trying to find comfort in her nearness, and for a moment, it worked. I inhaled her scent and allowed myself to enjoy the warmth of her body against mine, but I couldn’t help but remember the pain on her face when I’d left her in the study. It was too stark a reminder of the pain I was causing her—and how much *more* pain I could cause her, if Adéluce’s curse held.

*How is she still putting up with me? I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve her tenderness and her sweetness right now.*

I wanted nothing more than to turn around and kiss her again, but the thought of Adéluce watching and waiting for me to screw up kept me from doing it. I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction.

After a few minutes, Cali released me and walked around to face me head-on. “I don’t know what’s going on, and you don’t have to tell me right now. But can you at least promise me that you will?”

I looked at her, my heart breaking into a million pieces. There was literally nothing in the world that I wanted more than to stay with her tonight, to open up to her and tell her everything. But Adéluce’s words echoed in my head yet again, and I knew that I couldn’t do it.

I took a deep breath and paused, trying to steady myself. I forced myself to look into Cali’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Cali, but I can’t promise that.”

The look of pure despair mixed with anger that flashed across Cali’s face made me feel like I was being kicked in the gut. Unable to take the confusion and hurt in her eyes for even one more second, I left her standing there on the porch and ran off into the night.

# Episode 3751

Stunned, I watched Xavier go. It was like I couldn’t move a muscle—I was too shocked by what had just transpired between us to even be mad. What had Xavier meant when he’d said, “that can’t happen”? *WTF?* All I’d asked him was if I could promise me he’d tell me what’s going on eventually. Why was it such a big deal this time? Why would he refuse and claim that it ‘couldn’t happen’?

My mind raced as I searched for some kind of explanation for his strange reaction. Was it something I’d done? Something I’d said? Even though I’d been upset that he hadn’t come to the hospital, I’d never accused him or tried to make him feel guilty. I knew Xavier—and that meant I knew he had a perfectly good reason for not being there. But I’d also assumed he would *tell me* that reason. I needed to know what he was keeping from me, and why. It had been a long time since Xavier had actively kept secrets from me.

*We’re not doing this!*

Determined, I leapt from the porch and took off after him. It was pretty dark, and I didn’t have night vision like Xavier and the other wolves, but there was enough moonlight to see by. Judging by the direction he’d gone, I was hoping I’d find him at the edge of the woods. Maybe he’d just needed a second to think.

As I tore through the trees, all the while trying to come up with the right thing to say once I found him, I saw something dark lying on the ground ahead of me. My heart began to pound.

*Did he collapse? Is he sick?*

I raced forward, only to see that it was a pile of his clothes. They were shredded, meaning that he hadn’t taken the time to remove them before shifting. My heart fluttered when his howl reached me from a distance I couldn’t quite pinpoint. It wasn’t a powerful, confident howl like I’d heard so many times before, but a wail of pain and anguish.

“Xavier!” I screamed. My voice echoed around me, bouncing off the trees.

I waited, but there was no reply.

I closed my eyes and concentrated, trying to reach out to him via mind link. *Xavier? Can you hear me? Whatever’s going on, please don’t feel like you have to deal with it all on your own. Come back here dammit! Come back to me so we can figure this out!*

I waited and waited, but there was no reply. He was either too far away, or he didn’t want to respond. I stood there feeling a mixture of anxiety, anger, worry, and fear. There was no use in me chasing him—he was way too fast and it was obvious that he’d wanted to get away from me. But *why* had he wanted that?

*His feelings for me—they haven’t changed, right? There’s no way… Everything was okay not too long ago. But if his feelings are the same as they’ve always been, why is he so conflicted? Why is he unwilling to be honest with me about what’s happening with him? Why is he so unwilling to* be *with me?*

Then a chilling thought crossed my mind.

*Ava.*

I wasn’t exactly sure, but I was pretty sure Xavier had taken off toward Samara territory. It was no secret, least of all to me, that things between Xavier and Ava were complicated. And thanks to the Bitterfangs, Xavier had been forced to spend even more time with Ava—which probably hadn’t helped matters.

*Has being around Ava so much recently done something to him? Did something happen, and he’s ashamed to tell me?*

No. There was no way in hell Xavier would risk what we had for Ava. I refused to believe that he would betray me that way. He’d had so many chances to do it before, and he never had. That had to mean something.

I bent down to collect Xavier’s ruined clothes, shivering against the cold, since I hadn’t bothered to put on my coat. I’d just gone outside to talk to Xavier—I hadn’t expected to have to chase him into the woods. His tattered clothes in hand, I turned back toward the pack house.

Greyson surprised me when I stepped onto the porch. He had a blanket, and he wasted no time wrapping it around me and running his hands up and down my arms to warm me up. His gaze snagged on the clothes in my arms and then he looked past me, out at the woods. “So, I assume he left again?”

I nodded. There was something going on between Xavier and Greyson right now, and I didn’t want to be party to making it worse, but it was pure fact—Xavier *had* run off yet again, without telling us anything about where he was going.

“I don’t suppose he explained why, or where?” Greyson asked.

I shook my head slowly. “No. He just ran off. No explanation.”

“Great,” Greyson said, not hiding his anger. “Why is he doing this? I wish he’d stop being so damn selfish.”

I looked at my mate. “Selfish?”

“Yes, selfish,” Greyson said bluntly. “Xavier never thinks about anyone but himself—not the pack, not you. *No one.* Think about it, Cali. He up and left without a word, just now, and it’s not even the first time.”

Greyson was getting angrier by the second, and I wanted nothing more than to defend Xavier, but I couldn’t find the conviction I usually possessed. I was still too confused about where Xavier and I stood.

“He must have his reasons,” was all I could manage.

Truth be told, I was angry, too. Angry that he hadn’t shown up to the hospital. Angry that he wasn’t being upfront with me. Angry that he’d rejected me without any explanation at all. Angry that he was putting himself in danger by running out into the woods alone.

Greyson scowled, still scanning the trees, as if he thought his brother might emerge at any moment. “If he does have his reasons, then he should tell someone what those reasons are. I can see how this is hurting you—why can’t he?”

Again, part of me wanted to argue for Xavier, to defend him, but I couldn’t do it. It was true. He was hurting me with his silence and with his strange behavior, and it was already driving me crazy. It felt like my heart had been run over by a truck.

“I know that I shouldn’t be talking shit about him like this in front of you,” Greyson said, expression twisted. “It’s taken me a while, but I’ve finally accepted that we’re both your mates. You have to believe that I don’t get any pleasure from talking about him like this, but what he’s doing is just so…*cruel*, and I can’t help myself. Maybe it’s time to set things straight.”

I looked at Greyson. “What does that mean?”

“It means that it’s time for me to have a talk with Xavier,” he said grimly. “I have to act on the ultimatum I gave him. He’s not leaving me much choice. He can’t keep doing this—tormenting you like this—”

“No, I can handle it,” I said quickly. “I believe in Xavier.”

As angry as I was with him, deep down, I knew that whatever he was doing, he wasn’t *trying* to hurt me. But that didn’t make it not infuriating to deal with.

Greyson’s eyes flashed. “Fine. That’s your call. But Xavier is also part of this pack, and that comes with certain expectations. He’s not a Rogue—he can’t just up and leave whenever he wants without telling anyone. That’s not fair to any of us, and I’m getting tired of reminding him of that.”

I took this in, realizing how frustrated Greyson was.

“I understand,” I said. “I wish that there was something that I could do—something I could offer.”

Unfortunately, I was at a loss, just like Greyson was. I wished I had some quick fix to get us through this, but I was still too busy making sense of the tense moments Xavier and I had shared.

Greyson’s gaze remained riveted to the trees. “Where could he have run off to now?”

I was almost afraid to say it, but I did. “Could he have gone to the Samara campsite?”

Greyson mulled this over. “I suppose that’s possible, not like he would tell me. He’s insubordinate to me as Alpha and doesn’t tell me anything, Cali. There’s no reason, Samaras or not, why he would just run off in the middle of the night when you’re fresh out of the hospital. None.”

*There is Ava though.* I decided not to speculate any further. Maybe it was silly of me to immediately think that Ava had something to do with Xavier’s behavior. He’d never put Ava ahead of me before—why would he start now?

“Why don’t you head inside, where it’s warm?” Greyson said. “There’s not really anything we can do about Xavier right now.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said, pulling the blanket tighter around my shoulders.

As Greyson reached for the door, the wind picked up, and a familiar voice called my name.

We both turned to see Vander walking toward us, dressed in their park ranger clothes.

“Just the people I wanted to talk to!”

# Episode 3752

**Greyson**

I was surprised to see Vander and all, but really, I was *always* surprised to see Vander. They always had a way of popping up out of nowhere when you least expected them. I wondered if they got some kind of kick out of always making an entrance and catching people by surprise.

“Hey, Vander. Did you hear about Cali’s recovery?” I asked as they approached.

Vander grinned. “That’s why I’m here. I want to take this moment to congratulate Cali on finally restoring the magical balance.” Vander clapped their hands and did a little jump. “Bravo! It’s the first time that the natural world has felt at peace since the start of this whole ordeal with Seluna. I almost forgot how good it feels when everything in nature is in its rightful place. So, it begs the question… What exactly did you do?”

Cali shook her head. “I didn’t do anything, I don’t think…” She frowned. “Actually, no, I’m *sure* I didn’t do anything.”

“We were told that the magic would eventually settle, and that Cali’s lingering problems were due to the residual effects of Seluna’s ashes,” I added. “It seems that thing just finally settled back into place on their own.”

To be honest, I hadn’t given much thought to why things were back to normal. I hadn’t wanted to look a gift horse in the mouth. All that mattered to me was that Cali was safe and healthy. It didn’t much matter to me how we’d reached that point.

Vander flashed a puzzled look. “Maybe. But… are you *sure* you didn’t actually doanything?” Vander looked back and forth between Cali and me. “Something that kind of… shifted things back to their currently amazing state?”

Cali shrugged. “The only thing I did was almost die. Does that count?”

I tightened my grip on Cali’s hand. I hated being reminded of the awful state my mate had been in. We’d come so close to losing her, and that was a sobering feeling—and one I hoped never to feel again. It had been absolute torture, watching her lying there in that hospital bed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so helpless. A wave of bitterness rose in me again as I thought about how Xavier had opted out of the entire thing, choosing not to be by Cali’s side during one of her hardest moments. He’d essentially left Cali and me to fend for ourselves.

“I’m glad you’re still alive, Cali,” Vander said. “You’re always a pleasure to visit.”

“Thanks Vander, I’m glad, too,” Cali said. “So, since you obviously weren’t the one to push things back into balance, and I wasn’t either, do you think there’s some other explanation? It is all kind of strange, when I really think about it. One second I was right on the brink of death, fighting for my life, and the next I was completely healthy. It’s almost like nothing happened at all. The doctor says it was a miracle.”

Vander rolled their eyes. “Humans always look for miracles, and they almost always fall back on them whenever they can’t find a logical reason for why something happens. But nature always has a reason for everything. I suppose it could be that the magic *did* just finally settle down on its own… I just assumed you’d done a little something to move things along.”

“Wish we could take credit for it, but that would be a lie,” I said. “Honestly, we’re just as surprised as everyone else. Surprised and happy,” I added, looking at Cali and pulling her into a quick squeeze.

“Either way, I’m pleased,” Vander said. “All is well—and it couldn’t have happened to better people. The Redwood pack is one of my favorites, you know.”

“Glad to hear that,” I said. “And thanks for stopping by.”

I gave Cali a look. For the first time since all the shit with Xavier, she looked happy. I suspected that hearing confirmation of the good news directly from the Keeper of All Nature meant a lot to her. Probably more than it had, coming from Big Mac, though Cali would never admit it to the touchy witch. I knew *I* wouldn’t—I was all about staying on Big Mac’s good side these days, especially since she was about to marry my mom. Still, it was a relief to hear straight from the source that everything was really back in balance.

“Well, duty calls. Take care,” Vander said, turning to leave.

“Do you happen to know where Xavier is?” Cali asked quickly.

Vander turned back to look at us, confused. “What? Isn’t he here celebrating with the rest of your pack?”

“He’s not,” Cali said forlornly. “He ran off somewhere and we have no idea where he is.”

Vander flashed a kind smile. “Sorry, but I’m not the missing person’s bureau. But if I happen to come across Xavier, or any clues to his whereabouts, I’ll certainly let you know.”

Without another word, Vander disappeared with a flash of light and a rush of wind.

Cali’s shoulders slumped as her eyes searched the trees. She looked so sad, and a little spike of anger rose in me again at what Xavier was putting her through.

“I guess I’ll just have to wait until he comes back,” she said.

Not knowing what to say, I steered her back inside. I could tell she was losing the last bit of energy she’d regained after her recovery—and it was all Xavier’s fault. I hated what he was doing to her, and once again, I felt helpless to fix things for her.

As soon as we stepped back into the warmth of the house, I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her to face me. “Do you want me to go find him?”

Cali’s eyes shone for a second before she shook her head. “No, you don’t have to do that, Greyson. You’ve done so much already—”

“That’s not what I asked, love,” I said firmly. “Do you *want* me to go find him?”

Cali nodded, relief flooding her features. “Yes. Please.”

I leaned down and kissed her. “Then I’ll go right now,” I said as she wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed her body against mine. I pulled away and looked her in the eye. “While I’m gone, you should go be with your family, and the rest of the pack. They were all really worried about you, and I’m sure they’d like to spend some time with you right now. Even if your heart is elsewhere at the moment, let them enjoy having you back.”

“You’re right,” she said. “I will. Thank you again, Greyson.”

She gave me one final kiss on the lips and then I headed off, wondering where the hell my brother had run off to.

Back out on the porch, I removed my clothes and shifted. I took off into the night, lifting my nose to the air. It didn’t take long for me to pick up Xavier’s scent.

*What the hell was he thinking when he left? Was he going somewhere specific? Did he have a plan in mind? Was he just running to get away because he was overwhelmed by something he’s refusing to tell anyone about?*

Whatever was driving my brother to behave like this, I was determined to have it out with him, once and for all. I needed to get to the bottom of what was going on with him so I could get back to focusing on the pack. I was tired of having to keep tabs on someone who should’ve been acting as another leader instead of another stressor.

As I ran, I thought over my options for disciplining Xavier—because there had to be consequences for the way my brother had been acting lately. Obviously, there was no way I could banish him. That would upset Cali too much, and Xavier had upset her enough already. But I was the Alpha, and there was no way I could continue to let my brother keep running off, disobeying orders, and hurting everyone around him. If there was something going on with him, he needed to open his fucking mouth and tell us what it was.

I sniffed the wind again, starting to wonder if Xavier *had* gone to the Samara campsite. It didn’t seem like something he would do—especially not after everything Cali had just been through—but I supposed that stranger things had happened. Cali clearly thought there was a chance he’d gone off to the Samaras, since she’d asked about it. I knew my mate well enough to know what she’d really been asking: whether Xavier had gone to be with Ava.As unpredictable as my brother had been lately, I just didn’t think that was the case. Despite his struggles with their lingering mate bond, Xavier had made it clear time and time again that his heart remained totally and completely with Cali, no matter what.

I ran until I heard the steady babble of the river, then I came to a stop as I reached the bank. Xavier’s scent lingered at the river’s edge, and I cursed to myself. My brother wasn’t stupid. Far from it. Wherever he’d gone, it was clear that he didn’t want anyone to follow.

# Episode 3753

It was very hard not to just plant myself beside the back door and wait for Greyson to return, hopefully with Xavier in tow. I was worried, I had to admit. Greyson had said that he was going to bring Xavier back because he was worried about me, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the friction that was bubbling between the two of them. Greyson had made it pretty clear that he was pissed at Xavier.

*I get why Greyson doesn’t think Xavier’s doing right by the pack, but he’s pissed about the hospital, too, isn’t he?*

I remembered the two of them fighting, just before I passed out… What if they got into another fight? With the way Xavier had been acting lately, I doubted it would take very much to ignite one.

Pushing away my worries to the best of my ability, I went into the living room and was heartened by the way everyone brightened as I came in. It was nice that they were all so happy to see me.

Torin hugged me. “I’m so sorry that I wasn’t able to heal you, but I’m glad you were able to recover on your own. It was probably your Fae half that pulled you through,” he said with a wink.

“I won’t argue with that,” I said with a smile. “It’s kind of cool to think that being half Fae makes me powerful.” Now that magic had been restored, I was excited to prove just how powerful I could be.

“Of course being Fae makes you powerful,” Artemis said with a laugh. “Have you seen me in action or what?”

Artemis did a little muscle flex, eliciting a chorus of laughter from the pack.

“Speaking of, do you think Adair would keep helping me the way he’s helped you?” I asked her, trying to distract myself. “And like how he helped with the mind control practice?”

I hadn’t seen any wisps so far, and I hoped I wouldn’t. I had been hearing Seluna’s voice intermittently with the wisps before… Had that been her trying to lure me into something? Her final Hail Mary as the magic settled back in? I shuddered. I still had the plant charm my mom had made and the training, so I was ready if they showed up again.

Artemis shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

“Oh, honey, you don’t know how happy it makes us to see you up and about. You had us really scared for a second, there,” Mom said as she and my father came up and encircled me in their arms.

“At least now, when we go back to Minnesota, we’ll have one less thing to fret about,” Dad said.

I didn’t want them to go, but I didn’t bother telling them that since I didn’t want them to feel any guilt about wanting to get back to their own lives. It wasn’t like I wasn’t going to visit whenever I could.

“Hey, Cali, want to get in on this?” Jay asked. He, Gabriel, and Mikah were in the middle of an intense-looking arm wrestling competition.

“Um… No. She’s fresh out of the hospital—she’s not going to start arm wrestling vampires and werewolves,” Lola said with an eye roll.

I laughed as I looked around the room, marveling at how normal everything seemed—if you ignored the fact that my mates weren’t there. I quickly pushed that thought away, not wanting to let it drag my spirits down.

“By the way, you’d better not pull that shit again,” Lola said as she sidled up next to me. She bent down so I could see the top of her head. “Check for grey hairs! I was so damn worried about you. In fact, it got me thinking… Maybe I should turn you.”

“What?” I said, taken aback.

“Yeah, why not? Either into a werewolf or a vampire—that way, you’d be far better prepared to fight back if anything like that happens again.”

I shook my head, aware that Lola was joking. It was her way of coping.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I have no intention of ever being possessed by a demon again—and I’m never going to kill another one for that matter, since that would create *another* batch of ashes that would need to be returned to the demon world.”

Lola’s smile abruptly gave way to a serious look. “Are you really, really okay, Cali? I can’t have my best friend dying on me! I’m going to need your help making it through college, you know. You can’t just leave me high and dry.”

I clapped Lola on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll be here—though it’s not like I was a stellar student or anything.”

“No, but you *are* a stellar friend,” Lola said with a little catch in her voice. “Okay, that was corny, I know, but it’s true.”

Lola and I locked into a quick hug. When she released me, I couldn’t keep myself from glancing at the entrance to the living room again. I wanted nothing more than to focus on the people who were actually here, but I couldn’t stop hoping that my mates would come walking in at any moment.

Probably sensing my internal struggle, Lola followed my line of sight and realized what I was looking at. “I have to say, it’s weird that Xavier’s been MIA all day. The whole pack noticed. Do you know where he is?”

Unable to hide my feelings from my friend and knowing that I didn’t really need to, I didn’t hold back.

“That’s the question, isn’t it? I wish I did know,” I said. “I’d be celebrating a whole lot more if I had the slightest idea where he was.”

Lola nodded and squeezed my shoulder. “I asked Jay about it—I thought that Xavier might have said something to him. But Jay’s as lost as everyone else.”

“Thanks anyway, for trying to look out for me,” I said. “I just hope he’s okay. He’s acting so weird.”

“I’m sure he’s fine. Xavier’s tough, you know that,” she said. Then she brightened. “Oh, I know! Why don’t you talk to Gabriel? Maybe he knows something.”

My heart leapt. “That’s a great idea, Lola.”

Gabriel and Xavier had been through a lot together and were quite close. Maybe Gabriel knew something that no one else in the pack did. It was worth a shot.

I left Lola and went over to Gabriel. He’d just slammed Jay’s arm to the table, and was in the middle of celebrating his victory.

“Oh hey, Cali, you want next?” He flexed his bicep at me.

“No, thanks,” I said. “Um, have you talked to Xavier at all? He’s disappeared again, and I thought you might know something I don’t.”

Gabriel shook his head. “No, sorry Cali, he hasn’t said a word.”

I was just about to press him further when Greyson came walking in.

“Thanks,” I said, quickly before running up to Greyson. He was alone, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t found Xavier.

“Hey, love,” Greyson said.

“Hey! Did you find him?”

“Unfortunately, no. I lost his scent at the river. He obviously used the river to hide his trail. I searched along the bank for a mile or two, but I couldn’t pick it up again. He clearly doesn’t want to be found,” Greyson said. He hugged me, his large hand cradling the back of my head. “I’m sorry, Cali. I really am.”

I nodded, trying to keep my anger and disappointment down. Why was he doing this? He and Greyson weren’t on the best terms right now, but that didn’t mean he had to shut me out, too.

“Why is he doing this, Greyson?” I asked, unable to keep the quiver out of my voice.

“I don’t know,” Greyson said. “I even checked the border with the Samaras’ territory, but there’s no trace of him there, either.”

I took this in, not knowing whether it was good or bad. I’d had an itchy worry in the back of my mind that he’d gone off to see Ava, but at this point, that might’ve been better than him being out there alone.

“I know Xavier pretty well,” Gabriel said. “We’ve had to hide out a few times, so I know the way he thinks—maybe I can try?”

“I know him, too,” Jay said. “We can both go. Two werewolves are better than one.”

I turned to Greyson, hopeful. “Do you think that would be okay?”

“I don’t see why not,” Greyson said. “Just keep your heads on a swivel.”

“We will,” Gabriel said. “It’ll be a cold day in hell before I let anyone catch us by surprise.”

After putting together a quick plan of action, Gabriel and Jay left, promising to check back in as soon as they could.

“I’m going to go get cleaned up,” Greyson said. “Is there anything I can get you before I do?”

“No, I’m fine.” The one thing I wanted, Greyson couldn’t bring me. I only hoped that wherever Xavier was, he was okay.

“Good news,” Artemis said as she came bounding over. “Adair’s agreed to help us both with our Fae magic. He said to come find him first thing in the morning.”

“That sounds great,” I said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

“I know you’re angry and upset over this Xavier,” Artemis continued. “Maybe we can blast something, blow off a little steam.”

“I guess that sounds good,” I said. If I really was okay, it would be nice to see exactly how my magic was now. With that, Artemis dragged me outside.

“Blast that pile of rocks over there!” Artemis said. “Really let them have it!”

I nodded. Then, I lifted my hands and tried to focus on the rocks while reaching for my magic, but no matter how hard I tried, my magic didn’t rise. *Shit*. Why not?

“That’s okay, give it another shot!” Artemis said.

I lifted my hands again and narrowed my gaze at the rocks, gritting my teeth as I tried to pull my magic into reach, but no matter what I did, I couldn’t grab it. I dropped my hands to my sides.

*Why isn’t it working? What’s wrong with me?*

# Episode 3754

**Xavier**

I’d managed to build a small fire and was now using a stick to poke at the glowing embers, trying to warm myself the best I could. I’d had to shift back to human to start the fire, which meant I was out in the cold Oregon winter without a shred of clothing.

“Shit, not my finest hour,” I said to myself, cursing my impulsive nature. Running off unprepared wasn’t the smartest thing I’d ever done, but what choice did I have? I was stuck between a rock and a hard place, trying to protect my mate from an awful fate while not even being able to tell her what was going on. It was torture, and I couldn’t, at this moment, see the solution I needed.

Greyson could be as pissed as he wanted—I couldn’t have cared less what my Alpha brother thought of me. He was too blinded by his duty as Redwood Alpha to see past what he thought was simple insubordination. I *wished* that was all it was. He didn’t know the half of it. The only person I cared about was Cali, and it pained me to know how much I was hurting her. She didn’t deserve this, and the fact that Adéluce was forcing me to hurt her made me madder than I’d ever been. At least when we’d gone up against other threats, I’d had the ability to tell Cali what was going on. Just as Adéluce had intended, it was pure torture having to keep Cali in the dark.

I gritted my teeth as I pictured, probably for the hundredth time, the look that had crossed Cali’s face when I’d told her I couldn’t stay the night with her. It would haunt me forever. It was hands down the hardest thing I’d ever had to say to her. I wished more than anything that I could take it back—or that I could at least explain why I’d had to reject her—but fucking Adéluce and her curse wouldn’t allow it.

I stared into the fire, suddenly lost in a fantasy of getting back at the vampire-witch by breaking her hellish agreement and killing her—for good, this time. There was no doubt in my mind that I would get the chance to do just that; it was only a question of how and when.

I looked back in the direction of the pack house, hoping that I’d gotten far enough away that they wouldn’t be able to detect the fire. It was small enough, but I knew that either Greyson would be out looking for me soon, if he wasn’t already, or he’d send someone else to do it. The Redwood wolves were good trackers, after all.

There was nothing I wanted more than to return to the comfort of my pack and Cali’s arms, but even if someone from the pack managed to find me, there was no way I could go back. Not yet. I wasn’t going to face Cali again until I could offer some sort of explanation for why I was acting the way I was. That was why I’d had to be so evasive, and why I’d used the river to cover my tracks. It was an old trick, but an effective one… Though it was much easier on the feet during warmer seasons.

I crossed my arms and leaned closer to the fire. I had to think clearly. Adéluce was obviously a powerful adversary—I needed to stop underestimating her—but I’d faced worse. Hell, I’d been raised by worse… If what Silas had done to me, Greyson, and Colton could be called ‘raising’. One thing was for sure, though: everyone had a weakness. Everyone. All I had to do was find Adéluce’s.

I was lost in my thoughts for a while before I noticed that the fire had started to grow.

“Shit,” I muttered.

This was the last thing I needed. The heat felt good, but I needed to be discreet, not send a signal out to the world announcing my exact location. It took me a second more to realize that this fire was doing more than growing bigger—it was taking on a life of its own. Something fucked up was going on, as usual.

I moved back as the flames stretched toward the sky and began to swirl like a cyclone. Seconds later, Adéluce appeared and stepped free of the orange glow.

“What the fuck do you want?” I snarled. Even the sight of her turned my stomach, and only the memory of her blasting me with magic every time I’d tried to come at her during our last encounters stopped me from trying again. It was becoming obvious that I’d probably have to use something more than brute force to take her down. Her magic was some of the most powerful that I’d ever gone up against, which would make it all the sweeter when I snuffed her out.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just here to remind you that time is of the essence. Why haven’t you broken up with Cali yet?” Adéluce asked, almost matter-of-factly.

Unable to stopper my anger, I hurled a stick at the vampire-witch, but it just passed right through her.

“Because I’m not going to break up with her!” I spat.

As soon as the words left my mouth, the sharp pain spiked behind my ear once again and I collapsed to my knees. I pressed my forehead to the cold ground and screamed, trying to will the excruciating pain away.

“Silly werewolf,” she said, shaking her head. “You act as though you have a choice. Maybe you didn’t understand me the first time when we made our deal. Perhaps I need to make things a little clearer.”

Adéluce gestured to the fire and Cali’s face appeared, twisted in agony. I slapped my hands over my ears as she let out a piercing scream before her beautiful face was engulfed by the flames.

“Stop it!” I screamed. “Stop it right now!”

That was hands down the worst thing I’d ever seen. I’d thought that the look on Cali’s face when I’d told her I couldn’t be with her was bad, but this was way, way worse.

“I’ll stop,” she said, “but if you fail to do what you agreed to do, Cali will suffer far worse than what you just witnessed. Listen, Xavier—I don’t want you to think that I lack empathy, that I lack feelings… But my patience is wearing thin!” she hissed. “End things with your mate, or I’ll be forced to end them for you.”

With that, she vanished, and the flames died down to nothing.

A harsh, cold breeze swept in as I tried to restart the fire, but I was freezing now, and my hands weren’t cooperating. I knew that Adéluce was taunting me, having a little fun with me, and I was pissed that I’d let her get to me.

*I should have just ignored her. I should have looked right through her as if she weren’t even there. That would have shown her.* I’d dealt with enough supernaturals to know that someone like Adéluce hated nothing more than being ignored. *But that’s hard to do when your mate is burning before your eyes. Even harder when you’re freezing to death and at a loss for how to get out of the mess you’re in.*

I looked around at the thick darkness that surrounded me. There was no way I was going to be able to stay out here like this for much longer. I needed supplies—at least enough to keep myself alive until I could figure out how to fix this mess.

“And I will,” I said. “And then I’m going to fucking end you, Adéluce!”

My words, of course, had no effect. I was still cold and alone and in no better shape than before. I had to stop lashing out. Adéluce probably liked seeing me squirm like this, since it proved she was getting under my skin and had me under her thumb, just where she wanted me.

*She said she wanted me to suffer—but why should I hand her my suffering on a silver platter?*

I needed to keep my shit together, think straight, and figure out a plan. If this were a mercenary job that had gone wrong, then I already would’ve been cool-headedly thinking of a way out.

I turned at the sound of someone approaching. I stood up and quickly kicked a mound of snow and dirt over the still smoldering embers before crouching down and listening.

*Werewolves.* I couldn’t pick up their scent just yet—they must have been upwind from me—but I recognized the sound of their approach. I stood there for a few beats, trying to decide whether I should shift or not, but then the scent finally reached my nose, seconds before the wolf trotted into view. It was Jay. What the hell was he doing here?

I rose to my feet, just as Gabe appeared at Jay’s flank.

“Get the fuck away from me,” I snarled, before shifting and attacking.

# Episode 3755

**Xavier**

The only reason they were here was to take me back, and there was no way in hell I was going with them. I slammed into Gabriel first, knocking him backwards. I didn’t want to hurt either of them, but there was no way I was going to be dragged back to the pack house to face Cali. Not right now. It was too painful. I wasn’t going anywhere near her until I had answers.

Gabe was back on his feet immediately, and I turned just as Jay tackled me to the ground, pinning me under his heavy paws. I quickly slid free and lunged at them both again. The three of us tumbled to the cold ground in a tangle of limbs, growling and snarling and wrestling with each other. I was trying not to hurt them, and it was obvious that they were trying not to hurt me, but we were definitely gassing each other out in record time. It took almost as much work to pull punches and as it did to let them fly, apparently.

I pivoted quickly to the left, breaking free of them both only to slip in the snow. Both wolves took advantage, just like I would have, and layered their weight on top of me, pinning me to the ground. I struggled against their hold, growling and snapping and snarling, but there was no way I was going to be able to break free without seriously hurting my friends—and that, I couldn’t do. Besides, that would only please Adéluce even more, and I was done playing into her plans. She wanted nothing more than to see me suffer, and harming one of my closest friends would crush me. There was no way I was going to do that.

Finally, I gave in. I shifted back to human, holding up my hands as Jay and Gabriel backed off.

“Truce,” I said.

We hadn’t drawn blood and had generally taken it easy on each other, but that didn’t mean that our little tussle hadn’t taken a lot out of me. On the plus side, it had gotten my blood pumping and warmed me up a bit.

Jay and Gabriel both shifted back to human and all three of us collapsed to the ground, breathing hard.

“Truce,” Jay said, between breaths.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, truce—but if you ever try anything like that again, I’ll rip your fucking balls off,” Gabe muttered.

“I second that,” Jay said.

“You both have such a way with words,” I said with a chuckle. We all melted into a cathartic burst of laughter before falling silent.

“So, you gonna tell us what the fuck is going on?” Gabe finally asked.

There was nothing I wanted more. I wanted to confide in them, lay it all out there so that they could help—I knew they would want to—but I couldn’t. Together, I knew we’d be able to take on Adéluce again, just like we had at Crater Lake, only this time I’d make sure she was dead, no matter what Greyson said. Too bad I couldn’t give them even a shred of information that would lead to that happening sooner than later.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I can’t, as much as I want to.”

Gabe shook his head and snorted. “You can’t, or you’re too afraid to?”

I looked at my friends, wondering how much I’d be able to say before the burning, choking sensation filled my mouth again. I shrugged. “Does it really matter which?”

“Fuck yeah, it does. It matters to Cali,” Jay said. “She’s completely freaked out.”

“I know that!” I snapped. I wanted to say more, but what *could* I say? I snapped my mouth closed as guilt hit me like a falling boulder.

“If you know, then why are you doing this to her?” Gabe said.

“Tell me about it,” Jay muttered. “If it were me doing something like this to Lola, you’d be on my ass in no time.”

“And you wouldn’t let me treat Mikah like this, either. So what the fuck gives?”

“Yeah, just tell us what’s going on. You have to know that we won’t judge you. We only want to help,” Jay said.

Frustration was building up inside me with every word they said. Didn’t they realize that I’d already have told them, if I could? That the only way I’d ever cause Cali any kind of pain was if I didn’t have a choice? There was no way I’d ever let Cali suffer like this if I could stop it, and it was absolutely killing me that I was the reason why she was in so much pain—but what else could I do?

*You could break up with her, like Adéluce said. That way Cali can move on with her life, and Adéluce wouldn’t have a hold over her anymore.*

I cursed and buried my face in my hands. That would be a fate worse than death. I knew that was a dramatic thought, but my being without Cali for eternity simply couldn’t happen. There was no way in hell I was going to do that. My only option was to stop the vampire-witch by any means necessary, and then this would all be over.

“Still playing your cards close to the chest, huh?” Jay said suddenly. “Suit yourself. I don’t know about you two, but I’m freezing my ass off out here. Cali, Greyson, and the others are waiting for us to come back, and there’s no way I’m going back without you, man, so I guess that means the three of us are going to stay out here and freeze our asses off, or—and this is my vote—we could all go back to the pack house, crack open a few beers, and sort this out. What do you say?”

I paused to think, weighing all my options. Jay was right. It was freezing cold out. If nothing else, I could go back to the pack house and make an appearance, then sneak out later with some basic supplies, like clothes and food.

I knew the anguish Cali had to be going through, with me gone and her not knowing what was going on or if I was okay. If I was actually going to go back, there had to be something I could say or do to ease her mind, even if I couldn’t tell her anything about why I was acting this way.

“I doubt your brother is going to let you turn into the Invisible Man,” Gabriel said. “If you refuse and we come back without you, he’ll only send another search party. If you refuse that, he’ll just send another one. You want to put your pack through that? Or do you want to stop being weird and come home with us?”

I sighed. “You’re right. My brother is probably all too eager to drag me back and humiliate me in front of the pack with whatever punishment he’s spent the day concocting. Might as well go and face the music, right? At least this way, I’ll be going back on my own terms.” I hopped up and offered Gabe a hand. “You’ve convinced me. Let’s go back.”

“Yeah!” Jay said with a fist pump. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

The three of us shifted, and within seconds we were racing through the trees toward the pack house. As we ran, I tried to figure out what I was going to say to everyone—or rather, what I’d be allowed to say. Even the thought of Adéluce having so much control over me made me angry all over again.

I hadn’t really come up with a plan by the time we reached the pack house. I just hoped that when the time came, I’d be able to say enough to soothe Cali until I figured out a permanent fix.

We shifted back just as we reached the porch.

“Look who we found!” Gabe shouted, wasting no time running into the house and making the announcement.

“Don’t worry,” Jay said, hanging back with me. “You know I’ll always have your back, no matter what.”

“I appreciate that,” I said. I couldn’t help but think back to when Greyson and I had both been competing for Alpha, and Jay had thrown his support behind me instead of Greyson. He had my back. “I’ll be right in,” I said as Jay started to lead the way into the house. “I just need a minute.”

Jay gave me a look. “You’re not going to take off again, are you?”

I looked back at him. “No. Of course not,” I said easily, though with the way I was feeling at the moment, taking off again wasn’t entirely outside of the realms of possibility.

“Okay. See you inside,” Jay said, then he slipped into the house.

I turned away from the door and walked down into the yard, pacing back and forth. I still wasn’t any closer to figuring out exactly what I was going to say to Cali once I saw her. I’d already revealed as much as I could—which wasn’t very much—and my mouth had all but caught on fire in the process. Adéluce’s magic was strong, and she’d made it so that I really, truly, couldn’t explain myself at all. It was the most frustrating position I’d ever been in.

I inhaled sharply as an idea suddenly took hold. *But what if I can nullify Adéluce’s magic?*

I rushed into the house and found Tabitha in the kitchen, finishing a cup of tea. I grabbed her arm. “Tabitha—I need your help.”

# Episode 3756

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Lola burst into my room with a big smile on her face.

“Cali! He’s back! Xavier’s back—all thanks to my Jay,” she said proudly. “Oh, and I think Gabriel helped a little, too. But the point is, he’s back!”

My stomach flipped. A mix of excitement and nerves. “*Really?* Xavier’s here?”

My moment of disbelief over, I immediately rushed downstairs, and had almost reached the landing when all at once, I remembered how Xavier had left things. I stopped short, my entire body gripped with fear.

*What if he still won’t tell me what’s going on? What if he’s just as cruel as he was before? What if he rejects me again?*

Lola grabbed my hand. “Hey, are you okay? Why are you stopping? Isn’t this what you wanted? For Xavier to come back?”

“Yes, of course it’s what I wanted,” I said slowly. “But not like this. I—I—don’t know if I should see him. He was acting so strange before he left. What if he’s still acting that way? I don’t think I can handle him being so cold to me, Lola. Not again.”

My lip quivered, and I did all I could to keep myself from crying.

“Oh Cali,” Lola said. “It’s going to be okay, I promise. The important thing is that he came back. He wouldn’t have come if he didn’t want to see you—you have to believe that.”

I sighed, calming down just a little. “I suppose you’re right.”

Taking a deep breath, I turned the corner into the kitchen. Xavier was standing with Tabitha, his back to the kitchen door. Tabitha looked over Xavier’s shoulder at me, obviously alarmed by whatever Xavier was saying to her.

Following Tabitha’s gaze, Xavier turned to face me. For a moment, our eyes locked and my heart swelled. Every single doubt I’d had melted away at the sight of my mate. My eyes were brimming with tears in a matter of seconds, and I couldn’t find a single word to say that could express how I felt in that moment.

Xavier opened his mouth as if to say something, but then he just crossed the space between us and gathered me into his arms. I leaned into his warmth, enjoying his embrace and beyond relieved to have him back, safe and sound.

Jay walked in not long after. He cleared his throat and threw Xavier some clothes. “Here you go, man. Something warm to get that chill off you.”

I waited, watching Xavier closely as he slid into the clothes before my gaze fell to Tabitha. *What was he talking with her about when I came in?* She still looked a little freaked out by it.I wanted to ask Xavier outright, but after everything that had happened with him today, I knew I had to be patient. I was sure he’d talk when he was ready.

“I think Dani’s looking for you,” Jay said to Tabitha.

I suspected that Jay was trying to get rid of Tabitha so that Xavier and I could have a moment alone. I liked Tabitha and all, but I didn’t hate the idea. Xavier and I had a lot to talk about, and we didn’t need an audience.

“No, wait,” Xavier said to Tabitha. “I have something I need to say, and I need you to be here to hear it.”

I looked at my mate, confused. *What the hell is going on here?*

Tabitha froze, looking a little like a deer in headlights.

“I promise it won’t take long,” Xavier said. “Just bear with me for a second or two while I try to organize my thoughts.”

Tabitha nodded slowly. “Okay….”

She looked to me, and I nodded at her reassuringly, even though I was just as confused as she was. Xavier had to have a good reason for asking her to stay behind, and if he needed to tell her something, that was fine by me. I couldn’t for the life of me imagine what that something might be, but if he thought it might help fix whatever was going on with him, I was all for it.

Tabitha sat down slowly at the kitchen table, looking uncomfortable.

Xavier took my hand. “I’m so sorry, Cali. I know I owe you an explanation for all my crazy behavior, earlier.” He hesitated, and I saw a flicker of pain pass across his eyes. He touched the back of his ear before continuing. “But the reason… The reason I’ve been avoiding you, the reason I wasn’t at the hospital…”

I held my breath, waiting for the explanation that I knew would make everything okay again—if only he’d just come out with it.

“The reason…” Xavier trailed off, as if at a loss for words.

“Go ahead, Xavier. Whatever it is, tell me. Go on,” I urged.

“The reason…” His words choked into a gurgle, and he started to gasp. He bent slightly at the waist, his fingers still pressed to that spot behind his ear. He looked up at me, wincing, a bead of sweat running down the side of his face. “The reason…”

“Xavier, what’s wrong with you? Are you okay? What’s happening?” I asked. I moved toward him, but he backed away, his eyes brimming with tears. “Xavier, you’re scaring me! Will you please just tell me what’s going on?”

I reached for him again but he ducked away from me, gasping for breath.

“Shit!” He hissed. He rounded on Tabitha, his face screwed into a mask of anger. “You said you’d help me! You lied!”

Tabitha recoiled from him as if he’d slapped her. She looked absolutely terrified.

I put a hand on his arm. “Xavier, whatever’s going on with you, don’t take it out on Tabitha. How is she supposed to be helping you, anyway?”

Once again, Xavier tried to speak. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to form the words, but they wouldn’t come. He grumbled something, but I couldn’t make it out.

“Shit!” he snarled again.

He kicked one of the chairs, sending it flying into the wall, and then he started toward the door.

I ran into his path, blocking him. “You can’t run away again. You need to stop this and tell me what’s wrong!” I was shouting now. I was so tired of whatever this was. He wasn’t acting like himself. He was lashing out at people, and he wasn’t making any sense at all. “Just tell me! Please!” I said, tears welling up in my eyes. “Tell me so that I can help you! I promise I will!”

“Get out of my way,” Xavier growled.

I was stunned. “Xavier, why are you acting like this?”

“I won’t ask again.”

With barely maintained restraint, he moved me aside—just as Greyson came racing into the room.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Greyson demanded, grabbing Xavier by the shirt and slamming him into the wall. “Calm down!”

Xavier shoved Greyson away, and he nearly went flying over the kitchen table.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Greyson said darkly, lunging for Xavier and tackling him to the ground.

The two huge men grappled on the floor, kicking and punching, each one trying to get the upper hand.

“Stop it! Stop it!” I screamed, absolutely horrified by the scene unfolding before me.

They weren’t listening. They both clambered to their feet, locked together in a messy struggle that knocked chairs over and nearly sent the kitchen table crashing into the wall.

I jumped between them, trying to pry them apart. They were both way stronger and way bigger than me, but I’d stopped them before. Despite the way Xavier had been behaving, I knew he would never hurt me. I only needed to get through to them.

“Stop it, *now*!” I shouted, shoving Greyson back with one hand and holding Xavier at arm’s length with the other. I was well aware that I couldn’t actually have forced them apart without my magic, so I was happy that they’d both decided to stop. I looked at Tabitha. “Go, I’ll handle it from here.”

Tabitha hesitated. “Are you sure, Cali? Because—”

“Go!” Xavier roared. “You’re useless, anyway!”

I looked at Xavier, horrified. I’d never heard him speak to anyone in the pack like that before—with the possible exception of Greyson—but it was *not* okay.

“Don’t talk to Tabitha like that! How dare you talk to *any of us* like that!” I burst out.

“What’s your fucking problem?” Greyson demanded. “What are you doing? Don’t you see that you can’t keep this up? You’re pushing everyone away!”

I tried to reach out to Xavier via mind link. *Xavier, please tell me what’s going on! Let me help you, please! This isn’t like you! Are you sick? Just tell me what’s wrong!*

I waited, hoping that I could break through to him, that he would just tell me what was wrong so we could end this, but there was no response.

I watched my mate as he stood leaning against the wall, his eyes wild as he looked at Greyson. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him so on edge before.

A thought crossed my mind. “Xavier, do you think the magic settling has affected you, somehow? Maybe I got better, only for you to get sick? If that’s the case, let me help! That’s the only thing I want to do—you just have to let me!”

Xavier rounded on me, his eyes flashing with anger. “You can’t help me, Cali. Nobody can.”

# Episode 3757

**Xavier**

Tabitha had been my last and only hope. She’d been able to negate almost an entire city’s worth of magic before, so why couldn’t she negate whatever the hell Adéluce was using on me? She’d used her power with no problems when we were in New Orleans, so why wasn’t her presence able to do anything for me right now?

I hadn’t been able to even talk to Tabitha about what I wanted her help with before Lola had brought Cali downstairs. But all I’d needed was Tabitha’s presence. I’d hoped I could’ve opened up about everything with Adéluce to Cali, but it hadn’t worked. And I’d snapped, confusing and hurting everyone all at once.

Was I never going to find a solution?

Whatever Adéluce had done, not even Tabitha’s magic seemed able to negate it.

*This is exactly what Adéluce wanted, and it’s working. She put this curse on me so that no one could help me, so that I’d be forced to do everything she says because I can’t even do something as simple as tell the people I care about what’s happening to me.*

I cursed under my breath, my mind racing as I tried again to come up with a solution that would actually work and get me out of this. I could feel my brother’s angry gaze on me, and that only made me madder. I wanted to punch him right in his smug, know-it-all face. I knew that wouldn’t be the right thing to do, but I had no doubt that it would make me feel a hell of a lot better.

All I felt right now was anger. Anger toward everyone and everything. Even though I was frustrated and annoyed that Tabitha’s negation abilities hadn’t worked on me, I was still ashamed that I’d snapped at her the way I had. She didn’t deserve that. Now I’d dragged her into my cyclone of misery, along with everyone else I cared about. One more point for Adéluce.

Whatever was going on with me right now, however bad I was feeling, I knew I shouldn’t take out my frustration on Cali. I couldn’t continue to lose it in front of her. I had to get my shit together before I ensured that there would be nothing and no one waiting for me when this nightmare was all over. I just had no idea how the hell I was going to do that.

“Xavier, what do you mean by that? Why can’t I help you?” Cali asked, breaking the tension. “We’ve helped each other through so much, haven’t we? What’s so different now?”

I balled up my fists, trying to manage the fresh wave of frustration.

*Why can’t they understand? Why can’t they see that there’s something that I want to tell them, but can’t? Isn’t it obvious that I’m struggling? That I would tell them everything if I could?*

I had no idea how to resolve this, and I was only making everything worse. Every time I tried to say anything that could even begin to get me the help I so desperately needed, I failed. With Tabitha nearby, I’d thought her magic would work. I’d had a sliver of hope and thought that I would finally be able to explain everything to Cali, but then that hope had died. A rush of searing heat had encased my tongue and my throat had closed up, and I hadn’t been able to say a word. The pain had been more excruciating than ever. It was like Adéluce was teasing me, testing me, showing me how awful her power was.

“You need to apologize!” Greyson was saying. “Not just to Tabitha, not just to me, not just to Cali, but to the entire pack! Right now!”

An apology would only get me so far. I still wouldn’t be able to explain why I’d lashed out. *For being cursed? For my mouth turning into fire whenever I even try to explain what the hell is going on? Is any of this really my fault? I did what I needed to do to save Cali, and that’s all that matters in the end.*

And when Greyson found out he was going to have Cali all to himself…

“Screw you, and screw your apologies,” I snarled.

The moment the words left my mouth, Cali looked absolutely crushed. I immediately regretted them, but I was beyond angry, beyond frustrated, beyond worn down, and I had no idea what to do. There was so much wrong with me, and I couldn’t tell them a thing. I didn’t know how much more of this I was going to be able to take.

“Can you all just… leave me alone?” I said tightly. “I need to clear my head—or is that too much to ask?”

A few seconds of silence.

“Of course we can give you some time, Xavier,” Cali finally said. “But promise me that you won’t leave? We need to talk.”

I nodded at her, afraid to speak. Now more than ever, I wasn’t sure what I could say and what I couldn’t, where the line had really been drawn. Cali threw her arms around my neck and kissed me on the cheek, and somehow the fact that she was trying to comfort me hurt me even more. After the way I’d acted, I should’ve been the one comforting her. I was flipping out and acting like a lunatic, and she was just trying to do whatever she could to take my pain away. But Adéluce had made sure she couldn’t do that, no matter how hard she tried.

Greyson glared daggers at me as he and Cali left the kitchen. As soon as they were gone, I started searching the cabinets for a bottle of whiskey. When I found one, I didn’t even bother pouring it into a glass. I lifted the bottle to my lips and took a large swallow—anything to help dull the pain. It burned my throat on the way down, reminding me of the hold that Adéluce had on me.

I sat the bottle down and started pacing, trying to figure out my next move. I’d already tried everything I could think of. If anything, I felt way worse than before. Helpless. It was a rare feeling for me, one that I’d never quite gotten used to, and right now it was the worst feeling in the world.

I reached for the whiskey bottle again, but it wasn’t there.

Adéluce’s voice cut through the silence like a rusted knife. “Do you really think drowning your sorrows is going to help?”

She was standing by the sink, pouring the whiskey down the drain.

“Fuck you!” I cried out as I lunged for her. I slammed into the sink. She was gone. *Am I going mad?* It was certainly starting to feel like it.

A ticking sound filled the air, and I whipped around. There was a clock on the table that hadn’t been there before, the seconds ticking loudly by. Adéluce materialized behind it.

“I warned you that time was of the essence, didn’t I?” she said. “How much longer do you think I’m going to wait? I’ve pretty much reached the end of my patience, and I warned you about the consequences.”

I gritted my teeth and sagged against the table as I was hit by a surge of blinding pain. When it finally passed, I opened my eyes. I was no longer in the kitchen, but in Cali’s room—or at least that was what it looked like; I couldn’t really be sure. My heart broke once again as I watched my mate sitting in front of her mirror, despondent. Greyson was hovering behind her, trying to comfort her.

I gritted my teeth as I watched them. “Why the hell are you showing me this?”

“Why?” Adéluce repeated. “Because you’re not taking my warnings seriously. You obviously think this is all a joke. I’m trying to show you that this is no laughing matter.”

Adéluce gestured at Cali, who suddenly clutched at her throat, gasping for air.

I screamed, but no sound came out. I tried to reach for Cali, tried to go to her, but I was rooted to the spot. I couldn’t do anything to help her. I was completely helpless, yet again.

“Cali?” Greyson said. “Cali!” He pulled her into his arms. “Help! Somebody, help!”

Tears streamed down my brother’s face as Cali’s face began to turn blue. I could see the life draining from her eyes.

I fell to my knees in front of Adéluce. “Stop, *please*. Don’t do this! Please don’t do this! I’ll do anything you ask, just please don’t hurt her! Stop it!”

Adéluce locked eyes with me, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “You know what you have to do.”

Just as quickly as it had drained away, the color returned to Cali’s face, and she stopped choking. It was almost as if the whole incident had never happened.

I blinked, and I was suddenly back in the kitchen. The whiskey bottle slipped from my hand and shattered on the floor. I looked around wildly, the image of Cali dying right in front of me swimming through my mind, haunting me.

*What was that? Was it just a dream? A waking nightmare?* The tears on my cheeks told me otherwise.

Adéluce’s voice played through my head. *You know what you have to do, Xavier, so do it!*

Cali came rushing into the kitchen.

“Xavier? What happened?” Her eyes fell to the smashed bottle on the floor, and the whiskey pooling around it. “Are you okay?”

I turned to face her head on, my hands shaking, my heart feeling like it was going to burst right out of my chest. I had to do this, even though it went against every fiber of my being. Against my heart.

“I can’t be with you anymore, Cali. We’re done.”