

The clearing pulsed with a strange energy under the full moon. The scent of wild jasmine and pine was thick, clinging to Lila's skin and filling her lungs as she scanned the shadows. Her heart raced, but not from fear—not entirely. She knew he was watching, waiting. Cassian always did this, testing her patience like a cat toying with its prey.

“Are you going to lurk in the dark all night, or do you plan to show yourself?” she called, her voice sharp but steady.

A low chuckle drifted out from the shadows, smooth and dangerous.

“Impatient as always,” came his reply, rich with amusement.

He stepped into the moonlight, his presence a force that seemed to draw the world's attention. Cassian moved like a liquid shadow, his tall frame cutting through the silver light. His dark hair, always slightly disheveled, framed a face too perfect to be real—sharp jawline, full lips curved into a smirk, and eyes that glinted like molten gold.

Lila hated how her pulse quickened, how the mere sight of him sent heat spiraling through her.

“You're late,” she said, crossing her arms to hide her growing unease.

He stopped just shy of her personal space, tilting his head as his smirk deepened. “Didn't know we were on a schedule, sweetheart. Miss me that much?”

Lila rolled her eyes, but her body betrayed her, her breath catching as his gaze slid over her. She forced herself to hold her ground, refusing to let him see the effect he had on her.

“What do you want, Cassian?” she demanded.

He chuckled again, the sound low and rough, sending a shiver down her spine. “Isn't it obvious? I wanted to see you.”

“Liar,” she shot back, but the word lacked venom.

Cassian took a step closer, the space between them shrinking to something unbearably intimate. “Careful, Lila. You might hurt my feelings.”

Her pulse thundered in her ears, but she stood firm, even as his heat radiated against her. “I don't have time for your games. The pack is already on edge, and your little midnight visits aren't helping.”

His smirk faltered, replaced by a sharp seriousness that sent a chill through her. “The pack has bigger problems than me,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Like a rogue vampire hunting on your land.”

Her breath hitched, but she schooled her features into indifference. “And why should I believe you?”

Cassian leaned in, his voice a low rumble that brushed against her skin. “Because if I wanted to lie to you, I’d make it sweeter.”

Lila’s heart hammered against her ribs. His proximity was a torment, the way his scent—cedar and smoke, warm and intoxicating—wrapped around her like a net.

“What’s your angle?” she asked, her voice quieter now.

He studied her, his golden eyes probing, searching. “Maybe I just enjoy saving your pretty little neck.”

“Or maybe you’re bored,” she countered, though her voice wavered.

His grin widened, fangs glinting under the moonlight. “If boredom brought me here, I wouldn’t bother sticking around after the first insult.”

Lila scoffed and turned away, but his hand shot out, catching her wrist. His touch was searing, electric, and she froze as he pulled her back toward him.

“Lila,” he murmured, his voice softer now, almost gentle. “This isn’t a game. That vampire—it’s not like the others. It’s old, powerful, and it knows you’re a threat.”

Her throat tightened, but she forced herself to meet his gaze. “I’ve faced worse.”

“Have you?” he asked, his golden eyes darkening. “Because this time, you’re in over your head. And whether you like it or not, you’re going to need me.”

Lila yanked her wrist free, ignoring the way her skin tingled where he’d touched her. “I don’t need anything from you, Cassian.”

He smirked again, but there was something darker beneath it now, something almost... vulnerable. “Keep telling yourself that,” he said.

They stared at each other, the tension crackling between them like a live wire. The night pressed in around them, the forest holding its breath.

"Fine," he said after a long pause. "Have it your way. But don't say I didn't warn you when this thing comes for you."

He turned to leave, his steps slow and deliberate, but Lila couldn't stop herself.

"Cassian."

He stopped, glancing over his shoulder with a raised brow.

She hesitated, hating the vulnerability in her voice when she finally spoke. "Why are you really here?"

He turned back to her, closing the distance between them in a few long strides. Before she could react, he reached out, his fingers brushing a stray strand of hair from her face.

"You really want to know?" he asked, his voice a husky whisper.

Her breath hitched, her body betraying her once again. "Yes."

Cassian's eyes burned into hers, and for a moment, the teasing and bravado fell away. "Because," he said, his voice barely audible, "the thought of something happening to you... it's unbearable."

Lila's heart stopped, her defenses crumbling under the weight of his words. She opened her mouth to respond, but he leaned in, his lips brushing her ear as he spoke again.

"And because," he continued, his voice dripping with wickedness, "I enjoy watching you squirm."

Heat surged through her, and she shoved him back, her cheeks flaming. "You're impossible."

He laughed, the sound rich and genuine, and stepped away, his usual smirk back in place. "And you're irresistible, Lila. Don't forget it."

Before she could respond, he vanished into the shadows, leaving her alone in the clearing, her heart pounding and her skin buzzing.

But she wasn't alone for long.

A low growl rumbled from the darkness, the sound primal and menacing. Lila spun around, her hand reaching instinctively for the dagger strapped to her thigh.

"Cassian?" she called, but she already knew it wasn't him.

The growl came again, closer this time and a pair of glowing red eyes appeared in the trees. Her pulse quickened as the vampire stepped into the clearing, its pale skin gleaming under the moonlight.

It smiled, its fangs sharp and dripping with malice.

"Hello, little wolf," it hissed.

Lila's grip tightened on her dagger, her breath steadying as she prepared to fight. She wasn't ready to die, and she sure as hell wasn't ready to let Cassian have the last word.

From somewhere deep in the woods, a wolf howled, its mournful cry echoing through the night.

Lila squared her shoulders, her dagger glinting in the moonlight.

"Let's dance," she said.