**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 10**

**Episodes 1019-1147**

**Episode 1019**

“Am I human?” Lola asked again.

Jay was already at Lola’s side, and I rushed over to join him. “Are you okay?” I asked breathlessly. Was she really human? Was there a way to tell?

Jay shook his head and—his hands gentle on Lola’s body—helped her sit up. “Is she?” he asked Big Mac. “Is she human?”

I glanced over at Jay, who was as pale as I’d ever seen him but seemed to be breathing easier now that the spell was over. I looked back at Lola, my eyes searching her face. She looked—*fine*. Just like she always looked. She was alive, but how were we supposed to know how the spell had worked? Or *if* it had worked at all.

“There’s no way for me to tell,” Big Mac said. “Not unless you want to go through another spell.”

“NO!” we all replied at once.

But Lola was shaking her head. “There’s only one way to find out.” She braced herself against Jay’s arm to stand.

“Lola!” I said, alarmed. “You should just rest. Just sit back down.”

“No,” she said stubbornly. “I’ve waited too long for this. I have to know. I’m going to shift.” She got shakily to her feet.

We all held our breath, watching her as she closed her eyes. Her face scrunched up in concentration, but… nothing happened.

I shot a glance at Jay, who was watching her, his own face tense.

Finally, Lola opened her eyes, her expression devastated. “I can’t feel my wolf. I can’t shift.”

“Oh, Lola.” I reached out for her hand. “It’s okay. The important thing is that you’re alive.”

“That’s right,” Big Mac said briskly. “The spell worked.”

Lola looked at her, then turned to Jay. “But… I’m just a human,” she said, and tears started to stream down her face.

Jay pulled her into a hug, holding her close as she shook with sobs.

My heart ached for Lola. I knew how much being a wolf meant to her, and how terrified she had been of losing it.

“You knew this was a possibility,” Big Mac reminded us. “You should be thankful it worked at all.”

If this was meant to console Lola, it *wasn’t* effective, and Lola only cried harder. I hated the sound of it—she just sounded so *sad*. I wanted to hold her, to tell her everything was going to be okay, but Jay had his arms firmly around her, and it didn’t look like he had any intention of letting her go. She was starting to shiver in the cold October night, and he turned, leading her up toward the house.

“If she needs anything,” I called after him, “just let me know, I’m here.”

Jay nodded.

Feeling helpless, I turned back to Big Mac.

“Why is everyone staring at me?” she snapped, annoyed. “It was an old spell, and Lola knew the risks. You should all be happy that she’s alive.”

I folded my arms across my chest. I *was* happy that Lola was alive, but I couldn’t find it in my heart to say so to Big Mac—not when I could still hear the sound of Lola’s sobs ringing in my ears.

Mrs. Smith put a hand on my arm. “MacKenzie is right, you know. This is a shock, and Lola will be upset for a while, but, in time, she and Jay will adjust. She’s just going to need time to get used to being human.”

“I know.” I nodded. “I just keep wondering if there was something else we could have done. Something we didn’t think of. Maybe some Fae magic or something?”

Mrs. Smith gave me a small smile. “This may come as a shock to you, Cali, but you can’t fix everything. The best thing you can do is be Lola’s friend.”

“Yeah,” I said, “you’re right. Thanks.”

“Hey,” Xavier said, walking over from the house and slipping his arm around my waist. “How’d it go?”

“Hey,” I said, turning to him, grateful as hell to see him. I rested my cheek against his chest as he pulled me close. “She’s alive, but her wolf is gone.”

“Shit,” he breathed. “Did she take it hard?”

I nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I know what that’s like. And to have it gone forever…” He tightened his arms around me. “She’s lucky to have a friend like you, Cali.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “I just don’t know how much use I can be to her, Xavier. She’s so sad.”

“Hey.” He pulled back and put a finger under my chin, lifting it so I was looking into his eyes. “You told me how things have been going for her. How out of control she’s been. If she hadn’t done this spell, she probably would have died from the shifting. She didn’t have a choice. And she knew the risks. She knew this was a possibility. The important thing is that she has you as a friend.” He glanced back toward the house. “And that she has her pack. Always.”

“You’re right,” I said with a shuddering sigh. “I’m just worried about her.”

“I know you are,” he said, “but Jay’s with her. Let him help her tonight. It’s Halloween.” He grinned. “Why don’t we go join the party?”

“*You* want to join the party?”

He shrugged. “I could be persuaded.”

He was right though. There wasn’t much I could do, and no one would take better care of Lola than Jay. And, while I wasn’t technically human, I’d spent most of my life believing I was, and I’d turned out okay, so Lola might be okay too. I nodded and let Xavier lead me toward the house.

The pack party was spilling out from the house onto the front porch. Everyone was in costume—I saw Cleopatra and an alien and four cats, just one after the other. Everyone was smiling and laughing and had a drink in their hand. I felt so far away from it, like I was viewing it all from a distance. But Xavier kept pulling me deeper into the house and, when he put a drink into my hand, I smiled. The punch had been chilled with dry ice so it smoked like a witch’s brew—though I was sure Big Mac would have rolled her eyes at the idea. I really did love Halloween.

“Hey, Cali.” Artemis hailed me as she made her way across the room from the kitchen. “I heard what happened to Lola. She going to be okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah, she’s going to be fine.”

“Do either of you know where the cider donuts are?” Torin asked, bouncing over to us.

“The what?” Artemis asked.

“Apparently they’re these cakes with a hole in the middle. A *hole!* In the middle of the cake! Sage told me Mrs. Smith made some earlier and I’m dying to try them.”

“I’d check the kitchen,” I said.

“Right,” Torin said. “The food place.” He looked around. “I really love this holiday of yours. I love the costumes! It’s all so festive!”

“What are you supposed to be?” I asked, taking a sip of my drink.

Torin’s face fell. “Can’t you tell? I’m a werewolf.” He raised his hands like claws and growled.

I laughed. “Please don’t do that again.”

Torin grimaced. “I asked Xavier to show me how to growl and howl, but he wouldn’t do it.”

I grinned and pointed into the living room. “I think I see a basket of donuts over there. I’ll grab one, too. They look really good.”

We’d just picked up our donuts when the doorbell rang.

I frowned. “Who would be coming who isn’t already here? Trick-or-treaters?”

“Oh!” Torin bounced on the balls of his feet. “Rishika told me about those. Can we hand out candy?”

“Do we even have candy?” I wondered aloud. The pack house was in such a remote area, I was sure no one had thought to prepare for trick-or-treaters all the way out here.

Torin didn’t wait for me to answer my own question and ran for the door. The first person I saw was the little kid with the pumpkin pail. It was the same kid we’d seen in the forest earlier after Xavier had shifted in front of us. What was the kid doing here at the house? Behind him was a group of adults, all in Victorian-era costumes.

“Oh, shit. I mean—sorry.” I glanced down at the kid, feeling a bit on edge. “Are you here because of what happened earlier?” I asked, suddenly worried. If this kid had gone home and told his parents about seeing Xavier shift, we might have a lot of explaining to do. “I’m really sorry—”

“No,” one of the adults said, cutting me off. “We’re here for the party.”

I stared at him for a moment, confused into silence. The party? Who had invited them? How did they even know about it? But before I’d even had a chance to formulate a question, Torin swung the door wide open and grinned.

“The more the merrier! Come on in!”

**Episode 1020**

GREYSON

I wanted to jump down into the crowd and demand the witch sisters tell me what the hell was happening, but now wasn’t the time and I knew it. The bell rang, signaling the start of the fight. It was all the same, beat for beat. The same shouts, the same jeers, the same weird, shuffling steps from the Crusher as he ambled around, only barely avoiding tripping over his own feet and knocking himself out. I kept looking around, trying to figure it out, but I felt like I was in that movie where the guy was forced to live the exact same day over and over again. Was that what was going to happen to me? I hazarded a glance at the sisters out in the seething crowd. They were watching me, their faces impassive. Was I going to have to live the same thirty minutes over and over until I got some unknowable thing right?

The first two rounds went the same—me working my ass off to make it look like the Crusher really stood a chance against me. But it wasn’t these rounds I had to worry about—it was round three. *Round three*, I kept reminding myself. I glanced over at Maren, watching her tense, terrified face as she watched Fenrir. *Round three*. I looked at Fenrir, who looked especially small and vulnerable sandwiched between Hans’s giant goons. *Round three*. I had to make this work.

Round two—just as much of a blur as round one—ended with the bell, and I went to the corner. I took a couple of deep breaths.

“You got this, kid,” my cornerman said, slapping me on the shoulder.

This was it, and I knew what I had to do. When the bell rang again, signaling the start of the third round, I turned on my heel. I walked toward the Crusher slowly, waiting. It came faster than I remembered it—that wild swing—and instead of ducking it, I leaned into it, letting his fist crash into my jaw.

Whoever had given him the name “the Crusher” must have been playing a cruel joke, because though the skinny man’s face was beet-red with the effort, I barely felt the force of his fist as it connected with my face. But I managed to not roll my eyes and even stumbled back a few steps, then fell to the ground.

The crowd’s reaction was a beat of shocked silence, then *absolute pandemonium*. I could feel the ground beneath me rumble as people jumped to their feet screaming with rage and disbelief. “*GET UP!*”

But I stayed down. I squinted up at the ref as he—looking shocked himself—gave his head a little shake and began to count.

“ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR!”

The Crusher—once he got over looking shocked—started dancing around in triumph, pumping his fist in the air. He’d probably never won a match in his life, and he was a poor sport.

“*TEN!*” the ref finally called. He reached for the Crusher’s hand and held it high. “And the winner is THE CRUSHER!”

Without giving the Crusher another moment to savor his victory, I leapt to my feet. I had no faith that Hans was going to fulfill his part of the bargain, and I didn’t want to lose sight of Fenrir for even an instant.

The faces of the fans were a blur as I left the ring. Some seemed pumped and were jumping, cheering for the Crusher, the underdog. Others booed me as I passed.

“*LOSER!*”

I ignored them. Maren was fighting her way through the crowd, making her way toward Fenrir. She got to him before I did, and I watched her pull him out from between the thugs and wrap him in her arms. He clung to her, his little arms wrapped around her neck. My heart was still beating hard, but my breathing slowed slightly at the sight. Maren had him now—it was going to be okay. This was the way it was supposed to be.

I looked up to see Hans looking at me, his eyes cold and calculating. He gave me a slow nod, then, with a snap of his fingers, his two bodyguards stood and followed him toward the exit, the same door they’d entered through.

It was a relief to watch them leave, but worry still nagged at the back of my head. I still didn’t trust Hans. He didn’t seem the type to give up so easily. But it didn’t matter. Not now. I made my way over to where Maren was kneeling, her arms wrapped around her son, her face buried in his neck.

She sensed my approach and looked up, her dark eyes so bright with tears that they sparkled like diamonds. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

But I understood. I could only imagine how she felt. I touched her shoulder. “I’m glad you got him back,” I said softly.

Maren closed her eyes and took a deep breath, like she was trying to breathe her little boy in.

“I have to ask,” I went on, my voice still low, “did you have anything to do with what happened in the ring?”

Maren’s bright eyes dimmed, and her brows pulled down. “What do you mean?”

“What happened,” I repeated, gesturing toward the center of the club. “Just now. In the ring.”

She kept frowning at me. “What are you talking about, Greyson? I didn’t do anything.”

I stared at her for a moment, vividly remembering the wild, feral look in her eyes, the rasp of her screams, the silver dagger in my side…

“You didn’t see what happened?” I demanded. “You didn’t see me win the first time?”

Maren’s eyes widened and she searched my face. “Oh Greyson, are you okay? Did you hit your head when you fell? I thought it was an act, but did that guy really hurt you?”  
 “No, no,” I said, shaking my head. If Maren thought that the Crusher had actually done me any damage, there was no way she knew anything about the time shift. “No, I’m fine. It’s nothing. Forget I said anything. I guess I’m just confused.” I glanced down at her body—was she hiding the knife somewhere? Was she planning to stab me, just like last time, if things hadn’t gone as planned? “I’m just going to hit the locker room to change and then we should get the hell out of here, okay?”

Maren nodded. “That sounds good.” She hesitated for a moment, then stretched up on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek. When she pulled away, we looked at each other for a moment, and there was a frisson of energy between us. For a moment, I remembered what it used to be like between us—what we used to have. If I really wanted to move on from Cali…

I blew out a breath and turned toward the locker room. I couldn’t think about that—not right now, anyway. I was done with difficult questions for the night.

But it seemed that difficult questions weren’t done with me, because just before I hit the locker room door, I saw them: the witch sisters. Still sitting in their seats. Were they waiting for me? Because if they were, I had a few questions for them. Like what the hell was up with the two different versions of the fight? And that first version, the one I’d *won*—had that just been one of those weird daydream spells I’d been having? But… *could* it have been? It had felt so *real*. The fight, the screams, the fear, the pain… After all of the other daydreams, I’d snapped out of it and immediately recognized what had happened. Tonight’s event had been very different.

The sisters looked up as I approached, and they smiled at me.

“Hello, Greyson,” Lauren said pleasantly. “Did you enjoy the fight as much as we did?”

“Stop,” I snapped. “Just stop. What the hell just happened out there?”

Lauren raised her eyebrows. “Wasn’t it obvious? We fixed your mistake.”

“*Fixed*?” I asked warily. “What does that mean?”  
 Posie rolled her eyes. “It means *you* saved our lives, so *we* saved yours.”

I frowned. “How did you save my life?”

Lauren smiled. “We allowed you to rewrite your history.”

Chloe’s eyes got big as she watched me struggle with that for a moment. “Surely you don’t actually think you *imagined* what just happened?”

I didn’t answer right away, just shifted on my feet. I wasn’t sure what to say—whatever they’d done tonight had clearly saved a few lives—but I wasn’t thrilled that they’d used a spell on me without my consent.

Lauren exchanged a speaking glance with Chloe and then looked up at me, folding her hands primly in her lap. “Well, now you know. We may not be able to change your future, but you can change your past.”

This rang like a bell in my head, but I wasn’t at all sure why. “What the hell does that mean?”

As if responding to some unseen cue, the witch sisters rose from their chairs and turned toward the exit.

Lauren looked at me over her shoulder. “When you can answer that, Greyson, you let us know.”

**Episode 1021**

I was pushed against the door as the costumed guests Torin had just invited inside filed past. I looked after them, frowning. “Who the hell invited them?” I finally managed to ask, but Torin just waved an airy hand.

“Who cares? It’s a party! I’ve been watching a bunch of your teen comedies, and I know how these parties are supposed to work. Hey, what do you think of my costume?” he asked one of the new guests, grabbing hold of his arm.

The guy turned and eyed Torin’s furry costume critically. “Are you supposed to be a werewolf?” Torin beamed. The guy smoothed down the lace ruff on the front of his own lavish Victorian era costume and shook his head. “You don’t smell like a werewolf, kid.” He looked between Torin and me. “You smell like Fae.”

Then the guy turned and followed the rest of his friends toward the kitchen, leaving me staring after him in shock.

*Did he just say what I think he just said*? Because if he could smell that Torin and I were Fae, then that would mean that he was a—

Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit.

Had Torin just invited a large group of *vampires* into the pack house?

I watched as the knot of strangers disappeared into the crowd in the kitchen. I could try confronting them, but they were already moving deeper into the house. I grabbed Torin by the arm.

“Hey,” I snapped. “Keep an eye on that group, okay? Don’t let them out of your sight, you got me?” I waited until Torin nodded, then let go. I *had* to find Xavier. I had to warn him.

I turned toward the door, hoping to find Xavier on the porch, but then I saw the kid with the pumpkin bucket we’d seen in the woods earlier. I took a step back. He’d come with the vampires, which meant that he had to be one, too.

The kid looked up at me and raised his pumpkin bucket. “Trick or treat?” He was smiling, but there was something hollow and flat about the expression that made a shiver run up my spine.

I tore my eyes away and looked around. “I don’t have any candy, but I could get you a donut, I guess. Maybe you should ask your parents if that’s okay.”

The kid stared at me. “I’m four hundred and thirty-five years old, lady,” he said, his high kid voice flat and emotionless. “I don’t have to ask permission.”

My eyes widened. “Take ‘em, then,” I muttered, grabbing the plate of donuts and pushing it toward him. Then I turned on my heel and raced outside.

In the front yard, I took a deep breath of the cold night air. I *had* to remain fucking *calm* and find Xavier. I looked around, searching for his outline among the pack members scattered around the yard. As I looked, my brain was spinning. Why would *vampires* show up here? There was a whole group of them, but we were a pack. We still outnumbered them. Why would they self-invite to a werewolf party?  
 I rounded the side of the house and caught sight of Artemis and Rishika down by the lake. Artemis was holding a bow, and as I watched she grabbed an arrow from the quiver on her back and notched it. She pulled on the bowstring, then Rishika stepped forward and lit the arrow so it flamed to life. Then Artemis released, shooting the arrow out over the water. Half the pack, gathered nearby, cheered as it arched downward toward the blackness of the lake and disappeared with a quiet hiss.

Finally, I caught sight of Xavier. He was standing near the fire, talking with Jay, a little apart from the rest of the group. Lola was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she was still upstairs, resting in her room. I’d need to check on her at some point, but right now I had bigger concerns, so I strode purposefully toward Xavier. “We’ve got a problem.”

He looked up. “What’s going on?”

“A bunch of vampires just showed up,” I announced, my heart hammering. It felt scarier to say it out loud.

Xavier shrugged. “Not everyone has to have a different costume.”

I goggled at him. “I am not talking about a bunch of people in vampire *costumes*, Xavier. I am talking about real, *actual* vampires! The undead kind with the rotting flesh and the pointy fangs. The ones who are not big on garlic or holy water. The real deal—not jokes in satin capes.”

He looked at me, clearly unconvinced. “What are you talking about?”  
 “That kid, from before—the weird one who was trick-or-treating? The one who saw you shift? He showed up with a bunch of adults. And Torin invited them all in—”

“*What?*” Xavier asked, bristling.

“That’s not the worst part,” I said, relieved that he was at least listening. “They could smell us, Xavier. They could smell Torin and me. They knew we were Fae just by smelling us. They’re vampires, and he invited them in,” I finished, my cheeks burning in the cold night air.

Xavier shook his head. “Fucking Torin.” He looked up at the house. “Where are they now? Why can’t I smell them? Jay?”

Jay lifted his nose into the air and sniffed. He shook his head. “I can’t either. Cali, are you sure they’re vampires?”

“I’m not *sure*,” I admitted. “But they’re… *something*. I’m sure about that. They’re the ones wearing Victorian costumes. Or, like, maybe just their actual clothes from when they were alive during the Victorian era. Look!” I grabbed Xavier’s arm as the kid with the pumpkin pail wandered out onto the back porch. “He told me he was four hundred and thirty-five years old!”

Xavier looked down at me. “How much have you had to drink, Cali?”

“If you don’t believe me, go see for yourself,” I snapped.

“Cali,” Xavier said, slipping an arm around me, “don’t be like that. I believe you; they’re vampires. I believe you, okay?”

I stepped out of his grasp, annoyed. “Don’t patronize me, Xavier.” I pointed to one of the Victorian vampires as he stepped onto the back porch. It was the guy with the lace ruff. “Go see for yourself.”

Xavier looked at the man, then back at me. “Fine,” he said with a sigh. He grabbed my hand, threading his fingers through mine as we walked toward the porch. As we neared the man, he sniffed the air and then looked over at Xavier, his gaze icy cold.

“Hey,” Xavier said warily as we drew close. “I heard we had some new guests. I’m Xavier and this is—”

“I know exactly who you are, Xavier Evers,” the man said coldly.

I tightened my grip on Xavier’s hand.

“And you are?” Xavier said, matching the man’s frosty tone.

“Gregor Gilbert,” the man declared loftily.

Xavier looked at him for a moment, like he was familiar but he couldn’t quite place him. “Have we met before?”

“No,” Gregor said. “But you and Caliana Hart—”

I shivered as the man spoke my name.

“—have met my brother, Raul.”

I glanced up at Xavier, but he looked as confused as I felt. That name didn’t sound at all familiar to me. “I don’t know,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “I haven’t met that many vampires.”

Xavier planted his feet and gave Gregor a steady look that held more than a hint of a threat. “I think you’ve made a mistake. We’ve never met a vampire named Raul.”

Gregor narrowed his dead, black eyes. “I’d never mistake those responsible for my brother’s murder.”

My grip on Xavier’s hand was tight as a vise. “Are you accusing us of murder?” I asked.

“I certainly wouldn’t know how else to put it,” Gregor said. His voice was smooth, but it was filled with menace. “I was there—at the Renaissance faire—when you drove a stake into Raul’s heart.”

The memory came back to me in a flash. “It was a lance actually. And that guy Raul *attacked* Xavier!” I said, outraged. I took a step toward Gregor. “That was self-defense!”

Gregor’s eyes narrowed to slits as he stared at me, and Xavier put his arm out in front of me, moving me behind him.

*Step back, Cali. Now.*

I wanted to ignore Xavier’s voice in my head. I certainly didn’t want to leave him—especially when I looked up and saw the other vampire guests moving toward us.

Then the shrill sound of a scream rent the night air, and we all looked up. Lola’s head was visible in her upstairs window. She was reaching out, and for a moment I stared at her, not sure what I was looking at. Then it became clear, and my stomach dropped as my blood ran cold.

She was struggling with a man dressed in a strange, Victorian era costume. The man had his hands on Lola’s shoulders and, as I watched, he opened his mouth, revealing long, pointed fangs. Lola screamed again as the man leaned forward and bit down on her neck.

**Episode 1022**

LOLA

Bullshit. Absolute bullshit. I’d been without my wolf for less than an hour and now some goddamn vampire was somehow in my room, trying to feast on my newly human blood?

BULLSHIT.

It was like some kind of cosmic joke. Was that what was going on? Was the universe just having some fun at my expense? This year just kept getting worse and worse. What was going to happen next? A meteorite headed straight for me? Amnesia? Low rise jeans?

All these thoughts flashed through my mind in an instant. The next moment they were gone, replaced by screaming pain as the vampire’s nasty fangs plunged into my neck.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I screamed, struggling to free myself from this guy’s iron grasp. There was no way I was going to let some dude dressed like a janky extra from *Interview with a Vampire* finish me off.

I opened my mouth to scream for help, but the sound came out strangled, and on the lawn below I could see the other members of this guy’s crew tussling with the pack. Everyone seemed occupied, fighting their own fights.

“*Dammit*,” I hissed to myself. Okay. This was fine. I could do this. No problem. I might not have been a wolf anymore, but I still knew a thing or two about fighting. I twisted around and brought my knee up—hard—right into the vampire’s nuts. He winced, and I felt the skin on my neck rip beneath his teeth as he jerked back.

But I gritted my own teeth against the pain and went after him again, nailing him as hard as I could right in the family jewels. This had the intended effect, and his grip on me loosened slightly. I drew my head back and then forward, headbutting him as hard as I could right in the fangs. My own head stung with pain, but it must have been worse for him, because he started to howl. Pressing my advantage, I punched him in the gut.

He wheezed hard, breathing out his rotten breath onto me. It was *putrid* and, gagging, I struggled to get away, but he was still holding me tight.

“*Fine*,” I muttered angrily. “If that’s how you want to play it. See how you like *this*—” And I yanked up the velvet sleeve of his jacket and bit down as hard as I could on his arm, giving him a taste of his very own vampire medicine.

The taste of his dead, vampire flesh in my mouth nearly made me throw up, and when his blood started flowing against my tongue, I thought I was going to be sick—but I was nothing if not stubborn as hell, and I hung on as he thrashed around in pain and surprise.

It was clear from his apparent shock that I was the first person who’d ever turned the tables on his bitey ass, and he howled and instinctively let go of me. I took a step back and looked desperately around the room. He was still blocking the door, and even if I made it, I’d have to get through the whole damn house before I found Jay or another werewolf to help me. No, my best bet was just to figure out a way to defeat him here.

My frantic eyes scanned my dresser as I tried to find something—*anything*—that I could use as a stake. *Why do I have no stakes in my room? There should be stakes in every room!* Then I saw a wooden chopstick I sometimes used to secure my hair in a bun. That would work! I lunged for it, but before I’d made it halfway across the room, I felt a cold, clammy hand grasping my ankle.

The vampire—still bleeding his sludge-like blood from where I’d bitten his arm—had caught hold of my leg. “Not so fast, sweetheart,” he hissed.

“Let me go, bloodsucker,” I screamed, and kicked out. I moved frantically, kicking as hard as I could, but it didn’t matter. He was so much stronger than me. He knew it, too; I could see it in his cold smile. He gave one hard yank and pulled me down to the floor. But just before I fell, I reached out and caught the very tip of the chopstick by the very tips of my fingers. I pulled it to my chest and clasped it there as I fell to the floor, face down.

Immediately, the vampire began to move over me, climbing on top of my body like a cat scaling a roof. “I’ve got you right where I want you,” he whispered, his tone one of badly-suppressed glee. Then he slipped his hands beneath me and rolled me over, so we were face to face.

Holy *shit*, he smelled disgusting. Like a dead body stuffed into a trash can and left in the sun to rot. I held my breath. This was it. I had one chance.

The vampire grasped my chin and tilted my head back, exposing my neck. He traced a long, cold finger down the length of it, making a satisfied humming sound that sent a shiver of revulsion down my spine. Then he reared back and opened his mouth, revealing his razor-sharp fangs.

*NOW!* Grasping the chopstick in my fist, I plunged it into his heart.

We both looked down in surprise as the chopstick snapped in half against his thick jacket and fell to the floor.

“Fuck,” I whispered.

The vampire looked from the chopstick on the floor to the broken stub in my hand, and he started laughing. “Oh, that is *precious*,” he crowed.

I squirmed under him, trying to get him off me, but nothing worked.

He lowered his face closer to mine. “I find your paltry efforts incredibly amusing, sweetheart,” he whispered, still laughing to himself.

Enraged, I grasped the broken stub of the chopstick in my fist and drove it into the roof of his mouth.

Of all my efforts, this one seemed to be the most effective—the vampire reared back, screaming in surprise and agony, trying to pull the stub from his mouth. But I had driven it pretty far up, and he was struggling to get a grip on the splintered wood.

Seeing my opening, I squirmed, trying to get away, but he tightened his grip on me, his dead, black eyes livid with fury as he bore down on me.

I looked up as the door burst open and Jay raced in. Without a word, he threw himself onto the vampire, pulling him off me, and slammed the bloodsucker to the floor. Scrambling to my feet, I looked around the room. There had to be something I could use to dispatch this asshole. I could feel blood dripping from the wound in my neck, but I ignored it as I grasped the wooden bedpost at the end of my bed, attempting to rip it off. I probably almost gave myself a hernia, and didn’t even come close to doing a damn thing to the bed. I just wasn’t strong enough anymore.

*Fuck.*

There had to be *something*—my eyes widened as they lit on the wooden bedside table. It was light and spindly and I picked it up, sending the lamp and books and water bottle crashing down. I swung it over my head and brought it down on the floor, splintering it into pieces. I grasped a broken leg and, as the vampire lunged for Jay, I lunged for him, driving the splintery end of the table leg into the vampire’s back.

This threw off the vampire’s balance and he stumbled, falling to his knees. He twisted around, confused, to see what was in his back. He reached for the wooden leg—swatting at it—trying to pull it out.

Jay got heavily to his feet and wiped blood from his cheek. “Thanks,” he said, grinning at me. He turned to the vampire and, with his foot, pushed the stake all the way through to his heart.

The vampire’s anguished howl filled the room for a single moment, just before his whole being turned to ash.

Jay and I watched in silence as the charcoal grey ash floated down onto the hardwood floor.

“Wow,” I finally said. “I’m finally going to have to vacuum up here, I guess.”

Jay turned to me and pulled me into a hug. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” I said, nodding against his shoulder.

He didn’t believe me, apparently, because he pulled away, holding me at arm’s length to look me over. His eye grew wide when he saw my neck. “Holy shit, Lola! Did he bite you?”

I put a hand over the wound, feeling it for the first time. “Oh, yeah, he did. But don’t worry, I bit him back.” I grinned, showing him my bloody teeth.

Jay’s expression grew alarmed. “Did you *taste* his blood?”

“*Ugh*.” I gagged. “Don’t remind me—”

“Holy fuck, Lola,” Jay said. “Drinking a vampire’s blood after they’ve bitten you could turn you.”

Wait, *what*?

Panic rose inside me. “Am I going to turn into a vampire?”

**Episode 1023**

GREYSON

“Hey, man, better luck next time, right,” the Crusher said, grinning at me as he slung his bag over his shoulder.

“Yeah,” I grunted.

“You just gotta watch out for my right hook. Gets ‘em every time,” he said as he shadow-boxed a flaccid right hook.

I stared at him for a moment. “I’ll try to remember that.”

The skinny guy chuckled to himself as he left the club’s locker room. I dragged a towel through my wet hair, trying to force myself to hurry. I wanted to get out of here quickly, but I kept finding myself slowing down, thinking about what had just happened, trying to make sense of it.

What the hell had Lauren meant? *We may not be able to change your future, but you can change your past.*

What the *fuck* was that supposed to mean? Was I supposed to know?

I shook my head and tossed the towel to the floor. That was the problem with witches—all their goddamn riddles.

*Whiddles.*

That’s what Cali would’ve said. She would have said it, and I would have rolled my eyes, and then she’d have said it again, just to annoy me. I shook my head, smiling in spite of myself.

But I couldn’t just dismiss the sisters—not after what they’d done tonight. They’d *turned back time,* for god’s sake, and then I’d changed the outcome of the fight. Was *that* what Lauren had meant? That they could make it so I could rewrite the future?

If that *was* what she’d meant… that was a daunting possibility. Apart from the fact that I just didn’t trust them—or any witches, for that matter—meddling with time seemed *extremely* risky. Time was delicate and complex, and there could be a lot of unintended consequences.

I pulled up my boxers and jeans and dropped down onto the bench, thinking. I’d never really believed in fate, not until I’d met Cali. But messing with my past in order to change my future? It sounded… too easy. Too tempting. Like the house made of candy in the fairytale. One minute you’re stuffing gingerbread in your face, the next you’re getting shoved head-first into an oven. Anything that sounded too good to be true—especially when it was offered up by witches—tended to come back to bite you in the ass.

Getting to my feet, I blew out a frustrated breath. It had a been a long night. I just wanted to get Maren and Fenrir home safe. I’d worry about the witches later.

“Greyson?” Maren pushed open the locker room door just as I pulled a T-shirt over my head.

I watched her gaze scan downward, taking in my body before coming back up to my face. I yanked my shirt down and buckled my belt.

“Fenrir’s tired,” she said, nodding down to where he was resting with his head on her shoulder. She looked like she’d never let him go again. “You ready to go?”

“Yep,” I said, shoving the rest of my stuff into my duffel bag. I slung it over my shoulder and took the nearly asleep Fenrir from Maren’s arms. He nestled right into my shoulder. “Did you see anything unusual out there? Anyone hanging around?”

She shook her head. “No, most people took off already. It’s just the club’s security still here.”

“Good,” I said, trying to keep my tone light. I hoped she was right, but I didn’t think she was. Maren and I had done exactly what Hans had said he wanted, but I had a feeling he wasn’t going to let us just walk away.

We walked out of the locker room and through the nearly empty club. I glanced at the ring, still unnerved by what had happened. A shudder passed through me as we passed it—the sooner I got away from this place, the better.

When we stepped outside, I was relieved to see my car where I’d left it. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected to find, but I was tense and keyed up, and I wanted to be ready for anything. I sniffed the air.

“What?” Maren asked, watching me carefully. “What is it?”

It was vampires. “Nothing.” There had been vampires in the crowd. I could’ve been smelling a lingering scent from that.

But as we started toward my car, we stopped suddenly, blinded by a pair of headlights pointed right at us, the beams on high. I dropped Fenrir into Maren’s arms and instinctively pushed them both behind me, then turned and squinted into the beams.

Out of the light, a familiar figure emerged. Hans stood silhouetted in front of a black SUV. I stepped to the side, pulling Maren and Fenrir with me, so the light wasn’t so bright in my eyes.

Hans leaned against the SUV and looked at me. “That must have been difficult for you,” he said conversationally.

“What?” I asked warily.

Hans gave me a cold smile. “A skilled fighter like you—a proud fighter—to lose to someone like the Crusher? He’s so weak. It also must have been difficult to watch him celebrate a victory he didn’t earn.” Hans’s eyes were alight with interest. “Aren’t you an Alpha, Greyson?” He gave a high, thin laugh. “How humiliating that must have been for you.”

I bristled. Everything about this guy put me on edge. “Did you stick around just to gloat, man?” I snapped.

Hans smiled. “No, though I must admit I do find it pleasurable to watch your hackles rise. But, no, I have some other business to take care of.” He looked past me to Maren, and I felt her body tense as she tightened her arms around Fenrir.

“You leave my son alone!” she snarled.

“But you haven’t even heard my offer yet,” Hans said soothingly.

I glared at Hans, but I wasn’t surprised. I’d known he wasn’t going to let Maren and Fenrir go so easily, and now that he had me in the mix… There was just no way. For a manipulator like Hans, walking away just wasn’t his style.

He smiled coldly at Maren and took a step closer. “I certainly can’t blame you for being so protective of your son. He truly is a unique little boy. Very… *special*,” Hans said, his voice laced with unspoken threats.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and pulled out my keys, then—moving as though I was shifting my gym bag on my shoulder—handed them back to Maren. “Start moving toward the car,” I murmured. When her hand closed around the keys, I turned to Hans. “Why don’t you get to the point?” I said, louder. “What do you want?”

Hans shrugged. “I want the boy,” he said simply.

Maren gasped.

“Get to the car,” I whispered to her, then I stepped toward Hans, blocking Maren from view. I hoped that Hans would look at me, and that the darkness would obscure Maren’s movements. “We fulfilled our end of the bargain, man. Lose the fight, free Fenrir. That was the deal.”

“That’s true,” Hans said easily. He smiled. “But now the terms have changed. This is a new deal.”

I shook my head. “You know Maren is never going to agree to anything involving the kid.”

“Oh yes,” Hans said, “I know. That’s why I brought some assistance. To help… *encourage* her to change her mind.” He gave the hood of the SUV a sharp rap with his knuckles. The back doors flew open, and two giant men stepped out. This was all the encouragement *I* needed. I dropped my duffel bag and raced toward them, shifting as I went. I was tearing into the flesh of the first guy before he even knew what was happening. But that was how it had to be. These two were Dark Fae—I’d known it from the moment I’d seen them—and I couldn’t give them a chance to use their magic against me.

The first guy hit the cracked pavement of the parking lot fast, and I was crouched above him, finishing him off when the second guy grabbed me from behind and hauled me off, throwing me to the ground. I scrambled to my feet, but the guy was already raising his hands. *Shit*. It was too late. There was nothing I could do but get ready for the impact. I was bracing myself for the force of his magic when I heard the deafening roar of a motor, nearly right in my ear.

The car—appearing from nowhere—rammed into the Fae, propelling him ten feet across the parking lot, where he landed with a sickening thud.

I stared at the car as the door popped open.

Maren was in the driver’s seat. “Get in!”

I dove into the car, shifting back to my human form as Hans shouted at his goons to go after us. Maren slammed the door shut and gunned the engine again, racing out of the parking lot and onto the street. She kept going like that for miles, taking wild turns, skidding around corners, hoping curbs.

I didn’t know how long we drove in complete silence.

We’d made it.

“I think you lost them,” I finally said. “You can probably turn on the headlights now.” I glanced into the back seat, where Fenrir was curled up, sleeping peacefully, oblivious to the chaos we’d just driven through.

When I looked back, Maren’s eyes were on me. “So,” she said, lifting one eyebrow. “Where’s your pack house?”

**Episode 1024**

CHARLIE

The shouts pulled me from my tangled thoughts. I looked around, confused, trying to figure out what was going on. I’d learned that werewolf parties tended to get pretty rowdy, so I squinted toward the bonfire, wondering if it was just that time of the night. I was at the shore of the lake, staring into the black water and doing some pretty heavy-duty brooding. I was feeling like an ass for not having given Violet a clear answer to her question about me going back to Minnesota. I just hadn’t known what to say when she’d asked—

I looked up again. Those were more than just shouts—those were *screams*, and not just normal wild party screams. Something was wrong, and my thoughts jumped to Violet. Where was she? I hadn’t seen her since she’d stormed away from me. Was she okay?

I sprinted up the wet grass toward the bonfire, searching for her in the darkness. But the closer I got to the dark shapes in front of the fire, the stranger I felt. There was a tingling in my skin and down my spine, and something like an itch at the base of my skull. I didn’t know what any of that meant but, as I drew closer to the fire, I understood the screams.

*Vampires*.

There was a group of vampires in the house, and they were attacking the pack.

“Shit,” I muttered, looking around at the chaos. What was I supposed to do? I had to do *something*.

*We are a family of vampire hunters.*

My parents’ words rang in my ears—but, if that were true, shouldn’t I have been ready for this? Shouldn’t some kind of genetic knowledge have been flowing through me? I stared around, wide-eyed, but all I felt was fear and confusion. All I knew about vampires was from what I’d seen in movies, and unless I was going to fall in love with one of them, none of that seemed like useful information.

Then I heard a familiar growl and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I looked over to see Violet in her wolf form. She was leaning back on her haunches, snarling, looking beautiful and ferocious—and facing off against a fang-bearing vampire in a velvet doublet.

Without a second thought, I grabbed a burning log from the bonfire and sprinted toward the vampire. He spun to face me and I swung the log like a baseball bat, connecting with the vampire’s face like it was a fastball, and creating a shower of sparks that flew into the night sky.

The vampire stumbled back—clearly surprised—but then, with a howl of fury, he lunged for me. He grasped onto me and I grasped back. Wrestling, we fell to the ground. He opened his mouth, snapping and lunging for my neck, but I dodged, slamming the heel of my hand into his chin, clapping his jaws back together. I knelt on his ribcage and bounced with my full weight, feeling his brittle bones crunch beneath my knee. Everything I did was working more effectively than I could have imagined. I was drawing upon a wealth of strength and knowledge I hadn’t even known I possessed, and the vampire was shaken—I could see it in his cold, dead eyes.

But then, with a snarl of fury, he surged out from beneath and flipped me, slamming me to the ground so hard the breath was forced out of my lungs. With a wicked smile, he reared back, ready to bite—but then Violet slammed into him in her wolf form, pushing him off me. She slammed him to the ground and, without a moment of hesitation, tore out his throat.

I scrambled to my feet and locked eyes with Violet, who was spitting the vampire’s flesh onto the dusty ground.

*Be careful.*

“I will,” I said out loud, in response to her mind linked thought. My impulse was to move toward her, but I stayed where I was. There was so much more I wished I could say to her, but this wasn’t the time. The place was crawling with vampires, and there was work to be done, so I stepped past the dead bloodsucker’s arm and reached for the burning log. I looked around, ready to go after the next enemy, but then I was hit by memory. The recollection came at me like a freight train, nearly jarring me off my feet as the memory washed over me…

*I was with my mom and dad, and we were camping, somewhere deep in the dense woods of Minnesota. It must have been fall, because I could see my breath when I breathed out, which made me laugh. We were sitting around the fire and I was holding a marshmallow on a stick when both my mom and my dad went suddenly tense.*

*“Get into the tent,” my mom said, pulling the stick from my hand. She threw it into the fire—marshmallow and all—and I started to cry. I had really wanted that marshmallow.*

*“Take this,” my dad said, pushing something into my hand. I looked down and saw a hunting knife. “Be careful with it,” he warned. “Don’t use it unless you have to, and no matter what you hear, stay in the tent. Do you understand?”*

*I nodded, though my heart had started to pound. I climbed into the tent and sat in the corner, listening hard for any clues. I tensed when I heard a scream—or was that just an animal? I crept forward a little, then a little bit more, just enough so I could peer out of the tent. But I couldn’t see anything, only blackness. I bit down on my lip. What if they needed me? What if they needed help?*

*Gripping the knife tightly in my hand, I stepped out of the tent into the cold night air and headed in the direction I’d seen my parents disappear. I stepped quickly behind a tree at the first rustle in the underbrush. Was my mom up ahead? They’d told me not to follow them, so I didn’t want them to see me. Then I heard a twig snap behind me, and I spun around just in time to see a man bearing down on me. I screamed as the man drew closer. He opened his mouth wide to reveal fangs. He was a vampire! But… vampires weren’t real! They couldn’t be! I was frozen in shock, the knife forgotten in my hand as the vampire reached for me. His fingertips were just brushing my jacket when he was hit from behind and slammed to the forest floor.*

*I watched in stunned shock as my mother straddled the vampire and raised a wooden stake over her head. She drove it expertly into the vampire’s back, straight through his ribs to his heart. His howl echoed through my body, jangling through my head and bringing me back to the present moment.*

With a sharp gasp, I realized: I remembered it now. All of it. All the memories they’d tried to erase. I’d watched my mother stake a vampire. She’d known exactly what she was doing, and she’d been a *badass*. Everything they’d told me had to be true, which meant… which meant that I was a vampire hunter, too.

A warmth spread through me—a certainty that I’d never felt before. I looked around, suddenly aware that I could more than just *see* the vampires around me—I could *sense* them. I had a special awareness of them that I’d never even noticed before now. There was one right in front of me, a woman in a long, velvet dress the color of spilled blood.

When I looked at her, it was like I could see the cold, dead heart sitting lifelessly in her chest. I could hear the rasp of her clothing as it swung, and the sound of her feet hitting the ground. And I knew exactly what to do. I charged toward her, the burning log clenched in my hands. She swung around to look at me, and her face twisted in anger. She opened her mouth, fangs bared, and lashed out, but I was ready for her. My reflexes were lightning fast, and I sidestepped her advance and slammed her to the ground.

Then, just like my mother had done all those years ago, I straddled her body and raised the log over my head, then drove it down through the vampire’s back and into her heart, all in one powerful stroke.

The vampire howled with anguished surprise before she crumbled into dust, leaving nothing behind but my log, which had stopped burning, though it still smoldered.

I stepped back, a little surprised myself. Everything I had just done had been pure instinct, and now that it was over, my hands were starting to shake.

*What the hell was that?* I thought. *Did I really just do that?*

I had, and it had been the most natural supernatural thing I’d ever done in my life. I bent and grabbed my trusty log—it seemed to be my lucky charm tonight—and looked around, ready for another fight.

Just as I did, another vampire in Victorian garb pointed at me. “Get him!” he shouted. “He’s a hunter!”

**Episode 1025**

Xavier had—predictably—ordered me to hide in the house, and I was—probably just as predictably—ignoring him. Lola was being attacked in her bedroom and needed help, so I was sprinting upstairs to help her. But I took a quick detour into the kitchen for a weapon. Fae powers were all well and good, but as much as I tried to pretend otherwise, my control over them could be unpredictable, so it was always good to have a back-up plan… and a knife.

*Besides*, *why should I hide?* I thought to myself as I yanked open kitchen drawers. *I* was the one who’d killed Raul. Maybe it hadn’t *exactly* been by design, but I’d managed to stake him with that jousting lance all the same. So I had some vampire-killing experience, and telling me to cower in my room was just wasting it!

But what weapon to use? I glanced around the kitchen. There were no lances at the ready, so that option was off the table. My instinct was to grab a knife from the kitchen island, but they were metal and wouldn’t do much permanent damage against a vampire—the tricky bastards. My eyes drifted to a jar of wooden spoons next to the stove, which were mostly used to stir soup. They weren’t particularly lethal-looking, but given the enemy, they might work. I grabbed a handful and started toward the stairs, but stopped when I heard someone behind me.

Spinning around, I saw Gregor, leering at me from the back door. How had he gotten away from Xavier? My heart pounded, but I swallowed hard and held up my fistful of spoons. “Back off, assshole. I know how to use these.”

He raised an eyebrow, looking entirely unconcerned. “I don’t doubt that, but I also don’t know why that should worry me. This isn’t *MasterChef*.” His black eyes glittered as he closed the back door. He moved slowly, taking his time, savoring my fear, clearly enjoying the moment. “I am so *glad* that it comes down to us, Caliana Hart. That I get to avenge my brother’s death by killing the girl who ended his beautiful life.”

“*He* attacked *us!*” I repeated, though I didn’t know why I bothered. I tightened my grip on the spoons, but I was starting to have some serious doubts about whether they were going to be able to actually puncture skin, never mind the velvet and lace ruff thing he had going on down the front of his costume. I could feel cold sweat start to break out on my forehead.

Gregor took another step closer and frowned. He leaned in, taking a deep breath, breathing me in. “A Fae all to myself” he said. Then a wide smile broke out on his face as he clapped his hands. “You’ll be delicious.”

When he lunged toward me, I did the only thing I could: I threw a spoon at him. It hit him in the face, but it barely made him break his stride. I spun toward the door, wondering if I’d even make it halfway there before he caught me—but then it suddenly hit me.

Wait a minute! I *was* Fae. I spun around and raised my hands, aiming all my adrenaline-amped energy at Gregor.

The burst of magic hit him like a lightning bolt and flung him backward, sending him flying into the kitchen island. He let out a howl of pain as one of the knives from the block pierced through his arm.

“That’s *right!*” I crowed. “You’re fucking right I’m Fae! And don’t you forget it!”

Gregor blew out a breath like a wounded bull and, his eyes fixed on me, yanked the knife from his arm. He flipped it in his hand and hurled it straight at me.

With a yelp, I ducked and ran for the door, wrenching it open. I ran onto the deck, praying that Gregor wasn’t right behind me. I could still feel my power tingling through my palms, but I needed a moment to harness it for another attack. I wasn’t as adept as Artemis. I shot a glance over my shoulder as I flew down the porch steps.

No Gregor. All around me, the battle between the pack and the vampires raged on. Xavier sprinted around the side of the house but stopped, shocked, when he saw me.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” he demanded. He wiped his forehead with his arm. “Get your ass back in the house, Cali!”

I shook my head, my jaw set. “I’m going to fight, not hide!”

Xavier’s eyes flashed angrily, and he rushed toward me.

My eyes widened and I stepped aside, cowering, thinking of that wild moment when he’d attacked me, thinking I was Ava—but then he sailed past me and knocked a vampire I hadn’t noticed to the ground. He and the vampire wrestled, flipping over and over on the damp, dead grass. I tried to use my Fae power to help him, but they were moving too fast, and I kept missing.

“Cali!”

I looked over my shoulder to see Artemis jogging over, her face smudged with dirt and charcoal.

“What’s going on—” she started, but then she saw Xavier on the ground and drew her own conclusions. She held up her hands and focused, using her powers to blast the vampire off Xavier and into the bonfire.

The vampire writhed in the fire, howling in anguish, and Artemis pulled an arrow from the quiver on her back, notched it in her bow, and released, finishing the vampire off completely.

“You okay?” she asked, lowering her bow and turning to me, like she’d just done nothing particularly out of the ordinary.

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks,” I added, a little bitterly. It was hard not to be jealous of how good she was. And where the hell had she gotten *arrows?* Was there a Badass Supply Store around here that I didn’t know about?

“Thanks, Artemis,” Xavier said, getting to his feet. Then he turned to me, frowning. “And *you*—why aren’t you in the house like I told you?”

I rolled my eyes. “I was going, and then—” I looked up and saw Gregor stalking toward us. “And then I had some company.”

Gregor drew closer, a murderous look on his face as he clutched his bleeding arm. He’d wrapped a dishcloth around the wound. It was one of Mrs. Smith’s—it read “Bless This Mess”—though it was now soaked with blood.

He threw it to the ground at his feet and, as I watched, the wound began to heal.

I swallowed roughly.

Xavier reached for me, trying to push me behind him, but I was prepared this time, and I raised my hands and blasted Gregor with my power, sending him sailing back into the porch steps.

“See!” I said, turning to Xavier. “Did you see what I did? See? I can help!”

Xavier gave me a grudging smile. “I saw.”

Gregor’s fall had splintered the wooden steps and he was moving slowly, trying to get to his feet when Violet ran over, her eyes wide with fear.

“Xavier! You have to come help Charlie! He’s *surrounded!*” she pleaded.

I turned to see Charlie near the bonfire. He was holding a flaming log and was, indeed, ringed by a circle of vampires, all of whom were moving steadily closer to him.

“*Fuck*,” Xavier muttered, and raced over to Charlie.

I followed, and so did Artemis. The rest of the pack came too, creating a second ring around the vampires. The vampires stopped moving toward Charlie for a moment and looked around, apparently noticing the wolf pack surrounding them for the first time. Everything went still, until the only movement was Charlie, who was still turning in a circle, brandishing his flaming stake at the vampires surrounding him.

Even the wind had died down, so when I heard the pounding of running feet, I looked over, my heart beating hard. It was the kid vampire, still with the pumpkin pail banging at his side. He ran to Gregor’s side and yanked on his hand, pulling him down so Gregor had to stoop to listen as the kid spoke to him.

Gregor frowned as he listened, then shook his head. “No, of course not!” he said, sounding frustrated.

But the kid’s eyes flashed in a dangerous way. He kept talking, his voice too low for me to hear, but whatever he said must have convinced Gregor, because when Gregor straightened, he was silent and looked chastened.

“Come,” the kid said to the ring of vampires. He didn’t yell, but his eerie little voice carried in the still air. “We’re outnumbered, we’ll go.”

The vampires hesitated for just a moment, then, moving impossibly fast—quick as lightning—came to stand next to the kid and Gregor by the ruined porch steps.

The kid turned to go, but Gregor sought out my eyes and fixed me with a glitteringly lethal glare. “You haven’t seen the last of us, *wolves*.”

**Episode 1026**

ARTEMIS

“Everyone in!” Xavier was yelling, waving his arms like he was trying to herd a bunch of reluctant sheep. The Redwood pack, most of whom were still in their bedraggled costumes, headed reluctantly into the house.

“It’s fine!” Sage yelled.

“They’re gone now,” Rishika added.

Xavier shook his head. “I don’t care. I don’t need this pack getting picked off one by one if those asshats in lace decide to stage a comeback assault. Inside!”

When everyone was inside, Xavier locked the back door. “Jay, check the front. Cali, check the windows.” He shook his head. “Multiple points of entry. Great choice for a house,” he muttered to himself.

I shot a look a Rishika, who grinned back at me.

“Can you could do a protection spell, MacKenzie?” Mrs. Smith asked. “Are you able to reverse inviting them inside the house?”

Big Mac had been in such a foul temper lately, I fully expected her to absolutely refuse, so I was surprised when she just shrugged.

“Fine, but only because Sabine asked,” she announced, in case anyone was thinking about asking her for anything else. She stood from her seat at the kitchen island and sighed. “I can do a spell of protection on the house.”

“What will it do?” Cali asked.

“It will uninvite the vampires into the house, for one,” Big Mac said, and I saw Cali shoot a nasty glare at Torin, “and because I’m nice, I’ll throw in some additional protection, just around the house’s environs.”

Everyone looked a little confused.

“What does that mean?” Cali finally asked.

“It’ll protect the porch, too,” Big Mac said flatly.

I turned to Rishika, who was standing next to me in the doorway. “That was amazing out there! Wasn’t that amazing out there?”

She raised her eyebrows. “What? The vampires?”

“Are you kidding me? *Of course* the vampires!” I put my hand over my chest, where I could still feel my heart pounding with adrenaline. “Did you see me nail that bloodsucker with the eyepatch? I got him right in his good eye. *Bullseye!*”

Rishika laughed. “Yeah, I saw. It was a great shot. But did you see me tear that chick’s head off? The one in the purple dress? Her whole damn head. It was like popping a cork.”

I laughed and followed Rishika as she headed toward the stairs. “I guess I didn’t actually get to see you in action on that one, which is a shame,” I said. “But I blasted some guy off Xavier while they were rolling around, and then shot him in the heart.”

Rishika glanced over her shoulder at me as she climbed the stairs.

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked.

At the top of the stairs, Rishika turned to me. “No,” she said, her voice low. “I just don’t want to keep talking.” And then she grabbed the front of my shirt, pulling me close and pressing her lips to mine.

The kiss came as a surprise—a big one—and after a startled moment, I pulled back. “What was that for?” I asked breathlessly.

Rishika shrugged, her dark eyes searching my face. “I can’t help it. You’re just so hot when you’re talking about fighting.”

A warmth passed down my body, curling into my toes. “Really?” I smirked. “Have I ever told you about the time I captured a troll with nothing but a slingshot and a feather?”

Rishika walked me back until I ran into the wall. She kissed me again, more gently this time. “No. I’d love to hear it.”

“The troll’s walking down the path,” I started, my voice shaking, “carrying all this stuff he stole from me that I’d stolen, fair and square—”

“Tell me more,” Rishika purred, kissing her way down my neck.

When she hit the spot just below my ear, my breath hitched and I lost the thread of my story. My hands found her hips and I pulled her all the way into me. My lips found hers again and I kissed her, easing her mouth open. I grinned when I felt her knees go weak against me.

“I love stories about trolls,” she said. “Always have.”

With that Rishika stood upright. She took my hand and pulled me down the dark hallway.

“I’ve got more where that one came from,” I said.

As we passed Big Mac’s room, the smile slid from my face. The orb was in there. The orb, with all its power and all its danger. I took a step closer to the door, my hand reaching for the knob—

“Hey.” Rishika’s voice broke into my thoughts and she squeezed my hand.

She smiled, though there was a question her eyes. “You okay?”

I gave my head a little shake. “Yeah. Fine. Wrong room.”

We stumbled down the hall and into Rishika’s room. She kicked the door closed and flipped the lock, but didn’t bother turning on the light. The only light was the pale reflection of the horned moon, casting its beam through the wide window and onto the bed, where we stopped and looked at each other.

I grasped the leather strap of my quiver to take it off, but Rishika’s hand closed around mine.

“No,” she said, her eyes inky pools in the darkness. “Leave it on.” I could see a sly smile on her face as she looked at me. “I want to see what you can do with your bow and arrows.”

“Oh, actually, these are really dangerous and we shouldn’t ever use them in a way that the maker hasn’t intended—” I stopped, catching the long-suffering look on Rishika’s face. “I know what you’re doing, and I like it. Okay?” She nodded, laughing. “But these are seriously dangerous.”

With a shake of her head, Rishika pulled the leather quiver over my head and rested it carefully against the wall. Then she cradled my face between her hands and kissed me, her tongue pressing first against my lips, then sliding against mine. My body felt like it was being lit from the inside out by her touch, and when she slipped her hand beneath my shirt, her fingers climbing my ribcage like a ladder, I thought I was going to catch on fire.

My whole body quivered when she took my breast in her palm, brushing her thumb achingly slowly across my nipple. I wanted to drop my head back, but she held me tight in our kiss, so I moaned against her lips instead.

My hands, fumbling, went to the hem of her shirt.

Enough teasing already.

Then suddenly, she pulled away and looked at me. Her breath was coming fast, but her eyes were steady on me. “Do you want this, Artemis? Now? Tonight?”

I nodded, feeling drunk. “Yeah. I really, *really* do.” I paused. “Do you?”

“Fuck yes.” Then she grabbed my shirt and pulled it over my head.

We pulled each other’s clothes off and tumbled into the bed, kicking the sheets down, laughing and kissing. Rishika’s hands were everywhere on me, but I pinned them to her sides. She whimpered as I flicked my tongue against her nipples. First one, and then the other, making sure to give the right amount of pressure as I sucked on them. Her breasts were so perfect, and I couldn’t resist cupping one as I continued to lick the other.

Her skin was so soft. *Fuck*. I wanted to touch her all over.

“*Artemis*,” she said.

“Hmm?” I hummed against her skin.

Rishika sighed, her free hand digging into my hair and knotting it. Her fingernails felt so good on my scalp that I moaned. Slowly I kissed down her stomach until I settled between her legs. With a hand still squeezing one of her breasts, I looked up at her from my positioning.

“Nice view,” I said, admiring the way the moonlight fell on the angles of her body.

She laughed. It was short lived as I leaned forward, taking the most sensitive part of her into my mouth. Releasing her other arm, my fingers found their way into the soft folds of her. Rishika’s breath hitched and she was panting, pulling on my hair.

“Don’t… d-don’t stop,” she said.

I had no plans to. Teasing her with my fingers, I continued to taste her until her hips bucked and she cried out my name. My entire body buzzing, I moved up her body to kiss her again, our tongues dancing. Then she pulled back, a wicked smile on her face.

“What?” I asked, barely recognizing the sound of my own voice.

Her fingers started to stroke me. My eyes fluttered shut and my hands found her ass, squeezing as she teased me. Her mouth captured my nipples, one by one, and I thought my head was going to explode. My body tensed and bucked, tightening against her hand as I began to see stars as an orgasm spread through me. Slipping my hand between us, I rolled my thumb over her clit, kissing her hard as she came again, too.

“You like that?” I asked, continuing to move my fingers in circles.

All she could do was nod, and I devoured her lips with mine.

I lost track of time as we touched, kissed, and caressed each other. We went back and forth until we were completely exhausted, sweat covering both of us like morning dew.

Never in my dreams could I have imagined how good she felt.

Finished and spent, Rishika laced her fingers through mine and, rolling away, fell asleep almost instantly. I put my hand to my mouth. My cheeks had been hurting, and as I smiled at the sight of her, I realized why. Lately, I’d been smiling more than I ever had before, and it was all Rishika’s fault. Apparently the threat of imminent death was what really got me going.

I sighed and looked up at the dark ceiling. I was feeling almost contented until a thought passed through my mind.

*The Orb*.

It was just down the hall. The darkness—friendly a moment before—seemed to press in on me as I thought about how the orb had been affecting the pack, making everyone angry and volatile. Worst of all, it seemed to be singling Cali out. She thought it spoke to her. And I couldn’t forget the terror on our mother’s face when we’d mentioned its existence. She wanted us to run—to leave without looking back.

Was the orb the reason the vampires had attacked?

Big Mac was keeping it safe, but she was a witch—who knew where her loyalties lay? And even if her intentions were good, maybe she wouldn’t be able to resist the orb’s pull.

Staring into the blackness, I bit my lip, thinking hard. If there was one thing I was sure of, it was my toughness: I’d faced a hell of a lot of threats in my life. These werewolves thought they were tough, but I knew better. Of everyone in this house, I was the most experienced. I’d seen the most, and I was the best equipped to deal with anything the orb threw at me.

So, lying the dark, I made up my mind—I was going to take the orb and hide it, without anyone knowing.

**Episode 1027**

When Big Mac was done casting her protection spell, Mrs. Smith started herding anyone wounded into the kitchen, where she and Torin lined them up and started to attend to them, one by one. Together, they looked at scrapes and burns and already healing cuts. Charlie’s hands were pretty messed up from holding that burning log, so Mrs. Smith had him hold a gallon of ice cream for a few moments, then Torin held his hands over Charlie’s while he summoned his healing powers. When Torin took his hands away, Charlie’s palms looked perfectly normal again.

“Thanks,” Charlie said, flexing his fingers experimentally.

There were a couple of bad bruises that Mrs. Smith thought could have been internal bleeding, and Torin worked on those for a while. I watched anxiously from the doorway as Jay led Lola over to Torin.

“It’s her neck, mostly,” Jay said, as Lola sat down at the kitchen island, “but she also has some bruising on her back and ribs. That damn bloodsucker tackled her before I made it upstairs.”

“A couple of times, actually,” Lola said. “But I *almost* had him.” Lola leaned over so Torin could get a good look at the puncture wounds on her neck.

“Hey, how are you doing?” I asked, stepping closer.

Without moving her head, Lola looked over at me. “That depends. Are you asking because I got bitten by a vampire, or because I’m human now?”

“Um…” I nervously twisted my fingers together. “I guess a little of both.” I glanced up at Mrs. Smith. “Should we be worried about the vampire bite? Lola’s not going to turn into one, is she?”

“I don’t know,” Lola said, shrugging. “Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. They don’t smell great, but I think could get used to the teeth. Could make a good conversation starter at parties.”

I looked at her, trying to gauge whether she was joking. Even if she was, it wasn’t particularly funny. I knew she wasn’t pumped about just being human, but werewolves *hated* vampires. Everyone knew that. I shot a glance up at Jay, but his eye was on the bloody puncture marks on Lola’s neck. Would he still love Lola if she turned? Would they even still be mates? Did that work in cross-creature-enemies situations?

There were a lot of questions, and the possibilities made my head ache. I wondered if Torin could heal that, too.

“I don’t think Lola has anything to worry about,” Mrs. Smith said soothingly. “Not unless she drank the vampire’s blood.”

Lola closed her eyes as Torin held his hands over her neck. “I don’t really remember whether I swallowed any of it when I bit him. I wish I could, but everything happened so fast.”

“Well, if you sprout fangs, we’ll know,” Big Mac said briskly. “You’re done,” she added, as Torin stepped away.

“Cali.” Xavier appeared at my side. “We need to talk.”

I glanced up at him. “Okay.” I reached for Lola’s hand as she got to her feet. “I’ll see you later. Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

Lola nodded. “Thanks.”

“Come find me if she needs anything, got it?” I said to Jay, and he nodded. Then I turned and followed Xavier through the kitchen and up the stairs to his room.

He closed the door and turned to me, a dark expression on his face.

“What’s up?” I asked.

He hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward and took my hand. “I wanted to apologize,” he started. “For not believing you when you told me there were vampires.”

I snatched my hand away as a flash of anger surged through me. “Yeah, that’s fine, Xavier, but let’s get to the root of the issue: why didn’t you believe me? Do you think I just make up shit like that for fun?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Of course not. I just—” He stopped himself. “I should have listened.”

I looked at him for a moment, thinking hard. He *should* have listened. But he hadn’t. And this hadn’t been the first time. Not even close. Xavier was always questioning me. I was always having to explain myself to him. But not to Greyson. He never questioned me. He always believed me. Was it because he trusted me? Because he trusted me more than Xavier did?

“Why don’t you listen to me?” I asked, my throat growing tight. “We’ve been through so much together, Xavier. What more do I have to do to get you to believe me? To *trust* me?”

Xavier sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He looked tired. “I do believe you, Cali. I trust you. It’s just that sometimes—”

“You know what?” I said, cutting him off and holding up my hand. “I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to hear any more excuses. This doesn’t need to be a big conversation. Either you trust me, or you don’t.”

Xavier shook his head. “No, come on, Cali. You don’t get to set the terms like that. This is complicated stuff. This is a world you’ve only just discovered. There are things you don’t totally understand, here—”

“I understand a helluva lot more than you give me credit for!” I snapped.

“You think it’s going to be black and white just because you want it to be, but that’s not the way this world works—”

“That’s not what I’m saying!” I cried. “I just want you to trust me—”

“And I want *you* to trust *me!*” Xavier roared back. “You think you know everything about everything! You get so mad that I won’t listen to you, but you won’t listen to me either! All I ever do is try to keep you safe, and you never listen to a word I say! If I had—”

“Greyson always believes me!”

Xavier’s eyes went wide.

I slammed my mouth shut, but it was too late. The words were already out.

“Greyson’s not here, Cali” Xavier said quietly.

He took a step toward me, reaching for my hand again, but I pulled back.

His eyes narrowed. “But maybe you wish he were. You made *that* clear enough in the laundry room.”

My stomach tightened. “Xavier, I *tried* to talk to you about that. I begged you to stay so we could talk, but you shut down, just like you always do. You ran away—and let me tell you something, two can play at that game.” I spun on my heel and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

Hot, angry tears were running down my face, and I didn’t want to see anyone, so I looked down the dark hall, wondering where the hell I could go to be alone. In the distance, I could still hear the rumblings from the kitchen where Torin and Mrs. Smith were healing and patching up the pack, so that was out. I headed down the stairs and out the front door.

On the porch, I took a deep breath of cold night air. I couldn’t believe what had just happened. First Xavier hadn’t believed me, and then he’d tried to blame *me* for it. And *then* he’d thrown the laundry room incident back in my face. And just when I’d been thinking we were in a better place.

I braced my hands on the porch rail and stared up at the night sky. Maybe I’d been wrong about that.

Behind me, I heard the door open and softly close. I recognized the sure footsteps and knew it was Xavier without looking over my shoulder.

He moved to stand behind me, close enough I could feel the heat radiating off him. He rested a hand on the small of my back, but I stepped away angrily.

“Look,” he said with a sigh, “I fucked up, okay?” He paused. “I’m trying to apologize here, Cali.”

“That is *not* an apology,” I snapped. “And you shouldn’t have to *try*, or to explain to me what you’re doing. You just do it.”

He gave another sigh. “I’m sorry. I’m telling you I’m sorry, Cali. But when you said Greyson’s name, it just—”

He stopped, and we both looked up when we heard a car pull into the gravel driveway. Given the night we’d already had, my heart started to beat hard, wondering who it might be. Then it beat harder still when the door opened and Greyson stepped out.

He was followed almost immediately by a woman—a stunningly beautiful woman, with dark skin and dark, curly hair. She stepped lightly onto the gravel drive and shut her own door, then pulled open the back door and carefully pulled out a sleeping child. She was gentle with him, clearly trying not to wake him, but he blinked awake as she pulled him into her arms, and I saw the child’s dark blond hair and startling grey eyes.

I stared hard at Greyson, the woman, and the child as they started toward the pack house.

*What. The. Fuck?*

**Episode 1028**

My jaw dropped as I watched the gorgeous woman and her child follow Greyson from the car. *Who is that kid? And who is that woman? And how the hell do they know Greyson?*

My mind spun as I watched the trio approach the porch. Greyson had been gone for so long, with so little notice or explanation, and now he was back—with even less warning than his disappearance—and he was bringing back a woman *and* a child.

What the hell?

Greyson led the woman and child up to the steps. He stopped short of Xavier and me and nodded in greeting. That alone would have made me pause—where did he get off fucking nodding at me like I was some kind of stranger?—but then he stepped aside. “Cali, Xavier, this is Maren and her son, Fenrir.”

Seeing the little boy up close took everything in me not to scream at Greyson. The dark blond hair, the grey eyes… I couldn’t stop looking between the two of them. Was this…?

*No*, it couldn’t be.

Greyson didn’t have a son. He would have told me if that were the case. Besides, he’d introduced Fenrir as “Maren’s son”, not *his* son. But that left another question unanswered. Who was this Maren chick? And what were she and her son doing here?

“Why are you here?” Xavier asked tersely. He’d barely acknowledged Maren and Fenrir, while I couldn’t tear my eyes away from them and the perfect picture they made, standing next to Greyson.

“Well, the last time I checked,” Greyson said coolly, “I was the Alpha of this pack—”

Xavier cut him off. “And you ran off. And now you’re back and you expect everything to just pick up where you left off?”

Greyson bristled at that, and I swallowed. I’d been foolishly hoping that now that Silas was gone, and that since they’d defeated him together, things between Xavier and Greyson would improve. Maybe they wouldn’t be the warm and loving kind of family, but maybe they could at least tolerate being in each other’s presence. It seemed like I’d been wrong to hope. If anything, the two Alphas looked more thrilled than ever at the prospect of tearing each other to pieces.

“Guys,” I began, trying to end their argument before it could gain too much traction.

Maren beat me to it. “While you two hash this out, I need to put Fenrir to bed. It’s been an… an exhausting couple of days for him, and he needs to get some rest.”

I blinked. Somehow Maren was even more stunningly beautiful up close, and she clearly wasn’t at all intimidated by Xavier and Greyson’s spat. Was she just that brave, or had Greyson said something to reassure her? Did she know something I didn’t?

“Right.” Greyson nodded. It was then that the door opened and Mrs. Smith came outside, no doubt hearing the commotion.

A wide smile tugged at her lips. “Greyson! You’re back!”

He gave his mother a small smile. “I’m back, and I’ve brought some guests,” he said. “This is Maren and her son Fenrir, and they’re going to be staying with us for a while. Could you please put them in my room until we figure out a better arrangement?”

Judging by the look on Mrs. Smith’s face, she was just as confused about our new arrivals as I was. “I, uh, I’d be happy to,” she managed. She smiled at Maren and Fenrir, though it looked forced compared to the grin she’d been wearing just moments before. “Come on in, you two. I’ll show you around.”

Maren paused to put her hand on Greyson’s arm and give it a gentle squeeze. “Thank you,” she said softly. Then she turned to Xavier and me. “I look forward to getting to know you all. Thank you for your hospitality.”

She was met with silence. Xavier just stared at her, while I found myself speechless. Greyson cleared his throat and nodded. “Sure.”

God, I could practically *taste* the awkwardness in the air.

Mrs. Smith led Maren and a very sleepy looking Fenrir inside and closed the door behind them, leaving me alone on the porch with Xavier and Greyson.

But for the first time in a long time, I didn’t feel that pull from each of them. Instead, I felt like Xavier and I were a team, and Greyson was on the opposite side. I didn’t like that feeling.

“Who is that woman?” Xavier demanded. “And why the hell did you bring her into our pack house?”

Greyson shrugged. “She’s a friend, and she needed some help.”

*A friend, huh? That’s… informative. How friendly are they, really? And that arm squeeze—what the FUCK did that mean? Was it a platonic, “Thanks for helping me in a time of need?”-type squeeze, or was it something more?*

Xavier huffed. “This is a pack house, not a boarding house.”

“Noted.” Greyson had already started for the door. “I’m tired. I’ve had a hell of a day. We can discuss this more in the morning.”

I blinked. That was it? He’d walked out on me, disappearing for days without a word, and now he’d shown up with some new additions and was brushing the whole thing off? He was going to BED?! He wasn’t even going to *try* to talk to me about all of this?

*Come on, Greyson. I know you’re not that clueless.* He had to know what this looked like.

I stepped forward and caught his arm. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming back?”

He paused, looking from me to Xavier. “It wasn’t planned.”

And here I’d been stupid enough to hope that he’d come back for me, to be with me. And instead he’d shown up with some beautiful woman and a child who looked like he could be Greyson’s. I wanted—no, *needed*—to ask him about Fenrir, but I couldn’t bring the words to my lips. Not yet. Not with Xavier practically breathing fire beside me.

Greyson reached for the door, but Xavier stepped in front of him.

The two exchanged a heated look, and my mouth went dry. Were things going to erupt now? There had been so much tension around the pack house lately, and Xavier and Greyson’s history provided more than enough kindling…

After a beat, Xavier stepped aside. Greyson glanced back at me, his expression completely unreadable, before going inside.

The moment we were alone on the porch again, Xavier rounded on me. “I bet you’re happy,” he snapped. Then he stomped off into the yard before I could even try to formulate a response. By the time I’d found a few choice words to sling his way, he was already stomping into the forest.

*Asshole! Selfish prick!*

I stood alone on the porch, trying to process everything that had just happened.

Sure, I understood why Xavier was upset, but to tell me that I had to be happy that Greyson was back, right after Xavier had apologized? What the *fuck?*

*Xavier knows how fucked up this situation is,* I thought to myself. *And now it’s even worse!*

I left Xavier to brood and stormed upstairs, casting dirty looks at anyone who so much as made eye contact with me. I burst into my bedroom and slammed the door shut behind me. I’d worked so hard to free Greyson, Xavier, and myself from this curse, only for it to backfire. Now, it wasn’t only emotionally impossible to choose one brother over the other—making that choice was going to be a death sentence for one of them.

I threw myself onto my bed with a furious groan.

I’d tried so hard to move past this, but now I was right back in the same position, and neither Greyson nor Xavier seemed to understand that. All they’d done was make a horrible situation a million times worse. I wanted to scream, to shake some sense into Xavier, to demand answers from Greyson, to loudly announce that I wasn’t choosing either of them—see how they like that!

The door opened and Artemis poked her head in. “Is everything okay? You made quite the racket coming upstairs.”

I scoffed. “Do I look okay?”

My sister came in and closed the door behind her. “What’s wrong?”

I threw my hands up. “Oh, you know, *everything!*”

Artemis sighed. “Is this a Cali problem, or is there something really going on? I thought I heard arguing downstairs.”

I chose to ignore her dig. “Greyson’s back.”

“Oh.” Her eyebrows lifted. “I guess that helps explain why you’re so upset—”

“But that’s not all of it. He also brought a woman. Some gorgeous, model-looking lady named Maren.”

Artemis’s eyes practically bugged out. “He’s here—with *Maren*? Are you sure?”

My mouth went dry, and my confusion skyrocketed. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought that Artemis had heard that name before. “Why? Do you know her?”

“I don’t *know* her.”

I relaxed.

“I’ve only heard about her.”

I perked back up. “What have you heard?”

Artemis scoffed. “Well, for starters, she’s Greyson’s ex-girlfriend.”

His WHAT?!

**Episode 1029**

XAVIER

I stomped down to the lake, furious enough that it was a wonder I hadn’t shifted. Maybe I was *too* angry to shift. Maybe I was too angry to do anything but rage and snarl and try to boil the lake with the sickly hot fury pressurizing inside me.

Greyson was back. *Of fucking course* Greyson was back. I’d foolishly let myself believe that brother dearest wasn’t going to come back, that he’d gone Rogue again and had abandoned the pack to go off and do whatever the fuck it was he wanted to do now that Silas was dead.

It had always seemed like defeating Silas had played an important role in Greyson’s decision to become Alpha, and now that our father was dead, it had made a whole lot of sense for him to up and leave. Greyson had never been the type to lay down roots, and he’d as good as said that he wanted me to be Alpha if anything happened to him. And so of course, idiot that I was, I’d thought he’d bailed and given me the Redwood pack.

Well, the Redwood pack and Cali.

But that was clearly not the case. Greyson was back—he’d even brought home a couple strays—and he’d made it very clear that he still saw himself as Alpha.

I kicked a fallen branch, satisfied when it shattered into a spray of wood chips. Why couldn’t he have just stayed gone? It would’ve been so much easier to take over as Alpha if I didn’t have to actually fight for it.

And, more importantly, what did this mean for me and Cali? Even with Greyson gone, progress with Cali had been slow, and we’d hit a new rough patch *because* of him. I understood why she didn’t want to choose between us under the new limitations of the *due destini* curse, and I could almost accept the idea of being her “unofficial” choice. The important thing, I’d told myself again and again, was that I’d be her choice, whether overtly or not.

But even that compromise, which felt pretty fucking monumental to me, wasn’t enough. She was still holding on to Greyson, even though he’d made it pretty clear how he felt about her when he’d bailed on the pack after not returning from honoring Joss.

I still couldn’t shake the horror and anger that pulsed through me whenever I thought about that moment in the laundry room, when she’d called out Greyson’s name. I’d felt used, disgusted, hurt—I still felt all those things. I thought I’d been starting to move past it, but having Greyson here now was like pouring salt into the wound.

But I also knew that it had been an accident on Cali’s part. I knew she loved me. I knew she wanted me, too. That she wasn’t just stringing me along for her own amusement. That she felt just as torn by all of this as I did—maybe more.

I’d tried to apologize for how I’d reacted in the laundry room, and for not believing her when she’d told me about the vampires, and for insulting the Fae, and for… god, so many things. It seemed like all we did lately was fight and fuck, and that wasn’t nearly as fun as it sounded. Cali meant more to me than that.

And now Greyson was back. He’d barreled in during the middle of my latest attempt to fix things with Cali, and he’d thrown everything into chaos. I turned to look back at the house. Greyson had no fucking clue what had happened here tonight. If he’d even tried to be a real Alpha, he would have been here fighting vampires with the rest of us instead of giving room and board to Maren and her kid, whoever the fuck they were.

I could at least take some small measure of comfort in how shocked and hurt Cali had been when she’d seen Greyson pull up with that woman and her kid. After pulling a stunt like that, Greyson had to be in even deeper shit with Cali than I was.

I needed to talk to Cali, to apologize—again. I shouldn’t have said what I’d said to her on the porch, and I shouldn’t have stormed off like that. I didn’t need her any angrier with me than she already was.

*Fuck. I need to cool down. I can’t go back inside like this.*

I needed someone to vent to, so I pulled out my phone and immediately dialed Colton. I tried not to focus on just how much I’d been calling my brother lately. Needing the emotional support of others wasn’t something I was comfortable with, but I didn’t know what else to do.

Colton answered on the third ring. “What’s up, bro?”

“Everything’s shit.”

“Oh, so the usual then?”

My eyes narrowed, though he couldn’t see the murderous glare I would surely have sent his way if he’d been here with me. I explained everything that had happened since I’d last called him—Cali, Greyson, the threat to me taking over as Alpha, all of it.

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone before Colton finally responded. “Well, that sucks. Have you talked to Cali?”

I scoffed. “Considering all we do at the moment is fuck or fight, and Greyson only seems to make that worse, no. I haven’t exactly had a heart to heart with her yet.”

“I mean is it really *that* bad?”

I growled. “It sucks, Colton. That’s why I’m calling.”

“Okay, okay, bro,” he said. “Do you think Greyson’s planning on sticking around this time? He has a habit of taking off, like he’s a part-time Alpha.”

“Exactly. He’s not fucking cut out for this job. And no, I don’t know how long he’s sticking around. I don’t know why he came back in the first place.” A new thought occurred to me. “Have you heard of a woman named Maren, by any chance? Do you know why Greyson would have brought her to the pack house?”

“No clue. Is she hot?”

I was going to strangle him through the phone. *Typical Colton*. “Sure, but I still can’t figure out why Greyson would bring her here, with a *kid*. This is no place for kids. I mean, we literally had a squad of vampires attack the house a few hours ago.”

Colton whistled. “Damn, I’m missing all the fun, aren’t I? So what are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted. “But whatever I decide, it’ll be sooner rather than later. I can’t let this bullshit continue. Greyson’s going to tear everything apart at the rate things are going.”

“Then just go for it.” Colton’s voice was surprisingly sharp. “Stop wallowing in your crap. You whine and complain, but you rarely ever act. I mean, god, Xavier, if it hadn’t been for me, you never even would have met Cali. You never would have gotten your wolf back. You want to be Alpha? You want Cali? Stop fucking brooding and just take them both.”

I blinked. “Um, thanks?”

“You called me for advice, right? That’s my advice. Wolf up and take what you want.”

We ended the call soon after that, and I tucked my phone back into my pocket, feeling a strange mixture of certainty and discomfort. Colton rarely talked to me like that, but when he did, he was usually right. Which meant that I needed to stop angst-ing and act.

I looked out at the lake and blew out a sigh. *If I want to be Alpha, then it’s time to act like one.*

I headed back into the house, unsure of what to expect. Would Greyson be stalking about and reasserting himself? Was Cali ready to pick up where we’d left off before Greyson had shown up? Was there more fallout from the vampire attack to be dealt with?

The house was fairly calm when I stepped inside. I headed to the kitchen and found Jay sitting at the table alone. He looked uncharacteristically unhappy, and then I remembered that Lola had been bitten.

“Hey.” I took a seat at the table with him. “How’s Lola doing?”

“She’s resting. I think Big Mac gave her something to help her sleep.” It looked like Jay could’ve used some of that tonic, too. He looked exhausted in a way I’d never seen before.

“And how are you?” I asked.

Jay sighed and rubbed his face. “Honestly? I’m a mess. I love Lola, and I would do anything for her.”

“Even if she becomes a vampire?”

He nodded, though he looked a little sick. “I know it would make things… complicated. But I don’t think it would change how I feel about her.”

I nodded. “I get it. My relationship with Cali might be complicated, but when I found out she was Fae, it didn’t change my feelings for her.”

“But what if *Lola’s* feelings change?” he asked. “She’s worried about being human, about maybe being a vampire—it all just adds another layer of stress. We’ve already been through so much the last few months, and now this.”

I couldn’t help but draw comparisons. Cali and I were in a similar jam ourselves, and I didn’t have any answers. I was muddling through as best as I could, just like Jay was. I put a hand on his shoulder. “You’ll get through it. I’m here to help you, and so is the rest of the pack.”

“Thanks, man,” he said. “How are things with you? How are you handling Greyson’s surprise return?”

“I’ve made a decision.” I thought back to my conversation with Colton. It was time to be honest, to man up and take what I wanted. “I’m going to end this once and for all. I’m going to take Alpha from Greyson.”

Jay’s eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

“I've never been more sure.” I locked eyes with Jay. “So, are you with me?”

**Episode 1030**

VIOLET

“And then I—*wham—*shoved the whole log through that rotten bloodsucker’s chest.” Charlie grinned at me, clearly proud to have taken out that vampire. “It was the strangest thing, Violet. I was absolutely terrified, of course, but then, almost like magic, I just had this feeling. Almost like an unseen hand was guiding me, helping me fight with instincts I didn’t even know I had.”

I watched him recount his battle with the vampire, a small smile tugging at my lips. He looked so excited, so animated—much more like the Charlie I’d met and fallen for back in Minnesota. I hadn’t realized until now how subdued and troubled he’d been here in Oregon until now, when I was seeing that light in his eyes again.

More than anything, seeing him like this gave me hope. Yeah, it wasn’t ideal that a vampire attack was what had breathed some life back into my mate, but this had to be better than how things had been before, right? Ever since we’d defeated Silas, Charlie had felt unmoored, out of place. It had hurt him to leave his life in Minnesota behind so suddenly—something I probably could have been more sympathetic about.

That feeling had only been compounded by Charlie learning that he was both a werewolf and a vampire hunter. Charlie hadn’t chosen to be either of those things, and yet they’d still been thrust upon him, and he’d been forced to come to terms with his new reality. I didn’t know what to make of it, honestly.

Being born a werewolf and spending my whole life as part of a pack, I could only imagine how Charlie must have felt, having his world shift on its axis not once, but twice. I realized I couldn’t blame him too much for running off—he’d needed time to accept all the ways in which his world had changed forever. It had hurt, but now I understood it at least.

Charlie was practically buzzing with excitement. He seemed thrilled to be part of my world, to have a role in it—and all because of a bunch of vampires. But one lingering question nagged at the back of my mind as I watched him gush about taking out that vampire. What did this mean for the two of us?

He seemed much more at ease in my world now that he’d in some way embraced who he was, but he still hadn’t answered my question about whether or not he was going to return to Minnesota…

As he continued recounting his role in the fight, my gaze slid downward. I wanted to ask, to press the issue until he gave me an answer—one way or another. But I was afraid. What if he decided to go back, to leave me? What if pressing the issue only made him leave me faster?

I swallowed with some difficulty. No, he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t just up and leave. It wouldn’t be fair. We’d only just discovered each other. We deserved so much more time to get to know each other, to give this thing between us a real shot.

Because if there was one thing I knew for sure, it was that I loved being with Charlie. I could only hope that he felt the same way about me.

“Violet?”

My gaze shot up and I was suddenly aware that he was looking at me. How long had he been there, looking at me, maybe even talking to me without me answering? “Sorry,” I said quickly. “What’s up?”

“Are you all right?” he asked. I tried not to squirm under his searching gaze.

“Um, yeah. I’m okay.”

A crease appeared between his eyebrows, and he shook his head. “I’m sorry. I was so caught up in the adrenaline after what happened that I haven’t even asked how you’re doing.” He gently took my hand. “Are you all right? That had to be scary for you, too—having a bunch of vampires come into your home and attack the pack…”

I sighed. “Yeah, it definitely isn’t one of my top ten moments. I was hoping for a regular Halloween, especially after defeating Silas. I wanted things to be normal, but I guess that’s not always an option around here.” I squeezed his hand. “I’m glad you’re safe, though.”

He moved a little closer. “It was definitely a Halloween I’ll never forget.” Charlie’s head tilted down so our faces were close together, and my heart began to kick up into a new rhythm. Was he going to kiss me? “One question though,” he said, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

My mouth went dry. I liked that look on his face way too much. I licked my lips, thrilled at the way his gaze zeroed in on my mouth. “What is it?”

“Am I in your top ten?” His smile was teasing, like he already knew the answer, but he wanted to make me say it out loud.

It was all too easy to return his grin with one of my own. “One or two of them.”

“Mmm. Guess I’ll have to work a little harder.” He winked, and I felt myself melting into his arms.

“I’m glad you’re here with me, Violet,” Charlie said, his voice low and gentle. Affectionate in a way I hadn’t heard nearly enough of since we’d come to Oregon.

“I’m glad you’re here, too.” My voice was almost a whisper.

With a slight tilt of his face, Charlie closed the distance between us and pressed his lips against mine. It was a soft, gentle, thorough kiss. Unhurried, like we had all the time in the world to savor it, to savor each other. And for a moment, all the fighting, the arguing, the insecurity, and heartache—it all disappeared. And I was left with Charlie, my mate. Just the two of us—the way it was meant to be.

My arms wrapped around his neck as he deepened the kiss, his hands gripping my hips tight, his fingers spanning the plane of my lower back as he pulled me tight against him. We were chest to chest, our hips slotted together so there wasn’t a single inch of his front that wasn’t pressed against mine.

I nipped at his lower lip, tugging slightly at his hair. His answering groan set my blood on fire, and I walked us backward toward my bed. I needed him—all of him. I needed to feel connected to my mate in that primal way. I’d waited long enough.

And if anyone interrupted us, I was probably going to kill them.

I pressed open-mouthed kisses against his neck, feeling like it was appropriate given the evening we’d had. Charlie did the same, nipping at my flesh and making lust pool between my legs. He kissed me again, my head feeling dizzy.

God, I wanted him so badly I could barely see straight.

I pulled him onto my bed, until his body pressed mine into the mattress. I felt him through his jeans. Blush overtook my body.

“Charlie,” I gasped, my hips inadvertently canting up to his. I had no clue what I was doing—beyond the biological basics, of course—but I’d always been a fast learner.

“Yeah?” he asked.

I fumbled a hand along the top of his jeans. “Can I…?” I trailed off, keeping my eyes locked on his. Slowly, Charlie nodded.

Quickly, I undid his belt and slipped my hand under the last layer of fabric. Gently, I ran my hand up and down him. Charlie hissed and grabbed my wrist. “*Violet*.”

“Is that okay?” I bit my lip, my cheeks heating. “Does it feel… okay?”

He shook his head. “More than okay,” he said. “Amazing.”

While I processed this new piece of information, Charlie drank me in, his pupils dilating.

“You’re so perfect, Violet.” He leaned in, dropping a line of kisses down my throat and heading southward. “I wish I could be here, with you, in this exact moment, forever.”

His words were nice, but something about them made warning bells chime in my head. I gently pushed him back. “Just this moment?”

Charlie blinked. His eyes were nearly black with lust. “Huh?”

“You said ‘in this moment’. But what about after this moment? What about us?”

“What *about* us?” he echoed, and my stomach dropped. Why was he acting like this was a foreign concept?

“Yeah, *us*,” I said slowly. “You never answered my question about whether or not you’re going back to Minnesota. So what does all of this mean? We’re mates, and being mates is not a part-time thing. We’re supposed to be together forever, not long distance. I mean, Lola and Jay tried long distance once and she ended up in the hospital.”

His eyes widened. “What?”

“Or that could just be because of Lola,” I quickly amended. “But the point is that mates aren’t supposed to be apart. It can make you sick. Or make you feel bad, at the very least.”

“I don’t want to do that to you.”

A tiny spark of hope kindled in my heart. “So does that mean you’re staying?”

Charlie froze and then looked away, shaking his head. “No. I’m going back. I have to.”

**Episode 1031**

Artemis’s words rang in my ears, echoing dimly as my mind swam with the implications. “Maren is *what?*”

Artemis looked surprised by my response, cocking her head to the side. “Wait, now I’m confused. Why are you upset? I did say she was his *ex*-girlfriend, right? Do you know what *ex* means? I thought that was a common concept in this world—”

I held up a hand to stop her diatribe before it could take on a life of its own, as it so often did. “No, I know what it means. But Greyson never told me all that much about his past…” I frowned. “I honestly didn’t even know he’d ever *had* a girlfriend.”

“*Ex*-girlfriend,” Artemis emphasized again, pushing her messy hair behind her ears. It looked like she’d been through a tornado. “It ended really badly, the way he tells it. Besides, can you really say you’re surprised than an Alpha like Greyson hasn’t mentioned all of his past girlfriends to you? He’s probably had dozens.”

I scowled. “I know you think you’re helping, but you’re not.”

Artemis really hadn’t needed to drive that point home so firmly. As soon as the words had slipped out of my mouth, I’d realized exactly how stupid they sounded. Greyson was a handsome, confident, hot-blooded Alpha werewolf. I knew he hadn’t been a saint before I’d come along, based on his reputation alone. But that didn’t mean I’d ever given thought to his previous romantic attachments. Honestly, he’d always seemed like the type to *not* get attached. The love ‘em and leave ‘em type, who never stuck around for longer than a night.

But that was clearly not the case. I was proof of that, after all. And now Maren was too.

Which brought up another question…

“How do you even know about Maren?” I asked Artemis. This news had all but upended my world, and Artemis—my sister from another world, who was afraid of the microwave—had apparently known this about Greyson already? What other secrets was she keeping?

Artemis shrugged. “Oh, he told me.”

I blinked. “I beg your *what*?”

“Did you not hear me?” she asked innocently. Before I could respond, she cleared her throat and began to shout. “GREYSON—TOLD—”

I pressed my hands over her mouth to shut her up. “I heard you,” I hissed. Jealousy was a raging beast inside my chest, and there was a not-so-small part of me that wanted to do bodily harm to my sister not only for keeping this from me, but apparently for having a connection with Greyson that allowed her to know things about him that I didn’t. “So my mate told you all about his past, but failed to mention said past to me?”

Artemis effortlessly pried my hands away from her mouth. “He told me in Portland after we came through the Fae portal. And you shouldn’t be surprised—people are always telling me things. For instance, did you know that Sage can juggle chainsaws while blindfolded?”

“What?”

“I’m not convinced it’s true,” Artemis continued. “I’d need to see it for myself first, but it does sound thrilling. What exactly is a chainsaw, anyway?”

I groaned. “We’re going off-topic here. When Greyson told you about Maren, did he say anything about her son?”

That unanswered question nagged at me more than the others. I could accept that Greyson had some past relationships. It was normal, really. And besides, Xavier had had an actual mate before he’d met me. It wouldn’t be fair to Greyson to expect him to have saved himself for me, but Fenrir was another story. If Greyson had a son…

“What son?” Artemis asked.

“Maren has a kid. A young one. His name is Fenrir.”

“Oh. Well this is the first I’m hearing of him. How old is he?”

I pondered this for a moment. Having been an only child most of my life, I didn’t really know all that much about children. “I’m not sure. I haven’t been around enough kids to know. He’s maybe four? Five?” I thought about all the similarities between Fenrir and Greyson and added, “How long ago were Maren and Greyson together?”

She shrugged. “I don’t remember him mentioning any specifics, but I think it was a few years ago.”

*Great, that is exactly zero percent helpful. The timeline could be a perfect match for Fenrir to be Greyson’s—or he could just be some kid who bears a strange resemblance to a man who is in no way related to him.*

“Wait,” Artemis said slowly. “Do you think Fenrir is *Greyson’s* *son?*”

“Honestly? I don’t know what to think.” If she’d asked me before Silas had been defeated and Greyson had run off, I might have had more faith in him. Now, it seemed like anything was possible. He could still be in love with me and want to be my mate, or he could have moved on and chosen to be with someone less complicated—especially if she had a kid walking about with Greyson’s DNA.

“For all of his flaws, I find it hard to believe that he wouldn’t have told you he had a son,” Artemis said skeptically.

“But what if he didn’t know?” I pressed. “What if Maren never told him?”

“Then how is that his fault?” she asked.

I bit my lip. She had a point. “You said it ended badly between them, right?

She nodded. “Maren’s Dark Fae. She’s the one who gave him his scar.”

I was intimately acquainted with that scar, and that added a whole new layer of confusion to everything. If this was all true, then why the hell would Greyson invite her back here? And as for Fenrir, Maren could have kept their son a secret from Greyson. Especially if she had reason to believe Greyson wouldn’t be interested in the boy’s life.

I headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Artemis asked.

“I don’t know. I need to think.”

I headed out of my room and went downstairs automatically. My head was practically spinning with all the new information. I’d gotten at least some of my questions answered, but those answers had only led to new questions.

Maren was Dark Fae. And Greyson’s ex-girlfriend. And things had ended badly between the two of them. But apparently not so badly that she hadn’t been able to turn to him in a time of need. Had she reached out to him? Was she why he hadn’t come back after doing Joss’s Luna memorial ceremony?

Still I wondered about Greyson and Maren’s history. It was an itching question, lodged deep in my mind where I just couldn’t scratch. Had they broken up because Maren was Dark Fae? Or because she was Fae, full stop? I was Fae. What did that mean for Greyson and me, if he already had a failed relationship with a Fae woman?

And then there was Fenrir. *Was* he Greyson’s son? Did the timeline match? If my mate had a child with another woman, I didn’t know what I’d do.

I headed down to the kitchen for a drink of water, ignoring everyone I passed on my way. I was only dimly aware of the conversations going on around me, the pack members discussing the vampire attack and Halloween.

After downing a glass of water, I tried to collect my thoughts. To put them in some sort of order so I could make sense of the information I had and come to some sort of conclusion on how to approach this conversation with Greyson. I had to wrap my head around all of this, because right now, the alternative was barging into his room and wailing at him like a banshee.

Not exactly a good look.

Maybe the reason things had ended badly between Greyson and Maren had nothing to do with her being Fae—maybe it had simply been because Maren wasn’t his mate.

*And I am*.

The thought felt a little smug, but the hope it infused in my chest was brief. Because that little reminder led me to another thought: Xavier was also my mate. I hadn’t chosen—how could I? If I did, I’d kill one of them. Fuck.

I shook myself. *No, this is crazy. I’m acting like a crazy person right now.*

I was making all these assumptions, but there could easily be a simple explanation for everything. And in any case, there was no need to make assumptions when the source of all the information I needed was at my disposal. It sounded like Artemis hadn’t gotten the whole story from Greyson, and rather than trying to make all the pieces fit, I could just ask him to tell me what was going on.

*It’s time someone did, after all,* I thought. *And it only makes sense for that someone to be me.*

I headed back upstairs, new determination pushing me forward. As I reached the top of the stairs, I paused. *Wait, which room is he in?* He’d told Mrs. Smith to put Maren and Fenrir in his room, so where did that leave him?

I crept down the hallway, just in time to see Greyson entering his own bedroom. My heart dropped when I looked past him, into his room, where Maren was lying in his bed.

*Wait… Is she naked?*

**Episode 1032**

GREYSON

I was exhausted to the bone as I crept from the empty guest room I’d be sleeping in back to my bedroom. Good lord, what a shitshow of a day. The perfect fit for my dumpster fire of a week.

I’d planned to stop by my room to grab some clothes, and I hadn’t expected Maren to be awake. Seeing her bare shoulder and collarbone had taken me by surprise, and I’d frozen in the doorway for a moment before collecting myself and walking inside, closing the door behind me. I glanced around the room, noting Fenrir’s sleeping form on the lounge chair in the corner.

“Sorry,” I said softly, not wanting to wake him. Fenrir had to be exhausted after the events of the last couple days—still, he *was* half-Fae and half-werewolf, and I had no idea what that meant for his sleep patterns. “I’m surprised you’re still up. I would have thought with all the stress of the day, you would have been out cold at the first opportunity.”

Maren hummed noncommittally. “The thing about the stress of the past couple days is that it’s not exactly the stuff of lullabies.” She noticed my eyes flicking over to Fenrir’s sleeping form. “I hope you don’t mind, but Fenrir’s all elbows when he sleeps. I put him on the chair for his comfort and mine.”

“It’s fine.” I honestly didn’t care where the kid slept, so long as he was comfortable.

She sat up, pulling the sheet up over her bare shoulder. Another thing I hadn’t expected: to find Maren naked in my bed. I guessed it made sense—she hadn’t brought a lot of things with her after the fight. In fact, she didn’t really have anything. That was something I planned to remedy in the coming days.

“Well, sorry to invade,” I said. “I’m just gonna grab a few things, then I’ll be on my way.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Greyson,” she said. “Not after everything you’ve done for us. I hate that we’re putting you out of your own room.”

I shrugged and headed to my closet. “It’s really no big deal. In the morning, I’ll help you and Fenrir settle into a more suitable room—there are plenty available. This house is huge. And we’ll see about getting you two anything else you need from there.”

I felt Maren’s eyes on me as I dug through my closet for something to sleep in, and fresh clothes for tomorrow. “You’ve always been so generous to me, even though I’ve done nothing to deserve it,” she said.

My gut instinct was to shrug that off, or say something snarky about her being a liar. Since neither seemed like an appropriate response, I said nothing. I would’ve been lying if I’d said I wasn’t still beyond furious for all the months—years, really—that she’d kept important secrets from me.

But in the interest of not being a complete douchebag, I was trying to set all that anger aside and help. And I really did want to help her. For as much as I was angry with Maren, she had been my first love, and she would always hold a piece of my heart because of that. And Fenrir was just a kid—a sweet, innocent kid, who somehow hadn’t had the joy and optimism beaten out of him yet. He didn’t deserve any of the shit that had happened to him.

Despite the past, I wanted good and happy things for Maren and her son, and I’d do what I could to make those things happen for them.

I was turning back from my closet, clothes tucked under my arm, when Maren spoke again. “I don’t think your mate—Cali, was it?—I don’t think she would agree that my presence here isn’t a big deal.”

I sighed. I’d had a feeling Cali was going to come up. She’d been the elephant in the room during all of Maren and my encounters so far, and the little meet and greet on the porch had been just short of a complete disaster. I’d honestly been trying to avoid thinking about it—about Cali—until things settled down a bit. It was all too easy for me to recall her look of complete shock mixed with betrayal when I’d come up to the porch with Maren and Fenrir in tow. To recall how she’d leaned just a little closer to Xavier in that moment, how they’d looked like a real couple, a unit, a package deal.

We had a lot to talk about, Cali and me. But I wasn’t going to have that conversation with her until I’d gotten some sleep, and I didn’t love the idea of having a similar conversation with Maren right now.

“It’s complicated,” I answered.

Maren laughed. “I could see that.”

Despite myself, I felt a smile tugging at my lips. “That obvious, huh?”

She nodded. “She barely said a word to me on the porch. At least the other guy made his feelings clear.”

“Don’t worry about my brother,” I told her. Xavier might have enjoyed playing Alpha while I’d been gone, but I would have no problem reminding him exactly where he stood in the pack—and all the different and creative ways I would punish him if he hurt my new guests.

“Let me guess: your relationship with your brother is complicated, too?”

I smirked. “Welcome to the Redwood pack.”

I thought back to the confrontation with Xavier on the porch. It seemed like we had a lot of stuff to work out.

“Quite the welcoming committee you have here,” Maren mused. “Maybe Fenrir and I should look for another place?”

I shook my head. “That’s not necessary. I’ll work things out—don’t worry about it. I’m sorry you don’t feel more welcome here. Xavier’s an ass, but Cali will warm up to you in time. And I think you’ll find everyone else here to be very welcoming.”

Maren shrugged. “And if they aren’t, I’ll survive. Remember, I’ve been through a lot worse than being the subject of fair suspicion.” She watched me, a pensive expression on her face.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s just, this is the first time I’ve really been in your world.”

“The werewolf world? What about Aiden?”

She shook her head. “No, not like that. When you and I met, you were a free man. You didn’t really have any responsibilities or roots to hold you in any one place. And now here you are—Alpha to the entire pack. I don’t think I ever would have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes.”

My lips twitched. “Honestly, I still can’t quite believe it myself. And back when we met, it would have been impossible for me to even imagine this. Being Alpha was never something I wanted for myself.”

“So what changed?” she asked.

I laughed as I recalled my tangled web of reasons for becoming Alpha. “Now *that* is complicated.”

“If I’ve learned nothing else about you tonight, it’s that you’re a complicated man.”

“Mmm.” I hoisted my clothes up under my arm and headed for the door. “It’s probably best if you wait for me in the morning, before you and Fenrir meet the rest of the pack.”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

“Good night, Maren.”

“Good night, Greyson.”

I reached for the door, but before my hand made contact, I felt myself being swept away into another daydream.

*It started out just like the last one. I was at the pack house, sitting on the back porch as a car pulled up in the driveway and Colton and Maya stepped out with their baby in tow.*

*But this time Maren was the one who came from the yard to greet the newcomers. Fenrir and another child—a little girl with blonde hair and grey eyes—rushed forward, passing their mother before leaping into my lap.*

*“Daddy!” Fenrir grinned up at me. The little girl hugged my leg, looking up at me with pure adoration. The sight filled me with an almost overwhelming sense of happiness, so much that I felt tears pricking my eyes.*

*The door to the house opened behind me and Xavier walked outside with Cali, followed by Xavier’s mother, Marlene, who was gushing about the sparkling engagement ring Cali was wearing.*

*The sight stunned me, and emotions rushed through me, almost too fast for me to parse. I was happy for them, truly I was, but there was something else there that I couldn’t place. An ache, a longing, a sense of a promise unfulfilled.*

*Maren reached the porch, a bright grin on her face. She opened her mouth to speak—*

“Greyson, are you all right?”

I snapped out of it and found myself on my bedroom floor. Maren, wrapped in a bedsheet, was standing over me, her eyes wide. I slowly sat up, blinking to orient myself back in this reality. “What the hell?” I muttered.

“You blacked out again. Are you okay?”

No. I was pretty sure I was *not* okay. I swallowed. Was that vision supposed to be my future? Was I destined to be with Maren?

And, more importantly—was Cali destined to be with Xavier?

**Episode 1033**

VIOLET

All of my happy, warm desire dried up in half a second, and I pushed Charlie off me. “You’re *leaving me?*”

He reached for me, but I wiggled out from under him, skittering across the bed to put some much-needed space between us and hugging the comforter protectively against my chest. For all the love and lust that had been coursing through my body just moments earlier, now I’d never wanted for him to touch me less. I didn’t even want him to look at me.

Charlie gave me a pained look. “That’s not what I meant—”

“That’s sure what it sounded like! You *just* told me you’re going back.” Never in my life had I thought Charlie, my sweet mate, would go anywhere without me by his side, and yet here he was, moments away from possibly taking my virginity, from loving me the way no one else *ever* had, and he was still planning to ditch me? That bastard! He knew how I felt about him. He knew what this would mean to me, and now he was trying to have it both ways?

“Okay, that *is* what I said, and it sounded bad. I get it,” he relented. “But I’m not going to leave you for good. I could *never*.”

I froze, staring at my mate, my battered heart not even daring to believe what he was saying. Charlie sighed and reached for my hand. He gently detached it from the comforter and entwined his fingers with my own. “I tried to run away from you before, and honestly? I hated every last second of it. I could barely stand to be away from you, and the thought of putting any kind of distance between us just about kills me.”

“So why’d you do it, then?” I demanded. “If it was that terrible, why did you leave in the first place? And if you truly hated it so much, then why didn’t you come back sooner? Why did you stay gone?”

“I did it because I love you,” he said simply. “And I thought that by keeping my distance, I was protecting you.”

I blinked. Despite my anger and distrust, I felt my resolve softening. After all, he’d just told me that he loved me. And looking in his eyes, reading the emotions on his face, I believed him. I believed that he’d done what he’d done not because he didn’t care, but because he did care—maybe a bit too much. Maybe enough that he wasn’t willing to risk putting me in danger, even when the danger came from him.

I sighed. “So how long will you be gone, then?”

“Only for a short while, I hope,” he said. “But you have to understand, Violet, I’m more than just a werewolf now. Tonight, I became a werewolf vampire hunter, and I have a lot to learn about what being a hunter truly means.”

“So you’re leaving me to do what? Study vampire hunting? Do they offer that at college, or something?”

I was being sarcastic, still angry at him for choosing to leave me. But he shook his head. “No, course not. I’m going back to talk to my parents—to find out all I can about who and what I really am.”

I watched the resolve play out over his features, heard the determination in his voice. This was really happening, I realized. Charlie was really going to leave me to go home to his family, to come clean to them, and to learn the family trade of vampire hunting. He had another place he belonged, people he belonged *to*, and a purpose that seemed so much more important than simply being my mate.

I felt tears pricking at my eyes. “Do you have any idea how lucky you are?”

He scoffed lightly. “I’m not sure that’s how I’d describe this situation.”

“Well, I would.” I tugged my hand out of his grip and wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly feeling so, so alone. “You have a family to go home to, to talk to, to learn from. The only family I had was Lilac… and you, I guess.” A few rogue tears escaped my eyes. “What will I have when you’re gone?”

“Violet.” His voice was soft again, urgent, and I didn’t fight him when he pulled me into his lap, wrapping his arms around me. I buried my face in his neck, letting his calming scent wrap around me, enjoying it while I still could.

“Violet,” he said again. “Sunshine, look at me. Please.”

I reluctantly and miserably lifted my head from the crook of his neck and met his eyes.

“I know how this might seem to you, but I’m not leaving you,” he said. “This is just something I have to do. Something I need to take care of so that when I do come back, I can stay with you. Forever.”

I swallowed down my emotions. “If you’re so determined to go, then I’ll come with you.”

His eyes widened. “Come with me to my parents?”

“Is that a problem? I mean, we’re mates. Shouldn’t I meet your parents? And maybe I can learn more about you too. We can learn together, and—”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

I froze, my mouth opening and closing silently. Why didn’t he want me to meet his parents? Was he ashamed of me? Did he think I wasn’t good enough or something? All the insecurities that had taken root since we’d met—and that had blossomed since he’d left me—were beginning to bloom again.

I swallowed again, forcing myself to ask the question that I was almost afraid to learn the answer to. “Do you not think your parents would like me? Are you… Are you embarrassed to be my mate?”

His hold on me tightened. “No, Violet. No, that’s not it at all. Don’t even think that—”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s just…” He sighed. “You’re a werewolf.”

I waited for him to elaborate, and when he didn’t, I found myself confused. “You’re a werewolf too, Charlie.”

“I know… But my parents don’t know that. Not yet.”

“I thought you were going to tell them?” I said. “I thought that was part of your master plan for going back to them and learning about who you are?”

He nodded. “I am going to tell them. Really, I am. Just not right now. Right now, I want to learn more about this other side of myself. The vampire hunter side.” He leaned in and brushed a kiss against my forehead. “I know I’m asking a lot of you, and I know it’s not fair. And you don’t have to agree with my decision, but can you at least understand why I need to do this?”

I sighed. I *didn’t* agree with his choice, and I *wasn’t* thrilled about him leaving me, but I did understand why he was choosing to do this. It helped. Not a lot, but enough to ease some of the panic that had wrapped tight around my chest. “I’ll… I’ll try,” I said.

He smiled. “Thank you.”

Charlie gently eased me off his lap, readjusted his clothes, and started pacing back and forth in my bedroom. So much for the romance. Not that I was in the mood for it anymore. I pulled my own clothes back on while he mulled over his plan of action.

“I have so many questions about hunters,” he mused. “Who was the first? How do they hunt vampires? How many other hunters are out there?”

I held up a hand, stopping his rapid-fire questions. I didn’t know any of the answers, and watching him pace was making me anxious. It reminded me that my time with him would soon come to an end. I didn’t want to think about that.

“How about we get out of here?” I suggested. “We can shift and go for a run?”

“But Xavier told us all to stay inside.”

I shrugged. “I don’t see any harm in a little run around the yard.”

“It would feel good to get out and run for a bit.”

We slipped down the stairs and outside, and Charlie immediately fell to the grass and started contorting his body into strange positions. Was he… stretching?

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I always stretch before a workout. My coach told me it’s important. Something to do with lactic acid in the muscles or something.”

I laughed. “You don’t need to worry about that so much when you’re a werewolf.”

“Maybe.” Still, he continued stretching his lean body, and I couldn’t help but admire the firm lines of it. Then he paused and walked over to me. “You should try it.”

“What for?”

“Because it feels good. Just try it.”

He guided me into a lunge with a torso twist, urging my top half to fold over my legs for added stretch. Honestly, it felt more awkward than anything else, but his hands on my body sure felt good.

We both stretched a bit more—him alone and me with his “help”—before I eased out of the strange pretzel he’d folded me into and stood. “Are you ready?”

He nodded.

“Let’s take our clothes off now so we don’t ruin them,” I suggested. The desire from earlier was still simmering low inside me as I watched him strip, and “stretching” hadn’t helped things. Maybe we could find some privacy in the woods and finally finish what we’d started…

With that thought, I shifted and Charlie followed suit. We started running around the large yard and the house, racing and jumping and nipping at each other. It was goofy and fun, just what we needed—

Suddenly, Charlie went completely still.

And then, without warning, he took off into the woods.

**Episode 1034**

XAVIER

Up in my bedroom, I mulled over my conversation with Jay. I had to admit, I’d been a bit worried that Jay wouldn’t be on my side, but the time for fear had come and gone. It was time to step up and take what I wanted, just like Colton had suggested.

And despite my concerns that Jay would value loyalty and the status quo over supporting my claim to being Alpha, being open with him about my plans had proved fruitful. Jay had agreed to support me when and if I chose to take the title of Alpha from Greyson. Maybe there was something to showing up for other people and supporting them in their personal struggles.

Maybe that was my best shot at proving I was more than equal to the task of becoming Alpha. Maybe that was how I would continue to gain support—not by brooding and being a hardass, but by supporting my fellow pack members. Maybe I could have everything I wanted.

As it turned out, Colton was a hell of a lot wiser than I would have ever given him credit for. It hadn’t been easy to hear him speak so frankly, to call me on my shit and tell me to do better, but he’d been right. I needed to stop thinking and scheming and getting upset when things didn’t just fall into my lap. I needed to stop complaining and start acting, start chasing after what I wanted.

Which meant I was either going to have to challenge Greyson outright, or follow Mace’s suggestion to get everyone on my side and take control of the Redwood pack without bloodshed—like a peaceful coup. I had to admit, as much as the thought of ripping Greyson’s throat out thrilled me, a peaceful coup would probably be the best way to proceed—for one, it would present a stronger show of leadership if I showed Greyson and the rest of the pack who was behind me, and also—probably more importantly—I couldn’t imagine Cali would ever forgive me for killing Greyson.

I loved her, and she was my mate, and I intended to spend the rest of my life with her, so breaking her heart and making her hate me seemed a little counterproductive—no matter how much I wanted Greyson permanently gone.

I thought through the pack members—Rishika, Zainab, Sage, Jay, Lola, Violet, Charlie, Mrs. Smith, and the others—and tried to imagine whose side they’d fall on. After Greyson’s recent absence, I was sure that most of the pack members would support me. After all, Greyson had made it clear he’d never truly wanted to be Alpha, and he’d left the pack more than once. Joss had stepped in to cover for him before, and now that she was gone, the responsibility had fallen to me. And since Silas had been defeated, I’d been the one to lead the Redwood pack. I’d been the one to navigate this orb situation. I’d been the one to lead the fight against the vampires.

Mrs. Smith would probably be on Greyson’s side. She was his mother, after all. But I had a feeling that the rest of the pack would rather have me as their Alpha—someone who had been there for them, someone who had done a damn good job of watching over the pack while Greyson had gone off to do whatever he’d gone off to do.

*Of course they’ll support me if it comes to a coup. It would be in their own best interest.*

I wondered about Cali, though. Would she support me as Alpha? Maybe. As long as I didn’t have to fight Greyson, as long as no blood was shed in the transfer of power. Another Lupo Finale would be too much for her, but I knew I’d be able to get her to see the value of a coup. Plus, I might need her support. She was on good terms with several of the pack members, and she had a knack for putting people at ease—a skill that I unfortunately knew nothing about.

But that just meant she was even more perfect for me. We would be the ultimate team—me as the Alpha and Cali as my mate and Luna.

A panicked howl from outside caught my attention. I knew that howl. It was Violet. Why was she outside? Hadn’t I told everyone they needed to stay inside, if only for their own safety? We didn’t know whether the vampires were lingering nearby, and we needed to regroup. And thanks to Big Mac, the house was safe, but only so long as everyone stayed inside. I went to the window to see Violet, in her wolf form, racing into the woods.

*What the hell is going on? Why is she doing this now, when there could be a whole nest of vampires in the woods, just waiting to swoop in and attack?*

I started toward my bedroom door, but then I paused. Should I be doing this? Greyson was back now, and he was the Alpha—shouldn’t he be the one taking care of this? Shouldn’t this be his concern? I was supposed to retreat into the background now that Greyson was back, wasn’t I?

Violet let out another howl from the woods, and I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong. I cared a lot about Violet—she was the sister I’d never had. Who knew who Greyson cared for? He had Mrs. Smith and this Maren and her son to look after. He probably couldn’t care less what happened to Violet.

*If something happens to her…*

My mind made up, I burst into motion again. Greyson might be the Alpha again, but Violet was my concern, Alpha or not. Besides, I was going to be the Alpha soon enough anyway, and at the very least, rushing in to help Violet—regardless of my “official” role—would continue the precedent I’d set as the leader of the pack. There didn’t seem to be any reason not to step in and help.

I rushed outside and shifted, using my senses to guide me as I picked up Violet’s scent and followed her trail. I also detected Charlie’s scent, but that was no surprise. Whatever one of them got into, the other would inevitably follow.

Still, they both should’ve known better. We’d literally just been attacked by vampires.

I followed their trail deeper into the woods and slowed to a lope as I heard what sounded like a struggle—crashing sounds, scuffling in the dirt, branches cracking, and a cacophony of growls and snarls.

I moved cautiously as I approached, not wanting to give the upper hand to any threats that might be hanging around. I was astonished to see a campsite with an RV set up in the middle of the woods. What the hell was that doing out here? We were only a few miles away from the pack house.

*These fuckers are bold. Too bold.*

Then I froze when I saw Violet and Charlie standing back to back in their human forms, facing down against Gregor and a couple of other vampires—including that annoying kid.

The kid vamp pointed at Charlie. “He’s the hunter!”

I cocked my head to the side. Hunter? The vamps had shouted the same thing during the fight, too. But that didn’t make any sense. Charlie was a werewolf, just like me and Violet. He wasn’t a hunter, and he hadn’t even been a werewolf all that long. And before he’d joined the pack, he’d just been a run of the mill college kid. No offense to Violet, but the kid didn’t really seem like anything special. I couldn’t figure out why these vampires were so fascinated with him.

Before I could step in and lend some assistance, Charlie shifted and lunged at Gregor. At the same moment, Violet shifted and attacked one of the other vamps, and all hell broke loose. Charlie dodged and swiped and bit at Gregor, leaving long, deep gashes in the vampire’s torso, while across the clearing Violet was death on swift feet, leaping between two vampires in a blur of fur, ripping each of them apart before they could land a hit.

I didn’t think twice before jumping into the fray. Charlie and Violet were doing all right on their own, but that didn’t mean they should have all the fun. If either of the other wolves was surprised to have me fighting alongside them, they didn’t show it. We split up, taking the divide and conquer route. Violet was really coming into her own as a fighter, but Charlie seemed like a natural. He seemed to know exactly where to dodge and where to bite, almost as if he could somehow sense the vampires’ attacks before they came.

*The new kid’s all right.*

Then, just as fast as the fight broke out, it ended. The surviving vampires suddenly retreated into the woods. Charlie tensed, ready to go after them, but I jumped into his path with a growl before shifting back to my human form.

“Do *not* go after them!” I snapped. “Let them go. They’ve as good as lost now anyway.”

The young wolf also shifted back and started to argue, but I cut him off.

“What the *fuck* were you and Violet doing out here anyway, huh?” I demanded, getting in Charlie’s face. I turned to face Violet, to demand some answers from the closest thing I had to a sister, only to find open, empty forest.

Violet was gone.

**Episode 1035**

Why did morning have to come so early? I slowly ambled my way downstairs, only just awake enough not to slip on the staircase. Last night had been godawful, and if my current mood was any indication, today wasn’t going to be great either.

I’d had a terrible night. After watching Greyson disappear into his bedroom—which had featured a *very* naked Maren in his bed—I’d all but rushed back to my own bedroom, seeking refuge from the very real possibility that Greyson had reunited with his ex-girlfriend and had brought her home to live happily ever after or something…

*Get it together Cali*, I told myself.

But as I’d mulled it over through the night, the thought hadn’t seemed quite right. It hadn’t resonated with that note of truth, but I still hadn’t been able to shake off the dread and suspicion. Instead, I’d tossed and turned for most of the night, wondering if I was going to feel that same pain in my chest if Greyson slept with Maren that I had when he and Xavier had both slept with Ava.

The terms of the curse had changed, though, so there was no guarantee that it would do anything if either of my mates decided to hook up with other women. I couldn’t decide what was worse: the possibility of that terrible pain rushing through my chest once again, of the black veins returning in full force, or the likelihood that even if Greyson had chosen to be with someone else, I wouldn’t have a single clue because the curse didn’t enforce those particular terms anymore.

I’d spent half the night steeped in dread and weighing the pros and cons of trying to go to sleep versus sneaking down the hallway and listening at Greyson’s bedroom door for some clues about what the fuck was going on. I also briefly considered seeking out Xavier, but I wasn’t ready to talk to him yet, and I wasn’t sure he’d want to talk to *me* after the way we’d been fighting lately.

It had been closer to dawn than midnight by the time I’d finally fallen asleep, and even then I’d been tormented by dreams of Greyson, Xavier, vampires, Maren, and a little boy who may or may not have been Greyson’s flesh-and-blood child.

A shaft of sunlight broke through the kitchen window and shone right in my eyes as I walked into the kitchen, and I groaned, throwing my hand up to block the light.

*Stupid sun. We get it—it’s morning! No need to be so happy about it!*

God, I needed coffee in the worst way. But not Lola’s coffee.

I was the first one into the kitchen for the day, and I wasted no time brewing some coffee. As I watched the percolator in action, I picked up my ruminating from where I’d left off last night.

*Greyson is mysterious, avoiding me, and apparently choosing to spend time with other women. Back to square one.*

I’d foolishly hoped that when I woke up this morning I’d have some new clarity about this situation—through the power of osmosis or magic dreams or *something*. Really though, everything only seemed to be worse. If that were even possible. My fight with Xavier yesterday somehow seemed even worse in the bright light of morning, too, and I couldn’t even think about Greyson without feeling betrayed.

I poured myself a cup of coffee and then replaced the carafe as it continued to fill. I considered adding my usual milk and sugar, but the plain coffee in the mug seemed to fit my mood better—steaming, dark, and bitter.

Taking a seat at the kitchen island, I sighed and stared into the opaque depths of my coffee. I couldn’t get the image of Greyson and Maren out of my mind. When I’d met Maren and Fenrir on the porch, the three of them had looked, for all intents and purposes, like a family unit. And then there had been that whole scene in his bedroom. Even though my understanding was that he was sleeping in another room, Maren had been naked and waiting for him in his bed. And from what little I’d been able to make out, Greyson hadn’t seemed to mind.

I tried to wrap my head around that painful and traitorous thought. Greyson wouldn’t do that. Would he? No. I knew him. He wouldn’t just up and leave me to go choose someone else, right? I mean, how long had he been fighting for me? How long had he been telling me to choose him?

But even as I thought it, I couldn’t help remember how he’d told me to choose Xavier. At the time, I’d thought he was trying to be noble and selfless. Now, though, I wondered if he’d said it to give himself an out so that he could pursue Maren without any guilt. Maybe he hadn’t left after Silas’s defeat because he’d needed space. Maybe it had been because he’d wanted to go be with Maren.

I took a sip of my coffee, grimacing at the bitter flavor that spread over my tongue. I kept sipping it, my mind miles away from the kitchen table.

There had been a time when I’d thought Greyson was someone I could trust, someone I could love, someone I had a connection with like no other. And while I still loved him, I couldn’t help but feel like an unending void had opened between the two of us, that we were miles apart even though we were in the same house.

*We need to talk. Or, rather,* he *has to talk. Greyson has a lot of explaining to do.*

And I had a hell of a lot of questions. I wanted to know more about Maren, about Fenrir, but I knew that once I pulled on that thread, there would be no un-pulling it. What was I going to do if Fenrir truly was Greyson’s son? I could never take a child’s father away from him. But then what would that mean for me and Greyson? Even if Greyson *did* have a family, I was still his mate. How was that supposed to work?

A new thought struck me, and I set down my half-empty mug. Was Greyson doing all of this in some kind of mad attempt to make me choose Xavier? After all, he’d told me to choose his brother once before. Maybe now he was just trying to push the issue, to force me to make the decision myself.

I just couldn’t understand why he would do such a thing.

Footsteps echoed outside, and then Xavier and Charlie stumbled into the kitchen through the back door. They looked totally spent—dirty and bedraggled and exhausted.

“Where have you guys been?” I asked.

“Violet’s gone.” Charlie was panting. “They took her.”

“*What*? Who did?” I sat back, stunned, looking to Xavier for an explanation.

He patted Charlie on the back. “We’re not giving up the search, okay?” Xavier turned to me and filled me in on what happened: Violet and Charlie racing into the woods and facing down that same vampire nest that had attacked us, and then Violet disappearing.

“We think the vampires took her,” Xavier finished, his expression grave. “We’re just back to get more people to look for her.”

I stood up, my coffee and Greyson problems momentarily forgotten. “What should I do? I can go start by the lake.”

“No,” Xavier said. “You’ll stay here.

Charlie spoke before I could. “I screwed everything up! This is all my fault. I let her down. And I… I’m supposed to be the one who can hunt these things. I’m supposed to be good at it, and I just let them take her!”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Was he going into shock? I sidled over to Xavier and took his hand. “You can’t stop looking for Violet. I’ll help you find her, come on.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. “That’s what I’ve been telling Xavier, but he made me come back.”

I looked to Xavier for confirmation. “I don’t understand. Why would you do that?”

“Because they’re vampires.” He sighed. “The woods are huge. We need help—and I never said I was giving up. This is what a pack is for.”

A deep voice cut through the room. “Is someone going to tell me what’s going on?”

I turned to see Greyson standing in the doorway. My mouth went dry the moment our eyes locked, and I looked away.

“Violet has been taken by vampires,” Xavier said.

Greyson’s eyes widened. “What happened?”

Xavier crossed his arms over his chest. “If you had been here last night, you would have known. We were attacked by vampires. They retreated, but the new kid and his mate decided to track them down.”

“You let them go out?”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed on his brother. “I told them to stay in the house. Isn’t that what an Alpha is supposed to do?”

I rolled my eyes. *Violet’s missing and here these two are, swinging their dicks around!*

“Stop it!” Charlie said suddenly. “I’m going to find her. She’s my mate. And this is my fault. I’m the one who led her to them.”

I gasped. “What? Why would you do that?”

“We went for a run and suddenly I *knew*. I knew the vampires were out there. And I had to find them. I couldn’t resist the instinct. I didn’t mean for Violet to follow, but she did.”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed on Charlie. “What do you mean *you knew*?”

“I only just found out, and I don't know much except that I'm from a family of vampire hunters,” Charlie said.

Xavier and Greyson looked at each other in obvious shock. For once, they seemed to be of the same mind, which unnerved me no end. *What the hell is going on? Vampire hunters?*

Greyson stepped into Charlie’s path and shoved him. Hard. There was a fire in his eyes I hadn’t seen. “You need to get out of the pack house. *Now*.”

**Episode 1036**

VIOLET

*What the… What happened?*

I lay on the cold ground, slowly returning to consciousness. My eyelids felt like they each weighed about ten tons, and my limbs felt like jelly. A desert had sprung up in my mouth, and I tried to swallow, but my body seemed reluctant to give up any of the fleeting bit of moisture it had left.

The ground beneath me was cold, and I’d come back into consciousness with the distinct sensation of something jabbing into my side. The scents around me were reminiscent of the forest around the pack house, but also not. Like something was slightly off.

I finally pried my eyes open, blinking slowly as my surroundings came into focus. Suddenly and horribly, all of those sensations were beginning to make a lot of sense. I was in the woods, naked, lying on my side on the cold, hard ground. The thing jabbing into my ribs was likely either a rock or a stick.

And oh god… My *everything* hurt. With a grimace and a wince, I tried to sit up, but found my hands bound behind my back, pulling my arms and shoulders into an angle that made white-hot pain jolt up my back with even the slightest movement.

*Who did this to me?*

I tried to move slowly, to avoid making any noises or giving my captors any sign that I was awake. I carefully craned my head to look up—and found Gregor, the kid vampire, and a couple of other bloodsuckers sitting nearby, their bodies turned toward me like they’d been watching me sleep.

*Congratulations*, I thought bitterly. *You undead bloodsuckers just found a way to become even creepier.*

It didn’t seem like they’d noticed I was awake just yet, and I hoped to keep that detail to myself for as long as possible. I had no idea where I was, or who might be looking for me, and I was laughably outmatched. The best thing I could do at this point was try to leverage every bit of information I had that they didn’t. There was no telling when it might come in handy. When that tiny tidbit of information might be the difference between life and death.

As it was, I could hear the vampires arguing about what they wanted to do with the “wolf bitch” they’d caught.

*Technically accurate, but still rude.*

“I say we kill her now,” the creepy-ass vampire child said. “I hate werewolves. They’re smelly, savage beasts. And their blood tastes all wrong. You can’t even keep one around for a snack. That bitch is useless—I say we cut her loose.”

*Smelly and savage? I’m not the undead monster who literally lives on the blood of humans and smells like death. What a hypocrite.*

“Percival,” Gregor sighed. His tone was long-suffering, the voice of someone who hated to explain things he felt were common sense and yet found himself in a position to do so anyway. “For someone as old as you are, you aren’t very smart, are you? Sure, we could kill this werewolf and it would provide us with some satisfaction, but wouldn’t it be far more gratifying to kill the whole pack?”

The boy—Percival, I guess he was called—frowned. “I suppose so. I do want to get that hunter back for what he did to Lucien.”

Gregor nodded. “That’s right. And in order to kill the whole pack, we need to keep her alive.” He jerked his head in my direction. “At least long enough to use her as bait and draw out the rest of her pack. Do you understand?”

Percival kicked at the ground, looking so much like an actual child that I did a double-take. “You think you’re so smart, don’t you?” he muttered.

Personally, I wasn’t a fan of either scenario—obviously, killing me would suck, but using me to lure the others to their deaths was almost worse. I *had* to escape before either of those plans could come to fruition. I wasn’t going to allow these bloodsuckers to use me against my pack, and I had a funny feeling that if Percival wanted it badly enough, he’d kill me without waiting for permission. I needed to get the hell out of here.

The question was *how*. I tugged at my hands again, but they were bound tight. And whatever the bonds were made of, they were strong. I could always try shifting, but if the material was somehow woven with silver—something I would not put past these vampires—it could seriously injure me. I wouldn’t be able to take even a single one of these vamps if I was fighting against silver poisoning at the same time.

Unfortunately, even that small bit of movement caught Percival’s attention. He scowled and pointed at me. “It’s awake.”

It*? Seriously? Come on!*

Despite the odds stacked against me, I tried to roll away but couldn’t do much more than drag myself awkwardly and slowly along the ground as Gregor and Percival approached.

The child, of course, was sucking on a blood-red lollipop. I could smell the metallic scent of blood. Jesus, was that… was that lollipop somehow made out of blood? I gagged.

Percival glared down at me. “Disgusting creature.”

Right. *I* was the disgusting one. He was just the sociopath eating a blood lollipop.

I really wished I had a free hand, just one. I’d squeeze his little neck until his smarmy little head popped like a pimple. The imagery put a smile on my face, and Percival scowled.

Gregor knelt down next to me. “We were just discussing what to do with you.”

Instinctively, I flinched back. I couldn’t stand the sight of him, or the deathly scent that washed over me. As pissed off as I was, and as disgusting as I found these vampires, the thought of them touching me sent chills down my spine.

*I wish Charlie were here. He’d fought so well during the Halloween fight. He’d dust these monsters in half a second.*

“Are you uncomfortable?” Gregor asked.

I didn’t say anything, just kept my eyes glued to the ground. I just about jumped out of my skin when I felt Gregor’s icy hands on my shoulders, pulling me up to sit upright against a tree.

“There you are.” He offered me a smile that didn’t look even remotely genuine.

“Why are you helping it?” Percival demanded.

“Because, unlike you, I have some manners.”

I hated to side with the vampire child, but I would have preferred for Gregor to have left me on the ground. I could still feel his hands on my bare skin, and the phantom sensation made me shudder.

The other vampires called Gregor and Percival over. Gregor left to join them immediately, while Percival hung around a bit longer. He leaned in and whispered, “I’m going to kill you myself.”

His sharp teeth bit down on the lollipop, and he tossed the stick at me. I cringed, shame heating my face as, laughing, he returned to the rest of the vampires.

I groped around behind me with my bound hands and met the rough bark of the tree. With nothing else left to do, I began to rub the bindings against the tree trunk. It only took a few minutes of that treatment—watching the vampires carefully to make sure they had no idea what I was up to—for the friction of the movement to rub my bare wrists raw.

I could live with the pain, and if I escaped, my wrists would heal very quickly. But I could just as easily poison myself if the bindings had silver in them. If I shifted, the lock might break. Or it might not.

I took a deep breath and tried to think around the panic churning in my gut, looking around for any means of escape.

And then I saw the lollipop stick on the ground beside me. I moved discreetly until I could grasp the end of it with my fingertips.

*Gross! It’s sticky!* I tried not to think about all the specific fluids that had *made* it sticky.

Slowly, I managed to insert one end of the stick into the locking mechanism. I paused when I noticed Percival staring at me with a smug little smile on his face. I swallowed roughly, and he turned back to the group. And then I started up again, moving the stick around in the locking mechanism.

Within seconds, I heard a *click*, and the lock popped open and fell to the ground behind me.

The group of vampires went still and deathly quiet, looking around and listening for the source of the sound. I played dumb, hoping they wouldn’t trace the noise back to me.

After a long, tense moment where I barely dared to breathe, the vampires returned to their chat and I slowly slipped my hands out of the bonds, one at a time.

I was free, but now how was I going to escape? My only option at this point was to try to slip quietly into the woods, shift, and run like hell. But I had to wait until the right time, when they wouldn’t notice me—or at least when I could get a head start.

Vampires were deadly fast. And if I screwed this up, they’d be on me in a flash. I had no illusions about how I’d fare alone against a nest of vampires.

If they caught me, it would all be over.

**Episode 1037**

ARTEMIS

I woke to the warm sensation of a body next to mine and rolled over to find Rishika snuggled up next to me. Apparently, this fierce werewolf warrior was a snuggler. Who would have thought? I sank back into my pillow, a soft smile pulling at my lips as I watched Rishika sleep. She hadn’t even noticed me come and go last night.

This closeness, the intimacy of sleeping next to someone, of trusting them not to stab or betray you during the night when you were at your most vulnerable… it was nice. Back in the Fae world, though I’d taken my fair share of partners, I’d never trusted any of them enough to let them sleep next to me—even those I’d been intimate with on several occasions. It just wasn’t done.

But here, with Rishika… I could get used to this. To say nothing of the actual sex. I recalled our time together the night before, and my smile widened into a grin.

*What a night*. *And what a woman.*

I felt energized. Revitalized. Ready to take on the world.

Rishika stirred a bit in her sleep, her mouth pouting out a bit, and I couldn’t stop myself from reaching out and running a finger across her full bottom lip. For someone as fierce and strong as Rishika was, she had the softest lips I’d ever felt. Like feathers, only better. I couldn’t wait to taste them again, to feel them… everywhere.

With that delicious thought simmering in my mind, I considered kissing Rishika awake, perhaps seeing if we could pick up where we’d left off last night. But that probably wasn’t the best approach. I should wait for her to wake—

Rishika jolted upright with a gasp, looking around wildly. She blinked rapidly, clearly trying to identify her surroundings. I scooted back to avoid crowding her, and held a hand out in front of me. “Good morning.”

Her gaze snapped over to me, and then all the tension left her body. “Oh.” She slumped back against her pillow. “Sorry, I’m not used to sharing a bed with someone. I forgot where I was.”

I gently reached out and squeezed her hand, careful to not initiate too much touching until she was ready. “Believe me, I understand.” One of the—apparently many—ways in which Rishika and I were similar was our tendency to lurch awake, ready to fight. I’d picked it up growing up in the Fae world, and that instinct had saved my life on more than one occasion. I wondered where Rishika had learned it. Maybe during her time as a Rogue.

“You wouldn’t believe the dream I had,” she said. “I was being chased by a sea monster.”

“Oh?” I perked up. “Not a troll?”

She laughed as I wiggled my eyebrows. Things with Rishika were so easy, it was honestly jarring to recall that I hadn’t known her all that long. “She was a kelpie I knew in the Fae world. She actually lived in the human world for a long time—even fell in love with a human.”

Rishika’s eyebrows lifted. “The more I hear about the Fae world, the more I want to see it for myself. Maybe someday we can go there together. You can be my tour guide.”

I smiled. “Maybe.”

Realistically, I would rather not bring my new dear friend back with me to the deadliest place I’d ever known. Rishika was strong and smart and capable, but she was still a *werewolf*, and the thought of anything happening to her—

Loud, deep voices echoed from downstairs, growing louder with each syllable. Whatever was happening down there, the situation was escalating.

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Sounds like Greyson and Xavier are at it again. We’d better see what’s going on.” She hopped up and looked back over her shoulder. “Thanks for the amazing night.” Then she winked and let herself out of my bedroom.

“Amazing”seemed like a bit of an understatement. It was rare for me to seek out a sexual partner for a repeat performance, if only because my life in the Fae world had kept me pretty nomadic. But in the back of my mind, I was already making plans for another night with Rishika.

*Cali has two werewolves, after all. What’s the harm in having one of my own? When at roam… Or however that stupid saying goes.*

While footsteps echoed on the staircase outside my bedroom, I stretched out across my mattress and checked the time. It was early—*really* early. And I’d had way more fun things on my mind last night than sleeping. I could just go back to sleep now, rest up and let the boys argue. Wasn’t that just part of their natural dynamic, anyway? Birds sang, fish swam, Xavier and Greyson constantly battled for dominance. Cali got upset whenever her two mates fought, but even I knew by now that it was so commonplace, it wasn’t exactly cause for alarm. And after how long Greyson had been gone, I was sure Xavier had gotten very comfortable with being able to strut around as top dog.

It had probably been a nasty surprise for him too, when Greyson had shown up last night. They just had to work off the shock and frustration, and things would settle back down. They always did.

Either way, none of it had anything to do with me, so what did I care?

I rolled over, burying my face in my pillow—just as the argument on the ground floor got even louder. I grabbed my pillow and pulled it down over my head, but it was no use. Gods, were they trying to shout each other to death down there? What the hell was going on?

Another set of feet pounded up the stairs. I recognized the cadence and weight of the steps. It was Rishika. Was she coming back for more?

Instead, her strong, low voice called out, “Pack meeting! Everyone downstairs—now!”

Well, *that* was unusual. Maybe the fight downstairs wasn’t so mundane after all.

“Does that include me?” I asked, batting my eyelashes. “I’m Fae after all.”

Rishika gave me a look. “Get your butt moving, Arty.”

I frowned, internally groaning. She winked at me. Then, I heard the patter of feet as the others left their rooms and headed downstairs to attend the meeting. Still, I lingered in the warmth and comfort of my bed. Was it appropriate for me to join them?

I wasn’t truly a member of the pack—more an indefinite visitor. Was I expected to attend or weigh in on things at these meetings? The concept was so foreign, I could barely wrap my head around it. Back in the Fae world, I’d been entirely on my own. There’d been no one to have my back, no one with whom I’d shared goals, and so there had never been any need for meetings.

But Cali *was* a member of this pack. And Cali was my younger sister. So I knew I should probably go see what all the commotion was about, at the very least.

I got up, pulled on some clothes, and opened my bedroom door, just in time to see Mrs. Smith and Big Mac hurry past, heading downstairs.

I stepped back into my bedroom, watching until they’d disappeared. Instantly, I forgot all about the meeting. My focus shifted to something else.

The Orb. Right there in the other room.

I poked my head out of my bedroom, scanning the hallway for any stragglers, and then glanced toward Big Mac’s room. It was in there. I could feel it, and this was my chance to take it.

I shut my door and quickly grabbed a few items, like my knapsack and my bow and quiver. Then I opened my door and paused to listen—a skill I’d honed to perfection over the years. I didn’t look it, and I didn’t really even act like it, but I knew the sound of stillness and the virtue of patience.

The hall was empty and the path was clear. On the floor below, I could hear the hum of voices, but I was confident that I was the only soul upstairs right now.

I held my breath, counted to thirty, and then cautiously and lightly stepped toward Big Mac’s room, opened the door, and slipped inside. I felt the orb’s energy as soon as I eased the door shut behind me. It was a dark, alluring force, like an invisible fog that filled the room.

*How in the world can Mrs. Smith and Big Mac sleep with that in here?*

I looked around, but as expected, the orb wasn’t immediately visible. Fortunately, I’d seen my fair share of strange objects in my life. I knew the orb was being hidden from me by Big Mac’s spell, and that all I had to do was concentrate. The force of the orb’s power would lead me to it—hopefully with enough time to take it and escape before the meeting reached its conclusion.

I felt a voice slither through my head. The orb. “*You’ve come for me?*”

“Show yourself,” I ordered, my voice no louder than a whisper. I had no idea whether it was speaking out loud to me or in my head.

“*You want to destroy me, Artemis.*”

“You can save your lies. I’m not like Cali. I’m not going to let you trick me.”

“*You’re different from your sister, aren’t you? You’re both Dark and Light. An interesting and rare combination. We could get along well.*”

“I doubt it. I’ve seen my share of false prophets. You’re just one more to deal with.”

“*Why don’t you give me a chance? Let me show you what I can do.*”

I paused for a moment. The orb *did* have great power. There were a lot of things—wonderful things—that I could do with it. And who better than I, a Fae who held the power of Light and Dark, to wield such power?

Suddenly, the orb appeared before me, sitting on an end table beneath the window.

Without wasting even a second, I took it.

**Episode 1038**

My mouth dropped open in shock as I stood there, unable to believe what I’d just heard. I watched as Greyson shoved Charlie, hard. With a thud, Charlie landed on the floor. He didn’t even try to get up.

“Wait… hang on… we’ve got… vampire hunters now?” I spluttered. “And Charlie has to leave?”

I looked toward Xavier, hoping to get some answers. He just stood there stiffly, jaw flexed. Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I shifted my gaze to Greyson, but he was also giving me the aloof treatment. I don’t know what I was expecting.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, still incredulous at the way everyone was acting.

Greyson sighed. “If Charlie is a vampire hunter, then he’s dangerous to the pack.”

That was news to me, and none of it helped my mounting confusion.

“Will somebody tell me what a vampire hunter is?” I called out, impatient for clear answers. These people were werewolves, sworn enemies of vampires. How was Charlie any different? “Aren’t you all vampire hunters, anyway?”

Xavier decided to answer me, this time. “They’re supernaturals who can track and kill vampires,” he said, avoiding my gaze.

Someone who could track and kill vampires? That sounded like the best news ever. We *needed* Charlie!

“That should be a good thing, right?” I argued, my brow furrowing in frustration. “I mean, we were just attacked by vampires. Can anyone explain why we *wouldn’t* want someone like Charlie to help us in this situation?”

“But it doesn’t stop with vampires,” Greyson said, his voice low. He shifted his attention to Charlie. “Hunters have been known to use their abilities against other supernaturals—including witches. And werewolves.” Greyson’s voice got harder as he glared venomously at Charlie. “And Fae.”

“Basically,” Xavier said, “they think of themselves as the protectors of humans from the supernatural world.”

*Oh.* I blinked rapidly, trying to process this new piece of information. Wow. Being born with the ability to kill any supernatural? That was… terrifying, in a way. So, I understood why Xavier and Greyson were on edge, but it wasn’t like Charlie was here to *hurt* us.

My body trembled with rising anger at how unfairly they were treating him. He’d never threatened or harmed any of us, and he deserved more than us suddenly turning on him and throwing him out.

“But you saw!” I exclaimed, quickly coming to Charlie’s defense. “He fought with us!” I narrowed my eyes at everyone in the room, pointing a finger at each one of them. “He risked his life for all of you,” I accused loudly, “and now you’re going to turn him away?”

I glanced at Charlie’s morose expression, his body slumped in defeat. My heart went out to the boy. Charlie didn’t deserve this, and neither did Violet. My eyes widened.

“And what about Violet?” I questioned. “He would never hurt Violet—they’re mates.”

My words seemed to move absolutely no one.

“With everything going on, why risk it?” Big Mac said, clearly agreeing with Greyson. “We don’t know anything about Charlie. What if he brings other hunters here?”

I felt my skin prickle as heat rushed to my cheeks. Were they really serious about this? Charlie was part of our pack—he was one of us! I straightened, opening my mouth to argue.

“They’re right,” Charlie said softly, before I could get a word in. “I should go.”

He sounded so utterly defeated, it just made me that much more hurt on his behalf. “Why?” I seethed. “You don’t have to listen to them.”

“Actually,” Xavier growled, “he does.”

I ignored him, pack hierarchy be damned. Right now I was asking a person fearful for his mate’s life what he needed. If we couldn’t look out for our most vulnerable pack mates, then what good were we as a pack at all?

Charlie shook his head. “I only just learned that I’m a hunter,” he told me. “I don’t really know what I’m even capable of.”

Even more of a reason to keep him with us.

“And what if they’re right?” Charlie asked, the pain evident in his voice. “What if I turn against the pack? Against Violet?”

Without waiting for a response, Charlie slowly rose to his feet under the watchful gaze of Greyson and Xavier. He moved toward the door, ready to leave.

“No,” I commanded, stopping Charlie in his tracks. “I won’t allow this.”

I turned on Greyson.

“What about Maren?” I demanded, letting venom seep into my voice. “She’s Dark Fae, yet you invited her in.”

Audible gasps filled the room as people stared at Greyson with a mixture of shock and fear. Xavier swiveled to look at Greyson, his brows lifting in surprise. Greyson merely narrowed his eyes at me, ignoring everyone else.

“How did you know that?” Greyson asked, his voice low.

I forced myself not to cower at his tone. I jutted my chin out, refusing to break eye contact with him.

“Artemis told me,” I responded simply.

Xavier stalked toward Greyson, his eyes ablaze. Well, it seemed someone sure didn’t like being kept in the dark.

“You might have mentioned that,” Xavier gritted out between bared teeth.

Greyson turned away from me to face Xavier, shooting him a glare. “There are reasons why I brought her here,” Greyson stated evenly. “They don’t concern you.” Greyson pivoted, making eye contact with everyone in the room. “Or anyone else,” he added, with a small growl at the end.

I swallowed roughly as tears pricked at my eyes. I let my hair fall in front of my face as I discretely wiped the tears away. I took a deep breath, trying to rein in my emotions. Maybe I shouldn’t have used Maren against Greyson in that moment, but desperation was clouding any better judgement I might have had.

It was obvious that Greyson didn’t like people questioning Maren’s presence here. It was obvious how much he cared. Bitterness tainted my tongue. If Maren really wasn’t important to Greyson, he wouldn’t have brought her here in the first place.

An image of Maren’s boy—Fenrir—flashed through my mind, his familiar grey eyes staining my thoughts. Fenrir looked so much like Greyson, it was almost painful to look at him…

*Of course.* I sucked in a breath as understanding dawned on me. If Greyson was Fenrir’s father, then that would explain why he’d brought them to the pack house.

Greyson finally made eye contact with me. I fell silent, too caught up in my thoughts to say anything else.

“Then it’s decided,” Greyson announced, satisfied that I wasn’t going to intervene. “Charlie has to go.”

Xavier bristled at that.

“You’re deciding?” Xavier spat out, laughing humorlessly. “I’ve been Alpha while you’ve been roaming the world in search of whatever the fuck—”

“You’ve been *acting* Alpha,” Greyson interrupted, correcting him with a smirk. “And now I’m back, and the show is over .”

“And how long will you be staying this time?” Xavier challenged, unwilling to let go of the conversation. “You sure have a habit of disappearing.”

Greyson’s face clouded over at the accusation. He took a careful step forward, placing himself right in front of Xavier. “I’m here, now,” Greyson growled menacingly. “And I’m still the Alpha. You *will* listen to me.”

Xavier bared his teeth at Greyson. “I will not listen to an Alpha who abandons his pack,” Xavier hissed, his eyes dark with barely contained anger. The entire room was thick with tension as everyone braced for what was looking like an inevitable brawl.

Oh, that was it. I was so frustrated at how childish they were acting. Right now, we had so many important things to deal with, but these two wanted to have a little pissing contest.

I stomped over to them, grabbing both of their arms and wrenching them apart. They both turned to face me, blinking in surprise.

“Why are you both arguing about this now?” I scolded. Ignoring Greyson, I focused on Xavier. “And *you*,” I said, my voice hard. “Why are you going out of your way to provoke Greyson? Is this all because of me? Or is it about something else?”

I stepped away from them, not bothering to wait for their excuses. I knew they—*Xavier*—would never tell me the whole truth, anyway. At this point, I just didn’t want to deal with either of them.

I made my way over to Charlie, grasping his hand gently and leaning in close.

“Look,” I murmured, my back toward everyone else. “I don’t know what’s going on right now, but don’t worry. You don’t have to leave.”

Charlie looked at me sadly, shaking his head, clearly unconvinced by my words.

“I have to go,” he whispered back fiercely. “I have to look for Violet. She’s in danger.”

“We’ll look for Violet together,” I replied. “But you need to understand that—”

Charlie squeezed my hand tightly, cutting me off. “I understand that no one in the pack will trust me now,” he interrupted. “I don’t belong here, anyway.”

God, I felt so bad for him. He was so young, but he already felt so alone.

A prickle of anger ran through me. It wasn’t like our pack was doing anything to make him feel welcome, I thought scathingly, throwing a dark look over my shoulder at Greyson and Xavier.

I turned back to Charlie.

“I know what it’s like to feel like you don’t belong,” I confessed, giving him a soft smile. “But this is my pack, too. And if Greyson and Xavier don’t understand, then… well… then *screw* them.”

I didn’t have much time to feel elated by my sudden outburst when there was a loud scrambling sound by the front door. Rogues? Vampires, again? A snarl and a short howl sent everyone on high alert. I twisted around just in time to see Violet—in wolf form—rush into the house. Once she was inside, she shifted back into human form, collapsing to the floor. She was all dirty, covered in twigs and leaves.

Violet lifted her head up, the tiredness in her face indicating she’d run a really long way.

She was about to speak when I noticed a blur of movement come through the open door.

I watched in horror, the scream trapped in my throat, as that kid vampire appeared out of nowhere and lunged for Violet, fangs bared.

**Episode 1039**

GREYSON

The gasps and shouts behind me startled me out of my argument with Xavier as Violet’s wolf came running toward the house.

I jerked away from Xavier, turning on my heel just in time to see Violet scrambling onto the porch, shifting back to human. As soon as she did, the creepy child vampire lunged for her exposed neck.

*No.* Nobody was going to hurt my pack—not on my watch.

Growling, I bent over, about to leap into action. But before I could do anything, the vampire was suddenly knocked backward, as if shoved by some invisible force.

Well, it looked like Big Mac’s spell still worked.

There was a blur of movement beside me as Charlie moved past Big Mac, his eyes dark with killer focus. Before anyone could stop him, Charlie slammed into the vampire, knocking him down onto the ground outside.

I quickly realized that there was no need for me to intervene.

With a screech, the vampire leapt up, swiping at Charlie with his nails. Charlie expertly ducked, grabbing the vampire by the waist and throwing it over his shoulders. The vampire quickly got up, climbing onto Charlie’s back, his fangs at the ready. Charlie swung around, throwing the vampire off-balance.

I winced slightly as the vampire dug his fingers into Charlie’s skin, trying to hold on.

Without hesitation, Charlie bent down and picked up a rake handle that was lying on the ground. Using the sharpened side of the rake, Charlie stabbed the vampire in the neck. *All right, kid’s got some bite to him.* Enraged, the vampire released one hand from Charlie’s skin, trying to claw the rake out of his body.

Taking advantage of this moment, Charlie flopped onto his back, trapping the vampire underneath him and the ground. In a flash, Charlie twisted around, using his momentum to break the rake’s handle in half.

Squeezing his legs together to lock the vampire in place, Charlie raised his makeshift stake high in the air.

I—along with the others—watched in astonishment as Charlie, the mild-mannered kid from Minnesota, brought the broken rake handle down and shoved it into the vampire’s chest, finishing it off.

Slowly, rake still in hand, Charlie looked up, as if in a daze. For a moment, there was no sound except for Charlie’s heavy breathing.

“Are you okay?” Violet asked worriedly, rushing to him, her arms outstretched.

That seemed to snap everyone out of their trance. Immediately, Rishika broke into a round of applause, with others tentatively joining in.

“What an awesome finish!” Rishika praised Charlie, impressed.

I felt the pressure of Cali’s gaze shift from Charlie to me, as if to say: “Did you see what Charlie just did?”

I sighed inwardly, already knowing what the others were probably thinking. I could see how Charlie’s actions might have won all of them over, but I wasn’t convinced. The kid was a fighter, no doubt about that, but I just saw a normally quiet kid turn killer without a moment’s hesitation. That was exactly what worried me. Sure, today it was to our advantage, but what happened tomorrow? What if his hunter nature took over and wiped us out next? A hunter was too unpredictable. The risk too great.

Ignoring the weight of Cali’s gaze, I turned to Xavier.

“We’re not done,” I said.

Xavier met my gaze, unflinching. “Far from it, brother,” he said darkly.

Before we could continue, movement at the bottom of the staircase caught our attention. It was Maren. She was holding a still-groggy Fenrir in her arms, and he was rubbing his sleepy eyes.

Annoyance filled me up at the sight of her, quickly followed by a pang of guilt… which only aggravated me further.

“Didn’t I tell you to wait for me?” I asked Maren, irked. This was probably the worst time for her to make an appearance.

Everyone turned to stare at Maren, realizing she was here. Maren, uncomfortable, shifted on her feet, doing her best to avoid everyone’s eyes.

“Fenrir’s hungry,” she said quietly. “And I heard what sounded like a fight.” Maren looked around warily, slight concern etched onto her face. “Is everything okay?”

No one else was going to answer her, and I wanted to get her out from under everyone’s stares as quickly as possible, but that wasn’t going to happen. Sighing, I realized now was as good a time as any to introduce the pack to Maren. Stiffly, I turned toward everyone in the room.

“Everyone,” I announced, “this is Maren. Maren, this is my pack. The Redwood pack.”

Silence. No one seemed inclined to say anything. *Hell of a greeting, everyone, thanks so much for making this as painless as possible.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Mrs. Smith looking between Fenrir and me, her eyes bright and thoughtful. Immediately, I knew what she was thinking. I mean, I’d thought the same thing when I’d first laid eyes on Fenrir—the resemblance between him and me was uncanny, to say the least. I knew I should probably correct her at some point, but now wasn’t the time. Not with everyone else here.

To my relief, Mrs. Smith decided to speak up, breaking the painful silence.

“I can make breakfast for Fenrir,” she offered, her voice hesitant. “Does he… Does Fenrir like pancakes?”

“Thank you,” Maren responded, following Mrs. Smith into the kitchen.

The moment Maren left the room, everyone dispersed. Xavier headed over to Charlie, interrogating him with endless questions.

With Xavier taking care of Charlie, I could finally focus on what was important.

I turned to Cali, attempting to mind link with her in order to apologize and to tell her we needed to talk.

But before I could, Cali met my gaze, blocking my mind link and leaving without a word. I took an involuntary step back, hit by the pain and sadness in Cali’s eyes. We really needed to talk.

I looked back, checking in on Maren and Fenrir. Fenrir was sitting on a chair, humming happily as he waited for his breakfast. Maren was sitting beside him, smiling softly as she and Mrs. Smith talked. Satisfied that Maren and Fenrir were in good hands, I went after Cali.

I made my way outside, finding Cali sitting alone on the back porch. When I stepped out, making my footsteps purposefully loud, she didn’t even bother looking up. I stood there for a moment, taking her in. She was hunched over, her knees pressed against her chest. Her chin was resting on her knees as she gazed outward. The sun bathed her in a warm, golden glow. Even in this moment, she was beautiful.

“Cali?” I called out softly.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Cali said quietly. “You should have.”

“I know,” I admitted. “But how could I have predicted I’d ever see Maren again?”

At Maren’s name, Cali turned her head toward me, making eye contact. “Is Fenrir your son?” she asked, her voice cracking on the last word.

I swallowed hard, noting the hurt in her eyes. God, the last thing I wanted to be responsible for was hurting her.

“Fenrir’s not my son,” I said, hoping the truth would ease some of her pain.

Cali turned away, her hair becoming a curtain, closing her off from me. She fell quiet.

Sighing, I knelt beside her, staring straight ahead.

“What happened between Maren and me ended long before I met you, Cali,” I explained gently. I needed her to understand that Maren wasn’t anything important—not compared to Cali.

“Yet here she is,” she bit out, turning to face me. Her arms fell to her sides. Suddenly, her voice turned hard, her mouth forming a flat line as her eyes flashed with anger. “You show up unannounced with your ex-girlfriend and expect what? Me to welcome you both with open arms?”

“She needed help, Cali,” I told her. With a soft smile, I thought about Cali’s helpful nature. “You’re always risking yourself to help others,” I pressed. “Wouldn’t you expect me to do the same?”

“I don’t know what to expect from you anymore,” she said bitterly. She leaned forward, her cheeks flushing as her voice trembled with rage. “You just left me. You didn’t give me any kind of option.” Her breathing was now ragged. “You took my choice away!” she yelled. “Do you really even *want* me to choose Xavier?”

“I was just trying to protect you,” I said, pained.

“I didn’t need protecting,” she seethed, her eyes tearing up. “I needed you, and you *left* me. How can I choose you if you’re not here?”

Time seemed to freeze as I stared at Cali, replaying what she’d just said over and over in my mind.

“Are you saying,” I said, my voice quavering with hope, “that I was going to be your choice?”

“Maybe you were,” Cali said. “But now I can’t choose anyone.”

I felt my heart swell at this, and a small smile played across my lips. Cali would have chosen me. I’d never even dreamed that that could be possible, and yet here we were. I never got the things I wanted, but Cali was right here, saying she would have chosen *me.*

I was yanked back into the moment when I heard Xavier growl.

He was staring intensely at Cali. “You would have done *what?*”

**Episode 1040**

Oh, this was the last thing we needed.

I scrambled to my feet as Xavier stalked closer to Greyson and me. Greyson followed suit, smoothly straightening to his full height, never letting his eyes leave Xavier’s. I wedged myself between them and turned to face Xavier, determined to not let this get out of hand like every other misunderstanding.

“Don’t put words in my mouth,” I said, glaring at him.

“But I heard—”

“It was all hypothetical,” I interrupted, my voice hard, not giving Xavier a chance to argue.

He quieted down, watching me. Pressing my palms to my eyes, I took a deep breath, trying to keep the tears at bay. I was just so *tired* of this. They knew the awful situation I was in. They knew how hard this was for me, having to *choose* between the two people I loved the most, while potentially dooming one of them to his *death*.

So, why the hell did they have to make this harder for me? Having the two of them constantly at each other’s throats, trying to force me to choose, was killing me. What they were doing wasn’t fair. If anything, it was cruel.

Red-hot rage spiked through me.

Between Greyson’s sudden return, Maren’s and Fenrir’s unannounced appearance, Lola, Charlie and Violet, the vampire… and now this? It was all too much. I could barely breathe.

My fingers trembled as I lowered my hands and curled them into fists. How much more could I handle? How much more did these two expect me to fucking take?

Little pinpricks of pain spiked as I dug my nails into my skin.

“I’m not going to choose one of you and condemn the other to death,” I snapped through gritted teeth. “So stop trying to force me!” Then it hit me. “Unless that’s what you both *want?*” I lifted my head slowly, looking them both in the eye, and let out a humorless laugh. “One brother can get rid of the other,” I muttered darkly. “Without having to do anything but let me choose.”

Neither Greyson nor Xavier said anything.

I swiveled my head, pinning Xavier with a glare.

“Is that what you want, Xavier?” I spat out, my voice rising in volume as all my hurt and frustration and anger and pain came flooding out. “To have me kill Greyson for you?”

I pivoted and stepped toward Greyson, jabbing an accusatory finger into his chest.

“And you, Greyson,” I continued. “Do you want me to kill Xavier? Would that make you happy?”

I must have sounded hysterical, but I could feel my patience unraveling. My breath hitched in my throat. My lungs felt tight, my chest ached. I had to get out of here. Away from them. I stepped back from between the two.

“Why don’t you save me the trouble,” I cried, gesturing between them, “and kill each other right now?”

I whirled around and stormed back inside, the hot, angry tears finally streaming down my face. My entire face felt hot as my words kept replaying in my head: *kill each other right now, kill each other right now, kill each other…*

I stopped by the staircase and grasped the banister, bending over to take a moment to breathe. Part of me hoped that they *would* kill each other. It would honestly save me a whole lot of pain and trouble.

Immediately after that thought, worry gnawed at my stomach. What if they actually did? I could barely handle the thought of losing either of them. How would I be able to deal with losing both?

I rubbed aggressively at my eyes. How much more of this could I take? I’d hoped that breaking the Halloween deadline would make things easier, but instead, it felt like everything had gotten worse.

I blew out a breath, straightening. I finally understood why Cassandra had decided to jump to her death, rather than just choose. It had been out of desperation—desperation to end a horrific situation that had no happy endings. Poor Cassandra. Was I destined for the same fate as her?

The sound of footsteps brought me out of my spiraling thoughts. I looked up to see Lola coming down the stairs, looking a little better than she had last night. Even her steps were a little lighter, the under-eye circles slightly less pronounced.

Lola froze in her tracks, looking me over. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks,” I said, my voice flat. “Everything sucks.”

Lola gestured up the stairs. “My room, now.”

Reluctantly, I let go of the banister and followed Lola to her room, dragging my feet the entire way. Once I stepped inside, Lola closed the door behind me and gave me an expectant look. The look that clearly said “I’m your best friend, so spill.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I informed Lola. “But I do want to know how you’re feeling.”

Sighing, Lola sat down on her bed. I made my way over to join her.

“It’s weird,” Lola confessed, her voice soft but resigned. “I can’t feel my wolf. I mean, I couldn’t always feel it before, and the potions helped with that, but this is different.” Lola chewed on her lips, looking down at her hands, which trembled slightly. “Between that spell and the run-in with the vampires… It’s a lot.”

I nodded, completely understanding the feeling. Lola stilled her hands and looked up at me with pained eyes.

“Yesterday I was a werewolf,” she said, her voice getting louder. “Last night, I became a human. And now I might be a vampire? Like, what the *fuck?*”

I slid a hand across Lola’s back, until I was grasping her shoulder. I squeezed it, tugging her closer to me.

“That’s a lot to deal with,” I admitted. “But I want you to know that I’m always here for you, Lola. You know that, right?”

Lola nodded silently as I wrapped her in a hug. Suddenly, I felt a feather-light touch against my neck. I pulled back, watching as Lola’s hand fell from my neck. I looked at Lola for an explanation, but instead found her staring at my neck longingly.

“Um, why are you staring at my neck?” I asked, a little alarmed at her sudden interest.

Lola shrugged, lifting her eyes to mine. “Just wondering what it would be like to crave blood,” she stated matter-of-factly.

I leaned away slightly, a bit weirded out. “*My* blood?”

Lola pouted at me. “At least I know you,” she reminded me, her voice light as her eyes lit up in amusement. “You wouldn’t want my first turn at the old jugular tap to be with a perfect stranger, would you?”

Seeing my bewildered expression, Lola let out a laugh. I relaxed slightly at the sound and cracked a smile, realizing that she was kidding—I hoped.

Once Lola quieted down, I asked, “So, how is Jay handling things?”

“He’s being super chill,” she admitted, a soft smile playing across her lips. “Always checking on me. He’s the best, truly.”

All of a sudden, Lola frowned, her shoulders curving inward, as if weighed down by something.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s just…” she said. “I have no idea how he’d be if I were to actually become a vampire.”

“Edward and Bella.”

Lola lifted a brow at me, clearly confused. “Huh?”

“You know, just saying that stranger love stories have worked out.”

Lola chuckled. “I suppose,” she said softly. After a beat of silence, Lola straightened, changing the subject. “I heard a lot of arguing earlier,” she said. “Anything up with the pack that I should know about?”

I sighed, then launched into a quick explanation about Charlie and Violet and the vampire. Since I was already talking, I decided to also bring her up to speed about what had happened with Greyson and Xavier—about their argument, and the way I’d stormed out.

The entire time, Lola sat there patiently, letting me unload the past couple of hours onto her. By the time I’d finished updating her, I was tearing up again.

“That sucks,” Lola admitted.

“It’s not fair.” I sniffled. “After everything we’ve been through, we’re still mates… But I’ve never really been able to *enjoy* being a mate. Hell, none of us have ever really been able to even *act* like mates.”

Lola hummed in agreement. “Well,” she said gently. “What would you do differently if you could?”

I paused to think, my sniffles filling the room. “If I could do things differently,” I said slowly, “I would want to do all the things that normal couples do. Go on dates, spend time together—just without all the drama.”

“Like *The Bachelorette*?” Lola offered.

“Isn’t that all about the drama?”

Lola laughed. “Maybe you should all audition for it.”

I frowned. “That wouldn’t solve my problem.”

“What would solve it?” Lola asked.

I immediately knew the answer. “If I could at least break the death part of the curse—”

“But then who would you choose?” Lola interrupted.

That was the question I was so desperate to avoid. I thought about Xavier, about how protective he always was, how much he cared and fought for the people he loved. Xavier was my warrior wolf. Just as fierce, but still so different from his brother—from Greyson. Greyson, who was always so kind, and who was one of the few people who made me feel seen. They both played such distinct, but important, roles in my life. It was like asking me to choose between my right and left eye: I would be fine with either, but I was at my best with both.

“I… I don’t know,” I responded, my eyes wide. It was true, I didn’t know which one I needed—which one I loved—more. I shook my head. “Great, we’re back to square one.”

Lola suddenly brightened, grabbing my arm out of nowhere. “Why not be the Bachelorette?”

“You’re joking, right? Say psych.”

I looked at Lola like she was crazy, but she just smiled wider.

“Have both Xavier and Greyson agree to date you,” she explained excitedly. “It’s foolproof!”

*Oh my god*. I leaned back on my arms and lifted my face to the ceiling. Could I actually do that?

**Episode 1041**

CHARLIE

The pack left the room and I felt a weight release from my chest. Hopefully I’d managed to convince them all that I wasn’t a stone cold killer out to get them. Because I certainly didn’t feel like one.

I released a breath and turned around, coming face to face with Violet. She was no longer covered in twigs, and was now fully clothed. I hadn’t even noticed her slip away to get cleaned up.

A soft smile filled my face immediately at the sight of her. God, it felt so good to see her again, to see her *safe*.

Violet reached out, gently taking my hand. She looked up at me, smiling, her eyes bright and crinkled with tender joy.

I couldn’t be more grateful to have her at my side, even though Greyson and Xavier’s words were still echoing around in my head. I knew I had to leave the pack for everyone’s own good, but how was I going to leave *her*?

Violet silently tugged on my arm, urging me to follow her outside. Without a word to the others—who were all watching on with curious faces—Violet and I slipped away and headed toward the lake.

As we made our way down, I couldn’t help but feel grateful that we’d managed to escape the pack’s prying eyes. I knew they all had so many questions, but there wasn’t much I could tell them. I barely knew what had happened myself. All I knew was that when I’d seen the vampire, it was like a switch had been flipped—I’d honestly been running on instincts I hadn’t even known I possessed.

While a part of me was proud of what I’d done—I mean, I’d just taken down a whole freaking vampire!—I’d only be lying to myself if I didn’t admit that I felt a little rattled by it all. I’d attacked that vampire and killed it *without even thinking*. What if that happened again, but with someone from the pack? Or worse, what if I attacked…

“Are you okay?”

Violet’s soft voice pulled me from my thoughts. We were now in front of the lake, its deep blue waters forming gentle waves on the surface as the cool autumn breeze passed by. I glanced down at Violet, who was seated on a rock. She was looking up at me, her brow furrowed in concern as she waited for me to join her.

I waved away her question. “I’m more worried about you,” I said, taking a seat next to her. I peered closely at her face, searching for any cuts or bruises. “Did the vampires hurt you?”

I hated how I’d failed to find her when she’d needed me most. What kind of mate was I if I couldn’t even protect her? She must have seen my guilt written on my face as she gave me a small smile.

“I’m fine,” Violet assured me, her eyes wide and earnest. She held out her arms in front of her and rotated them for me to see. “See? Not even a scratch.” She retracted her arms, resting them on her lap. She gave me a small smile. “I’m all good,” she said. “I promise.”

I gave her a nod and leaned back slightly. “I’m glad.” I tipped my head back, closing my eyes briefly, as I took in a deep breath. My voice went a little shaky as thoughts of losing Violet plagued my mind. “I would never be able to forgive myself if anything happened to you.”

My eyes popped open when I felt a hand press delicately against my face. Violet started stroking my cheek with her thumb. I lifted my hand and held her wrist in place, leaning into her touch.

Smiling, she leaned in and pressed a tender kiss against my lips. It was over way too soon; I didn’t want her to pull away just yet.

“I didn’t think for a second that you wouldn’t have tried to save me,” Violet said, her voice light. She gave me another quick kiss. “And you did. You took care of Percival so quickly, it was amazing.”

I released my hold on Violet, gently breaking away from her touch. Her encouragement still managed to fall flat. “I know,” I said, but I could tell she knew I didn’t really.

Violet looked at me carefully, folding her arms. She chewed on her lip thoughtfully as she took me in. “Then why aren’t you acting like it?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

I opened my mouth to answer her, then paused. Should I really tell her?

Violet arched a brow, waiting.

“They… They think I’m a threat to the pack,” I admitted, wincing as the truth of those words hit me. “They think I’m a threat to you.”

Violet stared at me for a moment, then laughed.

I looked at her, confused. How was any of this funny?

“Is that some kind of joke?” she asked, incredulous.

I shook my head. “I wish it were.”

Violet gaped at me, unbelieving. “I don’t understand,” she said, her voice breathy. “We’re mates. You would never—you *could* never hurt me.”

I remained silent, grimacing as I thought about what my parents had told me. About how they—we—hunted monsters.

*Monsters like you, like me.*

The word kept replaying in my head, making me feel sick to my stomach. If my parents ever got a hold of the pack, got a hold of Violet… I didn’t want to think about it.

I twisted to look at Violet, so open and vulnerable. I knew she could hold her own, but I also knew what had happened back there with the vampire. I’d taken care of it like it was nothing. So what if I did the same to Violet?

My mouth went dry as horrifying images filled my mind. Was I going to turn on my own mate? Should I warn her?

Violet blinked at me. “You don’t really believe them, do you?” she asked, stringing her words together slowly.

“I wish I could brush it off,” I responded. “But the truth is, I could be a threat.”

Violet cocked her head, her face twisted in confusion. “What do you mean?” she asked.

I launched into a lengthy explanation, telling her exactly what my parents had told me about us being hunters. I told her about my family history, about how my parents had hidden that life from me until recently, and how they hated the supernatural world.

“And when I went after Percival,” I finished, “it was like I was on autopilot.”

“But Percival was a vampire,” Violet insisted.

“I know,” I said, my voice becoming harsher. “But what if that same force—intuition, whatever you want to call it—takes over again? Only this time, it’s directed at you?”

I raked my hands roughly through my hair, frustration mounting. I freaking *hated* the thought of hurting Violet. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I ever… God, it was too painful to even think about.

“What if I can’t control it?” I confessed, my voice dropping to a whisper.

Violet pursed her lips, thinking it over. “You will,” she said simply, her voice steady and sure. She edged closer to me, taking my hands and looking intently into my eyes. “Because we’re mates. We love each other—and love is the strongest emotion in the world.”

“Wait, you *love* me?” I couldn’t contain my grin. It was the first time she’d said it.

She blushed deeply. “Yes, of course I do, Charlie.”

Suddenly, all of the tension and fear and stress dissipated. Violet was right. The love I had for her was immense—stronger than any hunter intuition or force. I would never hurt her. She was just too important to me.

I quickly wrapped Violet in a hug.

“Right now, I’m the luckiest man in the world,” I murmured into Violet’s hair.

I felt Violet smile against my shoulder. “And I’m the luckiest woman in the world,” she said, chuckling lightly.

I stood up, bringing Violet along with me. In one smooth motion, I pressed her against a nearby tree and claimed her lips with mine. Without hesitation, Violet melted into me, her hands tangling in my hair.

I let out a small moan as I tightened my grip on Violet’s waist.

I’d been an idiot to try and run away from her. What I felt for her was too strong to resist—and I wasn’t going to resist it ever again.

I lowered my hands down her back until I was cupping her ass. With a grunt, I lifted her, pinning her between myself and the tree, immediately peppering kisses down her chin and neck. Violet wrapped her legs around me, giggling slightly.

I found her lips once more, opening her mouth to mine with my tongue. I felt Violet run her hands along my back and my muscles, making me shiver in pleasure. She slowly slid down, until her feet touched the ground again, and moved her hands down to my thighs.

I twitched in anticipation, eager for her touch. And then all of a sudden, we both felt a vibration against our skin, startling us. It was my phone.

Smiling coyly, Violet reached into my pocket and pulled it out.

Running my fingers down Violet’s breasts and waist, I breathed, “Whoever it is, let them leave a message.”

Violet gasped, arching against me at my touch. “I’m all too happy to ignore it,” she whispered, breathless, as she slipped my phone back into my pocket.

Smiling wolfishly, I wrapped my arms around Violet, pulling her toward me. I was eager to pick up where we’d left off, but then my phone buzzed loudly again.

Groaning, I grabbed it and opened up the text notification.

I instantly straightened, stepping away from Violet.

“What’s wrong?” Violet asked, concern etched into her face.

“It’s my parents,” I said shakily. “They’re in Portland, and they want me to come immediately.”

**Episode 1042**

XAVIER

Cali disappeared back into the house, leaving my brother and me alone on the windswept porch.

I flexed my fingers, grinding my teeth together as I tried to resist the urge to go after her. It was clear Cali was upset—and I hated seeing her like that—but, unfortunately, I had to deal with Greyson first.

I felt my jaw twitch as I turned to look at him. Greyson slid his gaze to mine, regarding me with cool indifference. A sudden burst of red-hot anger swept through me as I stared at his face. Greyson was now a reminder of Cali’s words—of how she would’ve chosen *him* over me.

“Cali was right about one thing,” I spat out, lacing my words with cruel fury. “I do wish you were dead. It would make things so much easier.”

Greyson stalked forward, getting in my face. I looked into his grey eyes, which were dark and stormy with ice-cold anger.

“In case you’ve forgotten,” Greyson ground out, his voice low and hard, “you had your chance to kill me at the Lupo Finale.” He leaned in closer, his lip curling slightly. “And you *failed*.”

I pushed Greyson away, not falling for his bait. I would have killed him if I hadn’t been poisoned. There was no doubt about that.

“Why are you really here?” I growled, ignoring his jab. “I want to know the truth.”

Greyson rolled his eyes, huffing out a breath. He leaned against the railing. “I told you,” he grunted, clearly exasperated by how often I asked this question. “This is *my* pack, I’m the *Alpha*, and I brought Maren and Fenrir here to offer them protection.”

“From what?” I demanded.

“Maren got involved with some dangerous people, and I helped her out,” Greyson hedged, breaking eye contact with me. He surveyed our surroundings, not bothering to elaborate on his vague answer.

I narrowed my eyes at him, finding that answer difficult to swallow. Greyson didn’t just go out and *help* people.

“Since when do you go out of your way to help a Dark Fae?” I demanded. He was hiding something from me, and the rest of the pack—I just knew it. “What’s so special about her?”

Greyson’s eyes flitted to mine as his gaze went hard and guarded. “That doesn’t concern you,” he bit out, his words clipped and short.

It was clear that he wasn’t going to say anything else about Maren and her child, but I knew there was more between those two than met the eye. Looked like I’d just have to watch them very closely, since Greyson wasn’t going to provide me with answers or information anytime soon.

“Are you actually planning on sticking around this time?” I mused, changing the subject.

“That’s the plan.”

Like hell it was. The longer he stuck around, the worse it was going to be for Cali and me. So how could I get the wolf to leave?

Greyson had been back for less than a day, and he’d already caused more than enough trouble for Cali. If this was any indication of what lay ahead—especially since it really did seem like he intended to stay—then it was obvious what I had to do.

The Redwood pack didn’t benefit from having Greyson as Alpha.

I felt resolve strengthen my core as the events of the past twenty-four hours cemented what I had been thinking. I needed to take the Alpha position away from Greyson.

With mutinous thoughts echoing around my brain I almost didn’t notice when the door opened and Fenrir ran out of the house, arms flailing. His eyes were bright, and a smile lit up his entire face. As he passed by me, in the light of day, I was suddenly hit by the striking resemblance between Fenrir and Greyson. The same grey eyes, the same blond hair…

I opened my mouth to question it, but then Maren stepped onto the back porch, breathing heavily.

“Fenrir!” she called out, resting her hands on her hips. “Stop right there!”

But Fenrir didn’t listen, just kept on running forward, toward the lake. Realizing where he was heading, Maren hurried after him, her eyes wide as she bellowed out his name.

Greyson glanced at me once, pinning me with a look, before following after them.

I watched as Maren finally caught up to Fenrir and scooped him up, scolding him lightly. When she was done with her reprimanding, she gave Fenrir a kiss on the forehead, turning toward Greyson with a smile.

From here, they truly looked like the perfect family, out for a day at the lake.

Creeping suspicion built inside of me. I didn’t think Maren was just someone Greyson had decided to help. No. I had a feeling that Maren was more than Greyson’s “friend”. And if I could see that, then I had no doubt that Cali could see it too.

And if that wasn’t enough for Cali to understand that I was her true mate, then nothing else ever would be. All I had to do was relax, step back, and let Greyson’s secrets unravel until they ruined whatever he and Cali had.

I continued to observe Greyson, Maren, and Fenrir when an idea flashed through my mind, causing a slow smile to spread across my face.

Of course, it wouldn’t hurt to make sure Cali saw this little picturesque family moment taking place in the yard. It sure would speed up the whole process of her realizing how she and I were meant to be—and how Greyson was too preoccupied with this newcomer.

I decided to head back inside to find her.

I made my way inside and searched the ground floor—the kitchen, the living room, the front porch—but Cali was nowhere to be seen.

I continued my search upstairs, peeking into various rooms. As I made my way down the hallway, I picked up on Cali’s voice and followed it, ultimately finding her in Lola’s bedroom.

I swung the door open without knocking. As soon as I entered Lola’s room, Cali and Lola’s conversation stopped in its tracks.

I couldn’t help the smirk that appeared on my face. They’d probably been talking about me.

Before I could say anything, Cali piped up.

“I need to talk to you,” she said quickly.

*Perfect.* I schooled my features into a serious expression and nodded. “I want to talk to you, too,” I said. I gestured to the hallway, silently asking if we could talk elsewhere.

Cali nodded.

I looked at Lola. I knew the past couple of days had been tough on her.

“How are you?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” Lola answered. *Touchy*. All right, far be it for me to pry into the well-being of my mate’s closest friend.

As Cali gathered herself and got up, I thought about which room would be the best to show off the view Greyson, Maren, and Fenrir, together in the yard. I remembered that my room had a direct view of the back of the house, all the way to the lake. If I brought Cali to my room, then she would be able to see them clearly from the window.

Cali stood in front of me, waiting for me to lead the way. I took her to my room, closing the door behind us.

I shouldered my way past Cali, crossing the room. I made sure to stand so that my back was to the window, giving Cali a direct line of sight to the scene below.

Cali shifted on her feet, clearly unsure, as she waited for me to talk.

“Why don’t you go first?” I suggested. I bent slightly at the waist, hoping she would look past me and through the window. I was so focused on having her see Greyson, I wasn’t at all prepared for what she came out of her mouth next.

“Have you ever seen *The Bachelorette*?” Cali asked.

*Wait, what?* I peered at Cali closely, confused.

“You know,” Cali explained. “The reality show.”

I paused to think. The show sounded vaguely familiar… Wait—wasn’t that the show Colton was always trying to get me to watch? I couldn’t remember exactly what it was about…

“What do I care about some stupid reality show?” I asked, unsure where Cali was going with this.

“I think,” she said slowly, “that we should try it.”

“Try what?”

“Um, well,” she began, fumbling over her words. “How it works is there’s, like, a girl.”

“The Bachelorette,” I provided.

“Right,” she said. “And there are thirty guys or something, and they all date her.”

*Where the hell was she going with this?*

“You want to date thirty guys?” I demanded, shocked. “What?”

“*No*!” she cried out, flustered. “Just you and Greyson.”

Oh, *fuck no*. There would be none of that—I wasn’t going to *compete* with Greyson. I was about to tell Cali just that when the door burst open. It was Big Mac.

“There you are,” Big Mac huffed, looking at Cali. “Where’s Artemis?”

“I… I don’t know…” she said, flustered. “I mean I haven’t seen her in a—”

“Well, find her!” the witch said, her eyes locked on Cali. “The orb is gone.”

**Episode 1043**

ARTEMIS

I had done it.

I sat behind the steering wheel of one of Xavier’s cars, going faster than any chariot I had ever steered, sunlight shining in through the windows. I was making serious headway. And I was driving! All on my own, without any lessons or help. The only really tricky part had been getting the car out of the garage unnoticed, but I had managed it in the end.

Hopefully they wouldn’t even notice the tiniest of scratches that I might have left behind. It was a small price to pay, after all. The further I got from the pack house, the better it was for everyone. My heart grew lighter with each hill and field and house that flew by. At some point they would probably realize that the orb was missing and put all the pieces together, but by then it would be too late—I would have already reached the portal to the Fae world, where the orb truly belonged.

A loud honk startled me out of my musings. With a jump, I saw that my car had begun to veer left, almost hitting another car. I pulled it back with an effort. I looked over at the driver I’d missed by mere inches. He gestured in a way that I remembered Cali describing as a friendly greeting. With a smile, I raised my middle finger to match his, then focused my attention on the road. Humans were so strange.

All in all, though, the car had proven to be a good idea. I couldn’t help but wonder if it would make it through the portal. I laughed as I envisioned the Fae’s faces when they saw me. How impressed they would be with my metal horse!

Another horn blared. I stopped laughing and pulled the car back into my lane. Hopefully, of course, I would have learned how to master it by then.

I glanced again at what lay on the seat next to me. It was just an ordinary bag, not something you’d look at twice. But what it contained… Now that was a different story. And I could feel it. I could feel the orb radiating sheer power, its tendrils reaching out toward me, trying to control my mind. I clenched my hands on the wheel, and my eyes narrowed. I would resist it. I wasn’t my sister. I wasn’t Cali.

I didn’t know why I’d been able to defy its call. It could have been my Dark Fae blood, or the fact that I was just more experienced when it came to formidable magic. I shook my head to clear it. It didn’t matter. My only goal was to get the orb to the Fae world so I could hide it away forever.

My resolve hardened, and I had turned my full attention back to the road when the car began to make strange noises. It spluttered and then there was a series of harsh grinding barks, like a dog choking. The steady rumbling purr of the beast went silent and ceased. I pressed down frantically on the pedal that had always made it go faster, but this time nothing happened. The car was slowing down! I gripped the wheel and bit my lip as I steered it to the side of the road, where it rolled to a stop. I took a deep breath and turned the magic key over and over again, but the car only made a whirring noise and refused to start.

What the hell was going on? Was this some trick of the orb’s? I glanced at the lump in the bag, lying oh so innocently on the seat. I would not be deceived. *Right.* I looked at the endless sea of black road, stretching out ahead of me. It was a long way to the Fae portal. Without the car, it would be even longer. I closed my eyes and took another breath, gathering my wits.

Given the fact that I had never driven before, I was amazed that I’d made it this far. But a voice deep inside me let me know that I was on the right path. I gathered up the bag and got out. I really hated to leave Xavier’s car here by the side of the road, but what choice did I have? I slung the bag over my shoulder and started walking. I had to keep going. Everything depended on it.

I was lost in my thoughts as I walked along the side of the road. It took me a moment to realize that a car had slowed down and was keeping pace next to me. I glanced up, and a window slid down.

“Hey!” A lanky man leaned out. “Hey, do you need a ride?”

He smiled. He wasn’t bad-looking. Dark hair and dark eyes. A strong, stubbled jaw. It was an interesting face—one that had seen the harder side of life. One with a tale to tell. But I knew a thing or two about strangers, and I also knew how to handle myself. I kept quiet.

He didn’t seem too put off by the fact that I wasn’t talking.

“I’m Iñigo.” He grinned. “And I’m not going to bite you, I promise. Look!” He motioned for me to come closer and gestured up the road. “My diner’s just ahead. You can call a tow truck from there. It’s all good, I promise.”

*Ooh, a diner.* That made me pause. I’d had the most amazing milkshake at a diner. Still, was I going to sacrifice everything for something sweet? I hesitated until I felt the weight of the orb pressing against my back. *No*, I told myself firmly. *No, you are not.* I sighed.

“Thanks,” I finally replied, “but I can walk.”

“Suit yourself.” Iñigo shrugged good-naturedly, rolled up his window, and drove off.

For a moment, I really regretted not accepting his offer. But it was probably for the best. Who knew what his motives were?

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My clothes had gained a fine layer of dust with each car that roared by as I plodded along the side of the road. Eventually, I rounded the corner and a familiar-looking building came into view. It was white and squat, with big dull neon letters. The Rockaway Diner… Hey, wasn’t this the same diner I had gotten my first milkshake at?

And sure enough, there was Iñigo’s car, parked just out in front. Looked like he’d been telling the truth after all. But that didn’t matter. What *mattered* was that I couldn’t stop thinking about milkshakes. Chocolate milkshakes. Vanilla milkshakes. Strawberry milkshakes. Banana milkshakes…

So it turned out it wasn’t the orb’s influence I had to fear, but dessert’s.

I stopped and checked my pocket. It was still there—the money I’d taken from Cali, folded into a tight wad. I did my best to push down the wave of guilt. I mean, we were sisters, and sisters shared, didn’t they? Surely Cali wouldn’t deny her sister a milkshake? Not if it was a really, really good milkshake after a long, hot walk. Right? I pushed the doors open and entered the diner. I scanned the place. Empty. *Good*. I went to sit at the counter, figuring I could keep the bag with the orb on my lap. No problem.

As I picked up a menu and swiveled around on the stool, I recognized the waitress coming toward me. Her beautiful black hair was tied up in a ponytail, and the waitress uniform clung to her slim curves—Ava.

*Oh… right. She works here.*

For a moment I tensed up, ready to run, but then I forced myself to relax. Ava wasn’t exactly on good terms with the pack, and she and Cali sure seemed to hate each other. It was highly unlikely that Ava would let anyone from the pack know that I was here.

As she came closer, her light blue eyes flashed with recognition. No problem. I played it cool and didn’t acknowledge her. Instead, I put down my menu and ordered a chocolate, banana, strawberry, vanilla, bubblegum, and cookies and cream milkshake. She raised her eyebrows when I said my fourth flavor, but she shrugged and nodded.

Ava went behind the counter and started opening the ice cream containers. I smiled. This was going to taste amazing. Then she paused and put down the scoop. I glanced over my shoulder to check who had come in. There was no one. I turned back to Ava. Her eyes had gone blank—dark, as if a shadow had passed over her face. What happened next happened fast. Before I knew it, Ava had grabbed a knife, pulled me up by the front of my shirt, and pressed the blade against my throat. I could feel the sharp edge cutting into my skin. A thin trickle of blood ran down my neck.

“Give the orb to me,” she whispered, “or I’ll slit your throat.”

**Episode 1044**

*The orb is gone.*

There was a chilling calm that washed over me before a wave of panic nearly made my teeth chatter.

*This can’t be happening!*

Everything Big Mac had been saying hit me all at once. Artemis! When had I last seen Artemis? Not since last night. But why would she run off with the orb without telling me? I remembered Artemis claiming, in her arrogant way, that she was the only person who could handle the orb’s incredible power—

I couldn’t help but shudder, remembering the effect the orb had had on me. I’d thought I’d been making choices of my own free will, but I’d been so wrong. The orb didn’t care who it hurt as long as it got its own way.

*What if it’s doing the same thing, or even worse, to Artemis?*

A rough hand spun me around. “Where is your sister? I think she took the orb, the foolish girl!” Big Mac was looming over me, her eyes bright with fury.

“I… I don’t know!” I shook my head, still dazed and bewildered.

Xavier had joined us, his face set and grim. “Call her!” He pushed his phone toward me, as if it was the lifeline that would save us. As if it were that easy.

I batted his hand away, frustrated. “Artemis doesn’t have a cell phone!”

All the while, my mind was racing, trying to work it out.

*Where would Artemis take the orb?*

“You girls have no idea what you’re dealing with!” Big Mac was beyond pissed. She looked like she wanted to kill me. There was definite murderous disgust in her eyes. Still, last I checked, I wasn’t the one who had run off with the most dangerous object in the world.

“Excuse me?” I wheeled around sharply. “Just for the record, I had nothing whatsoever to do with this!”

I felt a twinge of guilt. It wasn’t like I *wanted* to throw Artemis under the bus, but it was true—I would never have done such a thing, and I had pulled some pretty reckless stunts recently.

“We have to find her and get the orb back.” Xavier was clearly doing his best to sound calm and practical, like the Alpha we needed. He moved toward the door, stepping away from the window. As he did so, I got a clear view of Greyson, talking with Maren and Fenrir out in the yard. Seeing their little trio was like a punch in stomach, reminding me all too clearly of the conversation Xavier and I had been having before Big Mac had interrupted us.

I glanced back, but Xavier was already halfway out the door. Big Mac was close behind him.

“I should have used a spell to lock up the Fae sisters when I had the chance,” I heard her mutter.

I sat down and thought, hard.

*Artemis? Where would you go?*

It was hard to imagine. Artemis was unfamiliar with the human world. Outside of the pack house area, the only places she had traveled to were Portland, Minnesota, and the diner. Could she have gone to any of those?

As I sat there with my head in my hands, wracking my brain, Rishika came in, looking worried.

“I just heard what happened. Is there anything I can do?”

I stared at Rishika, admiring her quiet strength. “Thanks. That’s really nice of you to ask, but right now I just need to think.”

“Hey, you’ll keep me posted, all right?”

She left, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I heard my mother’s voice echoing in my head.

*At the height of the war, it was whispered that the sphere would be the one thing powerful enough to end the fighting once and for all… Kadmos was determined that he should be the one to find it… It’s too ugly to talk about.*

And once she’d found out that we had the orb in our possession, she had lost her shit. Telling us to get out of the house. Not even to pack a bag, just leave.

We should have listened to her. And then a thought occurred to me—maybe it wasn’t too late. I could hardly make the call fast enough. As soon as my mom saw my face, her own grew pale.

“Cali?” she said. “What’s wrong?”

“Mom, promise you won’t go ballistic?” Not a great start to what I had to say, but I had to be sure she’d stay calm.

She gave me a wary look but nodded all the same. I took a deep breath, best to just get this all out in the open at once…

I quickly explained the situation to her. To her credit, she didn’t explode immediately, just stayed quiet and listened to what I had to say.

“I’m so sorry that I didn’t listen to you!” I wailed. “But now I just don’t know what to do!”

There was a long pause. “Cali,” my mother said. It was terrible to hear how strained she was.

“Yes?”

“I truly hate the idea of Artemis being alone with that sphere.”

“I know.” I nodded vigorously. The thought of it made me sick to my stomach.

She sighed. “There’s only one thing left to do.”

“What?”

“I’m coming to Oregon,” she said firmly.

“But Mom…” I stopped mid-protest. After all, my mom knew more about this magic than either Artemis or me. If we’d listened to her in the first place, then none of this would have happened. More importantly, I’d really, *really*, missed her.

“That would be great,” I said, and swallowed around the painful lump in my throat. “I could really use your help.”

“I’ll let you know the moment Dad and I have our flights booked.”

“Thanks Mom. I love you.”

“I love you too. And Cali?”

“Yes?”

“Be careful,” she said.

I ran downstairs with a renewed sense of well-being. It might have been the lamest thing in the world to admit, but I was happy and relieved that my mom was coming. I paused by the kitchen, where I could hear the raised voices of Xavier, Greyson, Big Mac, and Mrs. Smith. They were having a pretty heated conversation about what to do now that Artemis had taken the orb. I started to go in and tell them the good news, but I stopped abruptly.

*Maybe they’re not going to think it’s good news. What if they’re against it? Better to wait.*

Meanwhile, I had to do *something*.

What were my options? Was there some kind of Fae thing I could do to help Artemis? Could I conjure a wisp? But how? Damn, I hated feeling so helpless. Then it came to me. What about the Fae circle that Artemis and I had conjured when we’d been trying to find Ava and the book? It seemed like a lifetime ago. Could I even remember how to do it? Maybe Torin and Astrid could help me? I ran upstairs, peering into each and every room, then headed downstairs again. The others were still fighting in the kitchen, but there was absolutely no sign of Astrid or Torin.

As I passed by the living room, I saw *her*, sitting in a chair, staring out the window. The one person I didn’t want anything to do with. Maren. She looked up just as I was about to leave, and we made full eye contact.

“Hey,” she said tentatively, and then her demeanor changed. “Everything okay? You look a little worried.”

I never did have the best poker face, but the last thing I wanted was Maren prying into my family emergency.

I cleared my throat nervously trying to keep my cool. “Um… Uh… Yeah. I’m looking for Torin and Astrid?”

Maren gazed at me blankly, and I was forced to continue.

“I don’t know if you’ve met them?”

Still nothing.

*Great Cali, how do you get into these situations?*

“Uh, they’re Fae, only they’re Light Fae, and I need them to help me do this thing…” I trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

I was kind of hoping that Maren would get the hint and leave it, but if anything, she was looking more and more intrigued.

“What kind of thing?” she asked.

“Well…” I was too flustered to think of anything in the moment—I’d have to explain. “The thing is, I’m trying to find my sister Artemis, who’s gone missing. She’s also Fae, so I need to build this fairy ring or fairy circle thing that we—Artemis and I—did once before, when we were trying to find somebody.”

I didn’t usually ramble this much, but Maren made me really nervous. I was practically sweating by the time I’d finished explaining.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but I haven’t met Torin or Astrid yet.”

“That’s okay.” I turned to leave.

“Uh Cali?”

“Yeah?”

She looked straight into my eyes. “You know I’m Fae, right?”

“That’s great.” I swallowed. I sounded super fake, but I had to say something. I really didn’t want to talk with Maren anymore. She looked like she was about to offer her help, and I could not handle that at the moment. She seemed nice, but this was so awkward. “Well, I’ll see you later!”

I turned to go. I would have to find Torin and Astrid by myself. I just hoped they weren’t foraging in the woods again—

“Wait!”

I turned back.

*Oh don’t say it. Don’t you even dare—*

“Maybe I could I help you with your fairy ring?”

**Episode 1045**

AVA

I saw red. Literally. My whole vision was soaked in a crimson wave of blood. I wanted, I needed, I *had to* kill her. And soon.

I pressed the knife harder against Artemis’s throat and turned the edge of the blade against her skin. A thin line of red trickled down her neck. It made me feel wonderful. Free.

“Give me the orb,” I ordered thickly, the bloodlust beating like a drum in my heart and filling my veins. I couldn’t wait to slit her throat.

To her credit, she didn’t look scared. Not that that would save her.

“Okay, here.” She reached down and picked up her bag. Then suddenly, she swung it out and smacked me in the head.

Hard.

I stumbled backward. Bells rang in my ears, and I saw stars. I was dazed, but it wasn’t just because of the impact of the bag colliding with my skull. It was the orb inside the bag that had jolted me. Even with such brief contact, I could feel its unbelievable power. I shook my head, blinked back the pain, and gritted my teeth in a snarl. I *had* to have something that radiated such delicious and raw power.

But first, I had to deal with Artemis. And she was fully Fae. Not like Cali, who was bad enough. I remembered the number her magic had done on me, back at Silas’s house. No, this Fae was far more experienced than Cali, and therefore far more dangerous.

But still, I had to have the orb—no matter the cost. The potential it held was worth any risk. The stars faded from of my eyes. I could feel myself healing and recovering, blood surging to the injured area, muscles regenerating, bruises fading and vanishing. Meanwhile, Artemis was backing up, getting ready to flee.

Deep in my mind, I could hear the orb calling out to me.

“*Ava! You must stop her! Artemis plans to destroy me. Ava! You must save me! Stop her!*”

It was now or never. I shifted and felt my bones stretch, grow, and meld. The moment I turned wolf, I lunged. My teeth were bared and, snapping and snarling, I went straight for the Fae’s white throat.

But I was too late. Artemis had turned and, with her arms extended, she blasted me with the full extent of her magical powers. It was like being hit by a freight train. I flew backward, over the counter and into the shelves holding dishes, cutlery, and silverware. I collided with an explosive crash and fell to the floor.

I lay there, stunned and blinking. My mind was engulfed by darkness. Then, all at once, a flood of memories rushed through me like a river, each so vivid and sharp that it almost hurt more than the little Fae’s blow.

*Xavier, his arms around me.*

*Xavier, his lips pressed against mine.*

*Running through the woods.*

*Lying in his arms, both of us laughing together.*

*Rolling around on the grass.*

*Smiling at each other, mind linking.*

*Gazing down at him as he slept. So beautiful, so perfect. Now. Always. Forever…*

And then I heard another voice, a voice that wasn’t mine, a voice speaking *through* me, not *to* me. It was the orb that filled my senses, that dazzled me with visions and promises that resonated through my whole aching body.

“*Ava, you can have him again. Ava, I can make it happen. Ava, save me, and all will be as it used to be. Just you and him, forever and ever and ever…*”

I snapped back to the present, to the here and now.

I had to get the orb away from Artemis. It was the only way.

Fragments of glass and shards of crockery fell from my fur as I rose up, growling, from behind the counter and prepared to spring.

But Artemis wasn’t at the counter anymore. I glanced around the diner, and there she was, fighting both Iñigo and Mabel. They had her backed into a corner—but not for long. The Fae was strong. Powerful magic shot out from her hands, and Mabel was hurled into some barstools. In the split second that Iñigo turned to check on Mabel, Artemis plucked an arrow from her quiver and drew her bowstring taut. When Iñigo turned back, that arrow was pointed straight at his heart.

Clearly, Iñigo and Mabel had gone crazy—both of them were fighting to get their hands on the orb. But how could that be? Yes, they wanted it, but it was *mine*. It was destined to be mine and Xavier’s alone. I had to stop them from taking it. I would deal with Ava myself. I leapt over the counter and slammed into Iñigo. He gave a yelp of surprise, and we tumbled into a booth. We struggled blindly, my jaws at his throat, his hands around my neck, my paws scrabbling at the slippery leather, both ready to kill each other, murder in our hearts.

Then, abruptly, I felt myself shift back, my bones compacting, shrinking, turning human. Now, instead of my fur, his hands were clutching at my skin. What the hell was going on?

Iñigo, after a moment of shock, flung me away from him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he screamed in frustration.

Mabel, meanwhile, had staggered to her feet and was staring out the window.

“She’s gone,” she informed us in a dazed voice. We all watched in silence as Artemis roared off in Iñigo’s car, leaving only a cloud of dust behind her. Iñigo’s expression darkened. He slammed his fist into his palm.

I could only stand there, totally and completely bewildered. What the hell had just happened? Had I blacked out? I tried my hardest to understand, to make sense of it. I remembered shifting into my wolf to attack Artemis—but why would I have done that? It hit me, then.

The Orb.

I swung around to Mabel and Iñigo.

“Why did we attack her?” I asked as Mabel handed me a sweatshirt. “What was wrong with us?”

Iñigo ignored my question and, with a sweep of his hand, gestured to all the broken glass, plates, and cutlery behind the counter. He rounded on me.

“*You* did this!” he spat.

“It wasn’t me!” I spluttered, trying to explain, “It was the orb! You have to know that—you both felt it too!”

“I don’t give a fuck.” His voice was icy and trembling with rage. “Ever since you showed up, we’ve had nothing but trouble.” He shook his head again at the damage. “Just look at my diner! It’s a fucking mess!” He ran his hands over his face and groaned. “Normally I’d ask Charlie to clean it up, but he took off, too.”

“Yeah, I know.” For a moment there, I’d almost felt sympathetic toward him. “But still, none of that is my fault!”

I shouldn’t have spoken. My words did nothing but set him off again.

“Actually, it is. You made the first move on the Fae, so it’s completely your fault!” Iñigo spoke through a clenched jaw, and a vein throbbed at his temple.

I looked to Mabel for support. I needed someone to back me up.

Mabel wouldn’t meet my eye. “I need a bowl,” she muttered and headed outside, leaving me to face Iñigo alone. *Great, thanks a lot Mabel.* I turned to Iñigo, trying to explain what had happened.

“Look.” My voice cracked. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Look, just listen to me for a second, okay? It wasn’t my fault, I swear it. The orb spoke to me—its voice was in my head, telling me what to do. It’s like I had no will of my own, I couldn’t have stopped myself, and I *tried*—”

Iñigo cut me off. His eyes were cold. Each word was delivered like a blow. “No. You listen. You and that Fae wrecked my diner, and then she stole my car. But on second thought, maybe it *is* my fault… for hiring a no-good werewolf like you.”

This was clearly a lost cause. There was no reasoning with him.

“If that’s what you think, then fine,” I snapped. “I’m outta here.” I tried to leave, but Iñigo stood in the doorway and blocked me.

“Not so fast!”

“Hey!” I yelled. “What do you think you’re doing? Get out of my way!”

“No.” He folded his arms. “You owe me.”

*This vampire is no joke.*

I started to protest, to tell him that I would pay him back somehow, make good, but he cut me off again.

“Please Ava,” he said. “Don’t even start with your lies. You obviously can’t afford to pay me back for all the damage here.”

I really didn’t like the sound of that, and I despised being in anyone’s debt. Judging by the glint in his eye, I had a feeling he intended to make whatever I owed something terribly difficult to repay, and I had no time for his little deals.

He smiled, fangs pulled back. “But there’s something else you can do to settle your debt.”

**Episode 1046**

The last place I wanted to be was alone with Maren… and yet…

Maren and I stood in a spot near the woods. I looked toward the trees and their dark, shady depths, then looked back at her. Mrs. Smith had offered to look after Fenrir. I knew it was a nice gesture, and that I should feel happy because it meant that Maren could help me create the Fae circle, but I couldn’t help but be suspicious. Had Mrs. Smith volunteered to babysit so quickly because she was actually Fenrir’s grandmother? It would make sense. After all, the kid was practically a mini Greyson—identical, just smaller. *Ugh.* I felt like I was trapped in a paranoid loop, but I couldn’t stop my thoughts.

*Focus, Cali.* This wasn’t about me. This was about finding Artemis.

As Maren and I set up the ring, I kept stealing glances at her. She was helping me out and being incredibly nice about it, but it was all I could do to fight off waves of unease and resentment. It was hard not to take in her huge dark eyes and satiny skin. Did she really have to be kind as well as stunningly beautiful? It didn’t seem fair, somehow. Hating her would have been so much easier to do if she’d been a bitch—or even just a little more standoffish. But of course, she looked like a model and had the saintliness of Mother Teresa.

Maren caught me staring at her and gave me a half-smile. So much for not being obvious.

“Something on your mind?” she asked.

*Yeah, actually there is. Are you in love with Greyson?* I wanted to ask, but obviously I chickened out.

“Uh… How long are you staying here?” I asked instead.

Again, Maren gave me that half-wry, half-wistful smile.

“I’m not sure yet.” She paused and then glanced at me. “I really hope it’s not too much of an inconvenience.”

The crazy thing was that it sounded like she meant it. *Ugh*. She was WAY too nice for her own good. How the hell did you deal with someone like that?

“So…” I tried my best to sound casual. “How old is Fenrir?”

“He’ll be five sooner than I’d like.” Maren wrinkled her nose and sighed. “They say that the days are long, but the years are short. Until I had a child, I never knew how true that was.”

“I hear you,” I murmured, but I wasn’t really paying attention, too busy trying to do the math.

*Okay, he’s four, almost five… And if she and Greyson got together four years ago, how long would it have been before she got pregnant? If I add nine months…*

It was no good. I absolutely sucked at math. I would have to work it out another way.

“So,” I said, “when did you and Greyson meet?

Maren didn’t answer me immediately. Instead, she stopped what she was doing, scrunched up her eyes and gave me a long, considering look.

“Just so you know, Greyson is not Fenrir’s father.”

*Oh, good job, casual Cali. Now she probably thinks you’re a jealous bitch.* She wouldn’t have been entirely wrong, but I still felt guilty nonetheless.

Probably seeing how embarrassed I was, Maren gave a little laugh.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I understand why you might think that. After all, they do look alike, don’t they?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess so.” I muttered. I knew my face was bright red. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die. Maren looked at me questioningly. It was her turn.

“Aren’t you his mate?” she asked.

I nodded. I couldn’t speak.

“And Xavier’s too?”

I nodded again. My shoulders tensed up. *Does everyone have to know about it?* I braced myself for the judgmental comment she would now deliver. Instead, she said quietly, “That must be really hard on you. And on everyone involved.”

How weird was it that Maren—a practical stranger and someone I had no reason to trust—seemed to get what I was going through? I felt a pang. It was like we could have been friends in another life. Close ones.

It looked like Maren felt it, too.

“Is there something else you wanted to know?” she asked me gently.

*Cali, don’t do it. You’ll regret it. Leave it alone.*

But the question was burning inside me, and I couldn’t hold back. I had to know.

“Are you…” I cleared my throat. “Are you still in love with Greyson?”

It was a mistake. All at once, Maren turned hard and the warmth drained out of her eyes. I had crossed a line, and a door had been slammed in my face.

“I really don’t think that’s any of your business, Cali.” Her voice was cold and distant.

“Well, I think it is.” I tried to sound calm, but my heart was hammering in my chest.

“Why? Because he’s your mate?”

*You bet.* I wanted to snap back, but thankfully whatever little sense I still had made me hold my tongue.

“Well, do you know what I think?”

I said nothing. I was too scared to find out what she thought.

“I think that Greyson deserves a chance to love someone who can love him back,” she said. “Someone who will love him back without hesitation, without compromise, and without comparing him to someone else. That’s what I think.”

I hated that. I hated that she said her piece so clearly, so honestly, and with such truth that it struck me clean through the heart. *You know she has a point…* No, no I was *not* going down that road. Not with my sister missing, not with the orb out there.

My cheeks burned and my eyes stung. It was like she’d slapped me.

“But I do… I—”

She cut me off. She was all business now. “The circle is ready. Shall we get this over with?” She very much looked like she wanted to add, *so can we can both get out of here.*

I bit my tongue. I didn’t want lash out and say something hurtful in return. I needed her help.

“Go stand over there.” Maren gestured to a spot in the circle. I went and stood and tried not to let my anger bubble over. I closed my eyes and resolved to stay in the moment.

As I stood there, feeling the cool breeze on my skin, I heard Maren begin to chant. The fine hairs on the back of my neck stood up. My arms and legs began to prickle. The air around me became thick and elastic with energy. I was half-convinced that if I opened my eyes, I would be able to see atoms floating around. It was a familiar feeling, and it made me hopeful.

*The circle is working! Maybe we’ll find Artemis.*

Maren somehow sensed my distraction. Her voice was cool and calm.

“Cali, don’t get too excited. You need to concentrate. Clear your mind and focus. Visualize your sister.”

She was right. It was time to shelve the jealousy, suspicions, and resentment—at least for now. These negative emotions weren’t going to help me find Artemis. Even the positive feelings could interfere. I inhaled, counted to four, and exhaled even more slowly. I did my best to clear my mind of everything, so that I could focus solely on Artemis.

*Artemis, where are you? Artemis, I hope you’re okay. Why did you take this on yourself? We should be working together. We both know that you’re strong, but the orb is so powerful. It will trick you. It doesn’t play fair. It’s very dangerous. Artemis, where are you? Reach out to me, Artemis, reach out to me and I will come and find you. I’ll help you. We can do this together. Please, I need to know that you’re safe. I am your sister. I am here for you. Artemis, can you hear me?*

There was a sudden silence, so deep and pure that it felt like I’d dived underwater. Once again, the air filled with crackling, sparkling energy. I heard Maren’s voice, coming from what seemed to be far away.

“It’s done.”

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

There, tiny and perfect and glowing with faint blue light, was a wisp!

*Yes! My friend, my muse, here to save the day again!*

I stared. The wisp hung in the air for a moment, like it was looking back at me, and then it rose higher and higher.

*Wait, what’s happening?*

The wisp started darting around. Left, then right, up then down. It was moving in wild, frantic zigzags, so fast that I had difficulty following its chaotic path.

“I don’t understand!” I cried out to Maren. “What’s it doing? What’s wrong with it?”

Maren opened her mouth to reply, but then the wisp stopped dead in front of me, as if it had heard my voice. It hung there, glowing so brightly that I had to squint. Then with a puff of smoke, it vanished.

*No! Ms. Wisp, why? Why have you forsaken me?*

After what felt like an eternity, I turned to Maren.

“What… What just happened? Where did it go? Can we bring it back?”

Maren turned to me slowly, clearly reluctant to meet my gaze. Somehow, though, she managed to drag her eyes up to meet mine.

“I’m so sorry, Cali,” she said quietly. “We can’t bring it back. There’s no way to find your sister.”

**Episode 1047**

GREYSON

I sat on the porch and watched Maren and Cali as they moved around on the lawn, setting up the circle. I had to admit, I was surprised to see them working together. I never would have thought it could happen. I didn’t quite know how to feel seeing them move in tandem to complete the ritual.

Still, since Maren and Fenrir were staying at the house, she and Cali were bound to have some kind of interaction. It was awkward, no doubt—but then again, Maren had always been a pragmatist, and Cali had always been good at getting people to help her, so who knew? Maybe it would be okay.

I saw Maren gesture for Cali to go and stand in the center of the ring. I really hoped this worked. We had all experienced what the orb was capable of when it got into the hands of someone like Silas—nothing but death and destruction, and Silas had been tough as nails. If someone like him could fall prey to the lure of the orb, I could only imagine what it might be like with Artemis. Maybe being Fae, she stood a better chance of resisting it—but who knew with these things?

Suddenly, a glowing light appeared in front of Cali. They had managed to conjure a wisp. I stood up fast as it started to move around erratically. Something seemed wrong. What was going on? Then, just as quickly as it had come, the wisp disappeared with a puff of smoke. I hadn’t realized I was holding my breath until I exhaled with a whoosh. What the hell was that? Cali came charging toward me, clearly distressed. It looked like she was trying not to cry. Maren followed slowly behind her, her head bowed. There was no need to tell me that it hadn’t worked.

I stepped off the porch to comfort them, and the whole world shifted underfoot.

*It was winter, and I was walking up toward a house in a cold, snowy neighborhood. The houses had frosted windows, like gingerbread houses, and the lawns were blanketed white. It was freezing outside, and I held the warm pot of coq au vin close to my chest, glad for its warmth. I couldn’t help but feel a little nervous. I hoped my shirt was appropriate—it had taken me forever to choose it.*

*As I stood on the front steps, I examined my reflection on the door’s glossy surface. At least my hair looked good. The sacrifice of not wearing a hat was worth it. True, I would have been a hell of a lot warmer, but my hair would have been an absolute disaster. Not great for first impressions. I took a huge, cold breath, filling my lungs with icy air. Time for a little pep talk.*

You can do this, Greyson. You can do this.

*I lifted my hand to knock, but then the door flew open. Cali was standing there, glowing with happiness. Before I could recover myself, she had pulled me into hug.*

*“Hey, watch the food!” I protested as I smiled into her hair. I hugged her with one arm and held the pot carefully away with the other.*

*Cali hardly noticed—she was too busy talking a mile a minute.*

*“I’m so happy you came! My folks are dying to meet you!”*

*I paused mid-hug. Cali’s parents. The only justifiable reason why I would rather have gotten frostbite than wear a hat.*

*During my pause, Cali finally noticed what I was carrying. She glanced down at the pot in my hand.*

*“Wow. That smells delicious! What is it?”*

*Her open enthusiasm never failed to make me smile. I kissed her and told her that* she *smelled even more delicious.*

*She grinned a little mischievous grin up at me. “Hold that thought!”*

*Then she turned, and I followed her into the house and down a hallway, trying to explain how to make coq au vin.*

*“You’d be surprised at the difference a good quality chicken makes—”*

*I stopped abruptly. I could hear her father’s voice coming from somewhere in the house. Cali must have sensed my hesitation.*

*She smiled up at me and squeezed my hand. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I told you, they’re going to love you.”*

*And with that, she pulled me into the kitchen.*

*The kitchen was full of light and warmth and laughter. And there were Tom and Orla—Cali’s parents. Tom was wearing a long apron and stirring something in a pot while Orla leaned against the counter, laughing and sipping a glass of red wine. They turned toward us with big, open smiles, just like their daughter.*

*“Welcome!” Tom brushed off his hands on his apron and came over to greet me. “Good to meet you—Cali’s told us…” He paused mid-shake and stared at the pot in my hands.*

*“Wait! Don’t tell me that’s coq au vin? Did Cali tell you it’s my favorite dish?”*

*“She didn’t,” I admitted. “But it’s also one of my favorites.”*

*“Well I’ll be! We can compare recipes!” Tom turned to his wife. “Orla, pour this guy a glass—he deserves it!”*

*“I’m already on it.” Orla poured me a big glass of red wine. She was a strikingly beautiful woman, and I could see the strong resemblance between her and her daughter. I told her so.*

*Orla laughed. “Keep those compliments coming! Flattery will get you everywhere.”*

*Soon, we all sat down to eat. Cali’s parents asked me a million questions, but nothing that I wasn’t willing to answer. Tom was a great host, easygoing and attentive while Orla was kind and gentle, making sure my plate was piled high and my glass was never empty. She reminded me so very much of Cali with all her energy spent making sure her loved ones were comfortable and happy. The afternoon was filled with talk and laughter. Cali beamed at me and held my hand under the table.*

*I had never experienced being with a happy family, but it was all so comforting and nice. I could hardly believe that I had been so worried. Time seemed to pass too quickly. Before I knew it, I was at the door, thanking them all and saying my goodbyes.*

*Cali walked out with me to the front steps. She turned to her parents. “I’ll be in in a moment.”*

*They nodded, smiling, and shut the door.*

*Cali only had a sweater on, no coat, and the temperature had dropped. She gave a little shiver, and I put my arms around her as we walked down the steps.*

*“Cali, you need to go back inside,” I told her. “It’s too cold—”*

*Suddenly, she grabbed me by the hand and pulled me around to the side of the house.*

*“Wait! What are you—”*

*“Shut up!” she ordered sternly, then grinned. “I’ve been wanting to do this all afternoon.”*

*She pressed her slim body hard against me, trapping me there against the house. Standing on her tiptoes, she reached up and let her fingers trace my cheekbones delicately, tantalizingly, before she dug them deep into my hair. Pulling my head close, she brought her face up and pressed her soft, warm lips against mine. She let her mouth linger there, lips slightly parted, and I could taste the sweet hint of gloss before she gently bit down and tugged at my lower lip. I gave a small moan. How did she always do this to me?*

*Sensing the effect she was having, Cali slid her tongue over my parted lips and deep into my mouth. And then she was kissing me. Only she* wasn’t *kissing me—she was devouring me, her lips and tongue and teeth moving to my ears, my neck, and back to my mouth, pulling me closer as if she would never have her fill. My hands circled her slim hips, pulling her close and holding on tight. I couldn’t feel the cold anymore. A fiery heat of lust and desire ran through me, and I was, I was—*

I was on the ground near the pack house, staring up at the sky, disoriented and filtering reality back in disappointing pieces.

Cali was leaning over me, shaking me frantically.

“Greyson! Greyson! Oh my god! Are you okay?”

I tried to sit up. Maren was staring at me, her eyes filled with concern.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

They were on either side of me, both trying to hoist me up, both wanting to know if I was all right and what was going on.

*Great. It’s turning into a competition.*

I managed to stagger to my feet. The fragments of the daydream, if that’s what it was, were still flashing behind my eyes. My mind was reeling with questions.

*Why do I keep having these things? What do they mean? What’s happening to me?*

I looked at Cali and Maren, and their faces mirrored my terror. I just couldn’t deal with them and the fear I saw there. I especially couldn’t bear to look at Cali a second longer. I kept seeing her warm, and pressed against me, choosing me with every action as she brought me into her life and family.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to excuse me,” I muttered. “I need to get a drink of water.”

I stumbled back into the house, where I came face to face with Sabine.

Her expression was cool, inscrutable. She studied me as if I was a particularly fascinating science experiment—one that might explode at any moment.

“What?” I sounded harsher than I meant to, but I didn’t like the way she was looking at me.

Sabine shook her head. “You shouldn’t have done it.”

“What are you talking about?” I tried to stay calm and keep my voice level.

“You should never have come back.” Now she almost sounded sad. “It’s going to kill you.”

**Episode 1048**

“What the hell just happened to Greyson?” Lola asked me, plopping down onto the bed.

We were in the safety of my bedroom, but I still kept my voice low, because this was a house full of werewolves.

“I have no idea,” I said. “One moment he was walking toward us, the next he passed out.”

Lola frowned. “Maybe the stress of everything is getting to him. Or he had too much to drink.”

I huffed. “What are you talking about? Greyson doesn’t drink when he’s stressed. Besides, for him to pass out drunk, he would need to drink ten times his weight in alcohol. The man is built like a water buffalo.”

“But a sexy one,” Lola added seriously.

This conversation was getting off topic.

“Maybe Greyson is stressed because of me…” I made an awkward gesture at myself before vaguely pointing out the window, as if that could communicate what I was talking about. “… and Xavier, being together while he was away. I guess there’s a chance that he was so upset that he literally swooned.”

Lola looked at me like I was delusional, which was fair. I sounded ridiculous.

“Alphas don’t swoon, Cali,” Lola told me dryly. “They rip people’s throats out, they get into fights that could have been avoided, they think with their dicks, but they most definitely do not swoon.”

I sighed, running my fingers through my hair. “Then I have no idea what to think! He just randomly passed out. It was pretty scary, actually.”

“That’s because Alphas don’t usually pass out,” Lola told me, as if she had offered a very important piece of information that was brand new to everyone. “Perhaps he’s stressed because Maren is here with her kid.”

“That does makes sense…” I trailed off. “She is his ex-girlfriend, after all.”

Lola’s eyes widened. “Seriously? And you didn’t think to tell me that earlier?”

*It’s not like I enjoy thinking about it by myself, you know*, I thought, scowling.

“She’s a Dark Fae who—”

“Oh my god, you just drop one bomb after the other!” Lola burst out. “Maren sounds like serious bad news—why is she even here? I bet she wants to kill Greyson and use his blood as a face cream or something!”

I wanted to agree with Lola, but I didn’t think she was right about Maren. Was I being naive? Had I been deceived by her absurdly attractive face and soft angel voice?

“I don’t see why Maren would want to harm Greyson, though,” I said. “He brought her here to help her, and she has a child. She’s too busy running after the kid to have the time to plot against him.”

Lola offered me an unimpressed look. “Is that what Greyson told you? That he brought her here because she needs help? Does he mean help for her to climb back onto his—”

“Do not say it, Lola!”

“His dick,” Lola deadpanned, undeterred. “I find it highly unlikely that she doesn’t want him back, or want him dead. But either way, if Jay showed up here with some ex-girlfriend and told me he was helping her, I’d poke out his other eye.”

I took a deep breath, rubbing my whole face. Lola really knew how to paint a picture. “Lola, she has a kid to worry about. She doesn’t seem obsessed with Greyson or anything weird like that. Besides, if she was going to hurt Greyson, why come all the way here? She could have harmed him back in Portland and gotten it over with.”

Lola shrugged. My logical train of thought had clearly made no impression on her. “She’s Dark Fae. Who knows why they do what they do?”

I paused for a moment, taking in Lola’s words. She was exaggerating, as ever, but it wasn’t like what she was saying didn’t have a grain of truth to it.

*What do I really know about Maren, actually?* I thought to myself.

“It is true that I have no real information about her. But she was fine while we did the Fae circle—”

“What if she sabotaged the circle so you couldn’t find Artemis?” Lola exclaimed. “If I were you, I’d keep an eye on her.”

I paused, processing. Perhaps Lola wasn’t entirely wrong about keeping an eye on Maren. The circle had felt right, but what did I know about all that? Without a successful spell, how was I going to find my sister? Poor Artemis—who knew what the orb could be doing to her right now? Who knew what it could be talking her into doing?

I knew firsthand how convincing that evil sphere could be. It was also extremely chatty, which was another menacing and powerful quality to have, all by itself. I knew I used *my* constant chattiness to make people do things for me.

I wished my mom were here… We could try another fairy ring.

Lola spoke up then, interrupting my thoughts. “How old is Fern?”

I frowned. “Huh?”

“Fern,” Lola repeated. “Maren’s kid.”

“It’s Fenrir.”

Lola snorted. “Whatever. How old is he?”

“Maren said he was four,” I replied.

Lola arched both eyebrows at me. “So, in theory, he could be Greyson’s son.”

The thought made something inside me twist. “Stop saying that!”

Lola ignored me, her expression pondering. “Would that make you his step-mom? Would you be an evil step-mom, like in the fairytales?”

I rubbed my temples to stop myself from smacking my best friend. “First of all, I’d hope I’d be a cool step-mom, not evil. Secondly, please stop. Fenrir is NOTGreyson’s son, so I’m not his stepmom!”

Lola shrugged, very unhelpfully. “He sure looks like Greyson. Just saying.”

“You’ve said a *lot* today, Lola,” I said, glaring at her. “Let’s get back to Artemis, now—how am I going to find her?”

Lola hummed thoughtfully. And then she squinted at me. “There’s always Big Mac…”

I shook my head instantly. “No way! She’s had it with all of us constantly pestering her to do stuff. I don’t think we can trust her.”

“She’s always mad at us anyway,” Lola said casually. “And no matter what, she is a witch. She could do a tracking spell for Artemis.”

I sighed. “You’re probably right. She’s our best bet right now.”

“Also,” Lola added, “if Big Mac is worried about the orb, wouldn’t it be better to work with her? That way, if she goes after Artemis to get the orb, you’ll be with her.”

I blinked at Lola slowly. “That’s actually not a bad idea.”

Lola smirked. “All my ideas are good.”

That was extremely debatable, but I wasn’t about to fight with Lola when I had much more important things to deal with. Like a missing older sister. Artemis was not supposed to do this—younger siblings were supposed to be the ones who got lost. She needed to get with the program!

“I guess there’s only one way to find out what Big Mac has in mind,” I said.

Determined, I headed down the hallway to Big Mac’s room.

The door was ajar, and I poked my head in to see Big Mac sifting through a bunch of witchy-looking items on her bed. It looked like a tornado had gone through the room.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “What is this mess?”

“I’m done with all this werewolf and Fae nonsense,” Big Mac declared, not even sparing me a glance. “I’m going to look for the orb myself.”

I gasped. “How? Are you going to use a spell to locate Artemis?”

Big Mac scoffed at me but said nothing. I already had my answer, though—if Big Mac found the orb, she would find Artemis as well, and that was all I cared about.

“I’m coming—”

Big Mac cut me off. “You’re *not* coming with me. Until the orb is put away, it’s not safe for anyone. I made a serious mistake keeping it here, and I intend to fix it.”

“Well, you did warn us about the orb…”

Big Mac rolled her eyes at me. “And what good did that do? Your stupid sister ignored my warning, and now we’re all at risk!”

Nobody other than me was allowed to call Artemis stupid. That was a universal sibling law; everybody knew that. “Artemis is under a lot of pressure, like all of us. There’s been a lot going on—Halloween, the vampires, and then—”

Big Mac snorted. “I’m fed up with all your excuses.” She opened a satchel, removed a scroll, and unrolled it. I instantly recognized it. It was similar to the map that Nneka had used to search for Big Mac when she was missing.

Before I could say anything, Big Mac performed a spell on the map, using a strange language. Holding my breath, I watched as a light appeared, flickering and moving slowly around on the surface of the map.

My heart flooded with hope. “Did you find Artemis?”

Big Mac shot me a look. “I’m looking for the orb.”

“But what about my sister?” I asked, agitated.

“I’m going to get the orb,” Big Mac said sharply. She rolled up the map and pushed past me. “And your sister had better notget in my way.”

**Episode 1049**

ARTEMIS

I’d stolen a car, but I’d really had no other choice. I’d had to get away from that diner. Everyone there had just attacked me, out of nowhere.

I glanced at the bag that held that damned orb. I was more than certain that it was to blame. It seemed to bring out the worst in people and supernatural beings—it was like a sneaky, living curse that wanted to cause destruction and wouldn’t be satisfied otherwise.

I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that the orb actually got stronger the more people fought over it. I shuddered at the thought, shaking my head. All the more reason to get that thing out of this world. The orb was one of the most horrific—

Wait, what was that smell?

It was so intense that I couldn’t focus on my train of thought. Scrunching up my nose, I looked around. The whole car smelled like spoiled pine trees. It was a scent that was better than blood or rotting flesh, but still, it was giving me a headache. Just then, I noticed a tiny little pine tree hanging from the car’s rearview mirror.

What was that thing? A stench bomb?

“Unbelievable,” I grumbled. I leaned forward to sniff at it, and the scent was so repulsive that I gagged. It reminded me of the night I’d spent hiding in a giant’s shoe. A golden-striped tiger had been hunting me after I’d tried to capture it. Only a giant’s shoe had been able to hide both me and my scent from the tiger. The stench had been horrendous.

Repulsed, I grabbed the miniature pine tree and threw it out the window, trying not to throw up. I played around with the buttons on the car’s door and lowered all the windows, just to get rid of the smell.

After I was certain that it was safe, I took a deep breath and tried to figure out what to do next. I should probably have thought this out more before leaving the Redwood pack house. All I knew about the portal to the Fae world was that it was near the shore.

There had to be many shores around here, though. Or not. Either way, I couldn’t remember much from the day I’d arrived in the human world. I should have planned this a little better, but usually I figured things out on the go, and that strategy had never failed me in the past.

I looked up. Maybe I could use the sun to navigate. But did that work the same in this world? It probably did, since the sun was the same everywhere. Or was it not?

Just as I was getting frustrated, I saw a sign on the right side of the road.

*Portland*.

I knew that place. The place with the whisky and Greyson’s apartment. Wasn’t the portal not that far from Portland? Maybe if I headed in that direction, I would be able to find what I was looking for. I turned to the right and followed the sign.

“*Artemis?*”the orb said. It talked to me like we were two pals who were going on a day trip to the lake to search for magical clams.“*Are you sure that’s the right way to go?*”

I rolled my eyes. “Haven’t you caused enough trouble for one day?”

“*Oh, Artemis*,” the orb said. “*You did the right thing to take me out of there and defend me with your life. My power can’t be trusted with just anyone—not everyone is worthy of me*.”

I scoffed. “And who is?”

“*You*, *Artemis. I can sense that you’re different.*”

I did not want to engage with this thing. I didn’t trust it, and I’d seen firsthand what it could do to people *and* supernaturals.

But what did the orb mean when it said that I was different?

“I’m different *how*?” I asked tightly.

“*You have always felt different*,” the orb said. “*Even when you were a child. You’ve been on your own for most of your life. And now you have Cali. You’ve met your mother, and—*”

“And what?” I snapped. “What are you even talking about?”

The orb’s voice became smoother but somehow sharper. “*How does it make you feel, to know that your mother chose Cali over you?*”

I was not going to listen to this nonsense. I refused to. I couldn’t let the orb get into my head. But the thing kept talking.“*I know that you want to belong, that you want to be part of something... But don’t be fooled by Cali and her mother.*

“*Where was your mother when you were starving in the orphanage? Where was she when nobody would hug you or tell you everything would be okay after you fell down and scraped your knees? Where was Cali when you had nobody to play with as a child? Where were they both when you were just a little kid and felt that everyone all around you either didn’t care about you or wanted you gone?*”

“Shut up,” I whispered. My stomach hurt. I was trembling as I listened to the orb’s manipulative tirade. I knew that it was twisting things around, but what it was saying still hit a chord inside me. What it was saying had a huge dose of truth, considering the hardships I had gone through.

“*The truth i*s,” the thing whispered,“*You have no one else but me.*”

“Stop talking. I’m done listening to you.” I tried to sound as determined as possible. I needed to resist the orb’s power at any cost. It was very obviously trying to exploit my weaknesses and turn me against Cali and our mother. What it was saying couldn’t be right. What it was saying couldn’t be true…

Right?

“*You shouldn’t take me to the Fae* *world,*”the orb continued. “*I want to stay with you, and if you let me, I can help you access your true power. You don’t need anyone else.*”

“I said *shut up*!” I jammed on the brakes, and instantly the car screeched and swerved.

The motion was so quick that the orb flew from the seat and landed on the floor. My heart was pounding, and I ignored the car honking behind me. Panting, I turned toward the still-covered orb, at the foot of the passenger seat. “I know what you’re trying to do,” I hissed. “I’m warning you, I’m going to destroy you if you don’t stop.”

I waited for the thing to argue with me, or keep trying to convince me of its importance. But the orb remained silent, for once. I picked up the bag and I shook my head. How funny was it that something so powerful could be held like this? In my hands? How incredible was it that I could just pick it up and throw it off a cliff?

Suddenly, I realized that the orb was the one who was powerless, not me.

It was like a parasite that needed someone to do its bidding, otherwise it wouldn’t be able to survive. I was now more determined than ever to bring this thing back to the Fae world, where it wouldn’t be able to tempt anyone with its evil promises.

I purposefully dropped it onto the floor again, hoping the orb could somehow feel pain. Or at least, I hoped that lying on a dirty car floor was uncomfortable.

I started driving again, reminding myself that I probably shouldn’t suddenly stop in the middle of the road again. Rishika had explained why that wasn’t very safe. I felt myself smile at the thought of her… I looked forward to seeing her again, sooner rather than later.

But first, I had to complete my mission.

Hopefully the shore that I was looking for wasn’t that far away. I had been driving for at least half an hour, just me and the road, when I noticed a truck was behind me. It was accelerating. Cali had told me that humans ordered a lot of things and they paid extra to have them delivered quickly. Not because it was an emergency—just because they wanted those things that badly.

I slowed down a bit to let the truck pass; I didn’t want to get in between a human and their favorite new gadget. As the truck came closer, I recalled seeing a similar one parked outside the diner, right at the back.

Coincidence?

I wasn’t a fool—I trusted my instincts, and that was how I’d survived all these years. Whoever was driving that thing was coming after me. I tapped my fingers on the wheel, keeping an eye on it as it caught up to me. As the truck passed by, I wasn’t able to see the driver through the dark windows. I frowned, alarmed. But then, thankfully, the truck kept driving in front of me.

But before I could decide that the danger was gone, the truck suddenly swerved and slammed into my vehicle.

**Episode 1050**

XAVIER

I was shifted, patrolling the forest to make sure that the vampires had left. I searched the spot where Charlie had said he’d found them.

I needed to make sure that the pack was safe. Having vampires on our property was unsettling. Messed up. *Unacceptable*. This was our territory, and nobody had the right to approach it. If the werewolf council heard about this, the pack’s reputation would be in danger. What kind of pack let fucking bloodsuckers get so close to their space?

This would have never happened if I were the Alpha.

While Greyson was too caught up in whatever the hell drama he had going on with Maren, I was out here, doing his job better than him. I had already done that countless times, and with a lot more success than he could ever achieve as a leader.

His level of uselessness was so fucking ridiculous that it felt like Greyson actually *wanted* me to prove to everyone that I was the more responsible Alpha. The man wasn’t even trying.

Either way, I didn’t give a shit. I was certain that I was better than him at all this, anyway.

As I approached the campsite where Violet had escaped, my wolf recoiled. My nose started burning. This place reeked of death; if any of those vampires had been stupid enough to remain here, I was ready to rip their throats out. However they’d been masking their scent before must have worn off. Taking steady but cautious steps, I trailed around the area, sniffing around, trying to track them…

Until the trail abruptly stopped.

The scent of gasoline was still lingering in the air, and there were tire tracks a few feet ahead. They must have driven off. I wasn’t sure if they were aware that the kid vampire had been killed, but they’d find out eventually. And when they did, they would come back. Vampires were big on revenge—they were predictable like that.

All I had to do at this point was make sure the pack was prepared to face them. It wouldn’t be too hard. Vampires weren’t the biggest threat we had to deal with at the moment, anyway. That was the orb.

It had the power to destroy the Redwood pack entirely.

It had the power to destroy anyone, really. Colton and I had been entrusted with watching it a long time ago, so now that its location was all up in the air, I couldn’t help the deep, unsettled feeling that twisted in my gut. I couldn’t believe it was gone, along with Artemis.

Sooner or later, Cali would want to come out here and find her sister by herself. That was my mate, reckless but always brave, with the stubbornness of a—

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard leaves crackling a few feet behind me.

Every one of my senses on high alert, I turned around, teeth bared, ready to eliminate any threat. But instead of a vampire, Rishika’s wolf ran up me.

*Shit, sorry!* she said, mind linking with me. *Didn’t know you were out here as well.*

*I just wanted to make sure that the vampires were gone*, I replied. *What are you doing?*

*I was hoping to pick up Artemis’s scent*, she said. She looked crestfallen.

*Any luck?* I asked.

Rishika shook her head. *I haven’t found anything.* She looked away, scuffing at the ground with her front paws. *I guess I’m kind of worried about Artemis. She’s tough as shit, but I don’t like the idea of her being out there all alone with the orb.*

It seemed like Rishika had a real soft spot for Artemis. I realized that I needed to pay more attention to those kinds of dynamics within the pack, if I wanted to take over. Rishika was basically Greyson’s Beta. If I could win her over, I’d be able to win more of the pack and ultimately become the Alpha. Alliances were extremely important in these kinds of situations.

*Don’t worry. We’ll find Artemis*, I told her. *I’ll make sure of it.*

Rishika nodded at me. *Thank you, Xavier. That means a lot.*

It meant a lot to me too, but for different reasons. I needed to find Artemis first—not only to bring Rishika on my side, but also to prove to the pack that I was Alpha material, and to remind Cali that I was the worthiest of her mates. Combine that with getting rid of the vampire coven, and I’d be golden. After that, all I would need to do was wait for Greyson to mess up and prove to everyone in the pack that he was unfit to be their leader.

At this point, the dethronement of my older brother was just a matter of time.

*Where else do you think we should look?* Rishika asked. *We’re running out of places nearby, and I don’t know how far she would’ve gone by herself…*

*I’m not sure*,I replied, *but we need to be very careful. We have no idea how many vampires might still be out here.* *I don’t think going beyond our territory would be in our best interest—not without more pack members on our search team.*

Rishika’s expression darkened. *That’s true.*

*It’s one thing to take on a handful of vampires*, I went on, *but if there are more, you and I would be putting ourselves in jeopardy. We don’t need that right now. Or ever.*

*I like your thinkin*g, Rishika said. She seemed impressed, so I counted that as a win. *Do you think we should head back to the pack house for now?*

I nodded. I couldn’t help but notice that she and I had always worked well together—we had since the very beginning, when Greyson had ordered us both to train the pack.

As we started to head back to the pack house, Rishika paused.

*I’ve already searched that route*, she said.

*I’ve covered the northeastern side*, I replied.

*We should both take a different route and circle back to the pack house. Maybe that will give us some sort of clue about Artemis’s whereabout*s, Rishika said. *I just hate the idea of heading back without looking everywhere…*

*Let’s do it*, I said. And you’re sure *you haven’t been able to pick up her scent?*

*Not yet,* she replied. *That’s why I want to cover as much ground as possible today.*

She was right, we had to. At least before Cali decided to come out to figure out where her sister went—probably while screaming at the trees for not pointing her in the right direction. I snorted to myself. *That’s my girl.*

*Let’s move*, I told Rishika, and we set off.

As we made our way back, I made sure to pause long enough to sniff at any suspicious footprints, searching for any clues about Artemis’s whereabouts. We continued through the forest, circling around the campsite and heading back toward the pack house. I knew Fae could be crafty, but it was odd there was no trace of her anywhere. I tried to think from her perspective, where she would’ve gone.

It might not seem like it at first glance, but the truth was that Artemis wasn’t all that different from Cali. She had a cruel streak, was pretty blunt, and could be a lot colder than Cali, but they were both pros at doing things without asking permission, and they were also pretty impulsive. They had grown up worlds apart, and yet there was no doubting that they were sisters.

Their similarities would have been funny, under any other circumstances.

But right now, it was maybe my only clue to lead me to where Artemis was. We couldn’t discount the danger of the orb and what its awakening could mean for all of us. Even though Artemis was a powerful supernatural being, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy at the thought of the orb in her hands. I was pretty sure that she’d done all sorts of messed up things as a bounty hunter in the Fae world.

Anyone could be susceptible to it, it seemed, if Ravi was any indication. The guy hadn’t been bad, just used. Anyone’s dark side could be exploited.

I had a dark side as well, but Colton had been there for me; together, we’d been able to hide the orb without letting it affect us. Or maybe it had. I didn’t know exactly, but it seemed as though Silas had awakened it.

*You know*, Rishika said as we ran, *I really appreciate the job you’re doing, leading the search for Artemis and the vampires. When—*

She never finished her sentence. There was a crashing sound in the distance that shocked us both—like metal slamming into metal.

*Did you hear that?* Rishika asked.

I grunted, nodding.

*It sounded like a car crash*, Rishika said, sounding panicked. We shared a look. *Artemis* is *a disastrous driver...*

Immediately, we changed course and ran toward the sound.

**Episode 1051**

GREYSON

I was sitting on the front porch, having a cup of Earl Grey. My “Get Off My Lawn” energy had to be pretty strong, because nobody from the pack had approached me. I was feeling weird, but better than when I’d blacked out earlier.

Why the hell did these dreams keep happening to me?

They were so intense, so *vivid*—almost like they were coming to me from another life. A life that I didn’t know about but could easily have experienced. This felt like some alternate universe bullshit, and I didn’t know what to do about it. And then afterward, my own mother had walked up to me and said, *You should never have come back—it’s going to kill you.*

That was comforting. Not.

Just then, Sabine stepped out onto the front porch. “Are you ready to talk?” she asked, peering at me.

“Do I have a choice?”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Not really. Mothers are known to interrupt their sons’ brooding time.”

Her words made something warm and fuzzy grow inside me. Despite everything, it was nice to know that she was there for me. We were building our relationship. Slowly, but surely. She sat next to me on the swing, a cup of white chocolate mocha in her hands. I wasn’t much for involved drinks like this, but I had to admit that I loved the smell of it. It was a scent that I’d started to associate with home.

“So.” Sabine nodded toward the yard, where Fenrir was playing with Maren. “What’s the story there?”

I hesitated for a moment, before reminding myself that there was no reason to hesitate. It wasn’t like I was about to lie here. “She’s my ex.”

Both my mother and I watched as Fenrir gingerly placed a poorly made flower crown on Maren’s head. He then kissed her cheek, and she laughed, clearly delighted. The image was so tender that it made a part of me feel raw. It also made me more certain than ever that that kid needed to be protected at all costs.

“Is he your son?” Sabine asked me quietly.

I sighed. It was a loaded question, wasn’t it?

“Maren has told me repeatedly that I’m not the father,” I admitted. “And I have no reason to doubt her…”

“But he does look like you.”

I turned to see Sabine staring at the kid with something akin to longing. “Something about him reminds me of you. Especially the eyes.”

“Who knows how Fae genetics work with a werewolf’s? Maren said it’s just a coincidence.” I kept my voice firm as I spoke, but still, a sliver of hope slipped through.

Sabine heard it. “I can understand how tempting it must be for you to want Fenrir to be your son. To have the family we were both deprived of.”

This was getting a little too real for my tastes. I was very protective of both Maren and Fenrir, but what did that mean? He was a kid, for god’s sake. How could I *not* give a damn? What kind of person would that have made me? And Maren was a lot of things, but it was obvious that she was a good mother.

I just didn’t want Fenrir to grow up without a mom and only have a shitty father. Not like me.

“Bringing them here was a mistake,” Sabine said in a low voice. “You do realize that, don’t you?”

I frowned. “Why? Fenrir’s a young werewolf—he needs to be with us, to learn. To feel welcome.”

Sabine nodded slowly, taking a sip of her mocha. She was always so composed and calm that I felt grounded in her presence. “Did you think about how this would affect Cali, though?”

I thought about Cali’s reaction. She had been upset, but hadn’t she been more upset about me leaving her than me bringing Maren and Fenrir to the pack house?

“I think she’s mad at me for vanishing again after Joss’s memorial without telling her. That’s the biggest issue. And I don’t blame her for that. I know I’d be pissed if she did that to me.”

Sabine cocked her head. “So you keep running out on her, and now you’ve also brought your ex, and a child that looks like you, back home. You keep giving Cali reasons to choose Xavier. And that was fine before, but now the curse has changed. Now, whoever she doesn’t choose dies.”

My chest tightened at my mother’s words. I’d already known that I was playing with fire here, but I couldn’t help but remember what Cali had told me.

“Cali implied that she would have chosen me if I hadn’t left,” I said. “Now that I’m back, I have reason to be hopeful.”

Sabine leveled me with a look. “That might have been the case if you had simply returned. Add some groveling and that face of yours, and she’d have been ready to drop. But what did you do instead? You brought your ex-girlfriend and her son back with. Her son, who could potentially be your child. I’m trying to figure out how things could get any worse for you, but it seems like you’ve already reached the peak of bad decisions.”

“I’m sensing some judgment in your tone,” I said dryly.

She snorted. “I think MacKenzie has rubbed off on me. It’s like you *want* Cali to choose Xavier. You’re not even trying, and if that’s not enough, you keep making things worse for yourself. How do you think it makes Cali feel to see Maren and that beautiful kid under this roof? Under *your* protection?”

I sighed. “Not great.”

Sabine took my hand, her expression suddenly serious. “I understand that emotions are hard for you to navigate after the life you’ve had. And Greyson, I don’t mean to be hard on you, it’s just that I won’t *ever* stop blaming myself for not being there for you—”

My stomach clenched. “You didn’t have a choice. Silas forced you—”

“The point is,” Sabine said, cutting me off as her eyes got misty, “that I’ve only just gotten you back in my life, and I don’t want to lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said. I meant that. I’d had trouble learning that Sabine was my mother, but if I were being honest, it felt good. Finally, I had this piece of family that I had been missing and wanting for so long.

I squeezed Sabine’s hand, and she smiled. But then her expression grew somber.

“I’m just afraid that with both you and Xavier here, Cali will end up choosing him inadvertently.”

“Cali is a lot of things, but I don’t think she would ever hurt either of us on purpose,” I said.

“But what about by accident?” Sabine asked. “I don’t know how those things work, but either way, you need to be more mindful of your behavior. I know you don’t want your brother to die, so I’m not saying to charm her into choosing you. I’m just saying that you need to keep making this decision hard for her, just so everyone stays alive.”

“Talk about being stuck…” I trailed off, a bitter taste in my mouth.

The door screen screeched then, and Cali stepped out.

She blinked at both of us, looking sheepish.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know you two were out here…” She glanced at me before staring at Sabine. “I really need to talk to Greyson.”

“Sure. We were done here anyway,” Sabine said, standing up. She gave me a meaningful look before heading back into the house. I could see the words“*please don’t mess this up*” plain as day on her face.

Cali and I were alone now.

Gingerly, she sat down next to me. The sight of her made my heart pound. She was gorgeous, as always. I had missed her so much that there was still a lingering ache inside me because of it. I wished I could reach out and touch her, kiss her, tuck a wisp of hair behind her ear. I wished I could love her without any second thoughts.

Her voice was quiet. “What happened to you before, Greyson? You just passed out.”

I shrugged. “I honestly don’t know.”

“I’m worried about you,” Cali said. Her gaze was so soft and tender that I felt ten feet taller.

“I don’t want you to have to worry, love,” I said. I tried to play it down. “This whole thing could just be part of the curse.”

“No,” Cali said, shaking her head. “I don’t know anymore. But it doesn’t help that Artemis is still missing.” She took a deep breath. “Which was why I wanted to talk to you. I’m going to go look for her.”

I scowled, and was about to tell her that I didn’t like that idea at all when she kept talking.

“Big Mac wants the orb back, and she said she’ll stop at nothing. I’m afraid she’ll hurt Artemis. Maybe do something worse.” Cali’s voice grew panicked. “And if all that isn’t enough, my parents are coming—I can’t have my sister killed when my mom is coming to visit her!”

The daydream of meeting Cali’s parents flashed through my mind. It had felt so good. My throat went dry, and I stared at Cali again. At her lips.

It felt like I hadn’t kissed her in ages, and I really fucking wanted to.

“It’s dangerous for you to go look for Artemis,” I said. “Especially since your parents—”

“I can’t let Big Mac hurt my sister, so I’m going with her.” Cali’s tone was firm. “Will you come with me?”

**Episode 1052**

As Greyson considered my question, I could feel my stomach tying itself in knots. I had no right to be asking Greyson to do this. But then again, he had no right to run off and then come back and pretend that nothing had happened.

Looking at him made my heart ache.

He took a sip of his tea, and I remembered the first time that Greyson and I had spoken alone. I had brought him a cup of tea, and then I’d realized that he wanted to kiss me. Or I thought he had, so I’d slapped him.

Whoops.

Part of me wanted to kiss him right now. Part of me wanted to climb onto his lap, wrap my arms around his neck, and kiss his stupid face all over.

*Get a hold of yourself, Cali,* I scolded myself and shook my head to clear it.

I couldn’t be thinking of shit like that right now. There were much more important things going on. I had no idea how the orb could be affecting Artemis, but I knew that Greyson would be able to help me with the entire situation.

He, Xavier, and Colton had fought against the orb and won. That had to mean something. It had to mean that the Redwood pack had a chance against that magical spherical asshole that had been making our lives hell.

Finally, Greyson said, “I don’t think I can leave the pack again.”

I was disappointed but relieved at the same time. Disappointed because Greyson kept saying no to me over and over; relieved because I was sure Xavier wouldn’t have liked it if Greyson and I had gone on a little trip together.

“I understand,” I told him quickly. “It wouldn’t be fair to the pack.” Or to Xavier.

Greyson glanced at me. “Look at us. Communicating and stuff. Isn’t this much better than you running off without telling me anything?”

I let out a short laugh, but my heart wasn’t in it. Everything felt so messy and raw between us. And our communication remained very, very bad. Meanwhile, there was still a child-shaped elephant in the room that was currently running around in the yard.

“Mommy!” Fenrir screamed. “The rocks want to steal your flower crown!”

I stared at the kid and a laughing Maren, blinking rapidly. This was so surreal.

“I guess another reason you can’t come with me is that you’ve got your visitors…” I trailed off. “You have to look after Maren and Fenrir.”

Greyson shrugged. “I don’t think they need looking after. Just a safe place to be for a while.”

Fenrir added a second flower crown to Maren’s head before they both dashed over to pick up more daisies from the field. They did look fine, actually. Precious, even.

*I can’t even channel my inner evil step-mom right now*, I thought, annoyed at everything.

“Cali…” Greyson trailed off, reaching out to hold my hand. The second our skin made contact, I had to fight a shiver. Our connection felt as strong as ever, vibrating and overwhelming. When I faced him, he swallowed visibly.

Did he feel it too? Or had I ended up all alone in this mating bond?

“I know how important Artemis has become to you,” he murmured. “The fact that I’m not coming doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t go. She’s your sister. And no matter what, that has to count for something.”

Part of me registered that Greyson was talking about himself and Xavier as well. They were brothers, and that had to count for something. But that thought was overshadowed by the fact that Greyson seemed willing to let me go. After a million fights over me not leaving the territory, this was a surprising development.

But then again, Greyson kept surprising me. It was one of the things I loved about him. He believed in me, and he was always willing to let me grow. I wanted to hug him, and that urge to kiss him had never left me.

*If I could just lean a little closer—*

My thoughts were interrupted when Greyson got to his feet, putting distance between us. In a throaty voice, he asked, “Have you asked Xavier to go with you?”

I blinked. “What?”

“You’re right that you shouldn’t go with Big Mac by yourself. The orb is dangerous, and Big Mac won’t make protecting you a priority. Xavier would.”

Okay… but why did that sound like Greyson was pushing me away? *AGAIN?*

I glanced at Maren.

*How am I NOT supposed to believe that Greyson’s behavior has something to do with her?* I thought, feeling sick to my stomach.

“No, I haven’t asked Xavier,” I said curtly. “Why?”

Greyson turned to me, folding his arms over his chest. “You should. It would make me feel better to know that someone from the pack was with you.”

“And you think that Xavier would be the best choice for that,” I said slowly.

He shook his head, smiling a weird little smile that I couldn’t categorize. “I know it sounds crazy, but Xavier is the best person—other than me—to look after you. He would do anything to protect you.”

I was confused, and sad, and frustrated. I also felt guilty about talking to Greyson like this, practically begging for his attention, while Xavier had been there for me all along.

I really hated everything right now. Primarily myself.

“I don’t understand what you mean, Greyson,” I said, my frustration growing. “I feel like we’re not even speaking the same language, so—”

“No!” Astrid burst out of the house, spilling out onto the porch with Torin on her toe. “You did it!”

“No, YOUdid it!” Torin pointed at her, wagging his finger. “And now the entire house has gone dark!”

Greyson looked confused. He turned to me. “What are they talking about? Can you translate for me?”

Before I could yell at him that I couldn’t even translate what *he* was telling me half the time, Astrid turned to Greyson. “Torin was playing with that thing that blows hot air, trying to glamour himself with it, and now the whole house is dark!”

Torin huffed. “But you were using that rod to make your hair curl at the same time! Now you’ve ruined everything and we won’t ever know what it’s like to glamour oneself with human devices!”

“No, *you* have ruined everything!” Astrid yelled. “Now the werewolves won’t have any gadgets to better their appearance! You have condemned them to a life of hair mediocrity!”

Greyson looked like he was about to laugh but also shout at them. He turned to Torin. “You two probably tripped the circuits.”

Torin frowned. “I didn’t trip anyone.”

Greyson rolled his eyes, snorting. “I’ll go fix it in the basement. Both of you, stop fighting.”

“And now the Alpha is mad at us!” Torin yelled at Astrid after Greyson headed inside. “Look what you did!”

Before Torin and Astrid could drag me into their drama—and some very uncomfortable conversations—I followed Greyson inside the dark house. Sure enough, all the lights were shot. I felt antsy, frustrated, confused. I didn’t fully understand where Greyson was coming from, and I had to make sure that he really was okay with me going with Xavier. That this wasn’t some sort of ploy.

A ploy that made no sense to me, but anyway…

It still felt like he was trying to force my hand to choose Xavier, even though right now, I basically didn’t even *have* a choice if it meant one of them dying.

*This is a mess*, I thought to myself. *And I’m not even as annoyed about it as usual... I just feel exhausted.*

My head pounding right along with my heart, I followed Greyson to the basement. I opened the door and called into the dark, “Greyson? Are you down there?”

A low chuckle broke the silence. “I’m right here.”

I took a deep breath and went downstairs. “Great!” I said, hating everything. “I’m coming over!”

Greyson’s tone was surprised and amused at the same time. “Or you could wait for me to fix the power?”

“That would make too much sense, wouldn’t it?” I asked, reaching the bottom of the stairs. I got to the final step in one piece. But before I could celebrate my victory too hard, I stumbled as I walked across the floor.

Greyson paused whatever he was doing in the dark. “Are you okay?”

“Of course,” I lied, moving toward his voice. “I’m great. I am so great that—”

I tripped over something (A crate? A rug? My own sense of dignity?) and was about to faceplant on the floor when Greyson’s strong arms wrapped around me.

“You gotta be careful, love,” he said, slowly lifting me up.

My heart was freaking out because of yet another near-faceplant experience, and also because Greyson was so close. I couldn’t see him, but I could feel him. All the things that I had been feeling since he’d returned were dialing up into a frenzy inside me.

Before I could process the battle going on within me, though, I felt Greyson’s hot breath against my face, and then his soft lips as he kissed me.

**Episode 1053**

ARTEMIS

I fought to steer the car back onto the road, but the truck came at me again.

I was forced onto the edge, and then the car was slammed into a barrier. Before I could even process what in the human hell was happening, I was smacked in the face by two very white, very large pillows that burst out of nowhere. They deflated as quickly as they’d popped up, leaving me dazed and confused.

What were those things? Humans used balloons for celebration and pillows for sleeping, but I didn’t feel like sleeping, and there wasn’t exactly anything to celebrate right now. Suddenly, my door was yanked open.

A large hand grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the car, snapping the seat belt at the same time. Gasping, I landed on the ground. I stared up at the truck’s driver, who hissed at me, “Where is it?”

I didn’t have the time to answer—not that I *would* answer, considering this imbecile’s behavior—because then the man grabbed me, dragging me close to his face.

And then I saw his fangs.

Fear made my senses hazy.

*Vampire.*

Vampires were very tricky to fight, as I’d been learning, but I always did my best. I tried to break away from his grip, but he wouldn’t let me go. He scrutinized me, sniffing before he growled, “So you are Fae.”

If he kept doing that sinister smile I was going to tear his head off.

Before I could shove him, he opened his mouth wide and used super-speed to bite down into my neck. A blast of energy burst out of me while I screamed, determined to repel this disgusting bloodsucker.

He pulled away and staggered back, wiping my blood from his lips. His eyes were wild. He reached for me again—he had the *nerve* to reach for me again—but this time I stepped aside and kicked him right in the chest.

He groaned, stumbling back before attacking me again, but I was ready for him this time. This insolent moron really thought he could trap me? He clearly had no idea who he was dealing with.

We fought on the side of the road, smashing into the truck and the car, and every time he tried to get those fangs close to me, I blasted him with energy. The leech had a lot of power, though. If this had just been a physical fight, he might have won. He was faster than me, but every time he got too close, I was able to hit him with my magic.

It didn’t seem to be harming him as well as it could have been.

I focused on disorienting him with my energy blasts, and then landing physical blows on his chest. After a particularly hard blast, the vampire looked dizzy, and I knew this was my shot. Since I didn’t have a stick to stake him with, I knew that cutting off his oxygen supply would at least make him pass out. My hands were too small to wrap around his throat, though, so I used the next best thing.

“You fucking—”

The vampire stopped talking when I jumped on him from behind, wrapping my thighs around his neck and squeezing.

He passed out only seconds later.

Panting, I jumped off of him and landed on the ground. Fuck, that hadn’t been easy. My neck was hurting. The wound was still oozing blood. I wasn’t sure what the hell to do with him now. If I’d had one of my Fae world nets with me, I would have wrapped him up and left him on the side of the road.

But this wasn’t the Fae world.

There could potentially be trouble if he was found. After all, I had stolen a car, and there would be questions about that and the crash. As a bounty hunter, though, I’d always made sure to do one thing: cover my tracks.

I headed over to the car. It was a mess. Smoke was pouring out of the front of it, and a pool of liquid was spreading underneath it. What kind of liquid was that? It smelled vile. What was I was supposed to do with it? Clean it up?

I did not like that idea, so I leaned in and grabbed the orb from the passenger seat. It seemed to be fine—unscratched, and still in its bag.

Rotten thing.

I checked out the car once more, and I noticed that the wheels on the front were ruined. Bottom line, it didn’t look like I would be able to use the stupid metal horse. Gazing around at the never-ending emptiness of the road, I thought about walking. But I had no idea how far I’d need to go to reach my destination.

I glanced back at the unconscious vampire. Maybe he would know where the Fae world portal was? Perhaps he could be useful to me in that way. First, though, I needed to take his truck, since he’d ruined my car… Well, the car that I’d stolen.

Details.

The truck seemed to be in far better shape than the car. How hard could driving it be? I already knew how to drive a car in the most careful and excellent manner possible, and the inside of the truck looked like the car, only bigger, so that gave me hope. It was a mess, though. It smelled like old cheese and there were papers, bottles, and cans everywhere. *Disgusting*.

Holding my breath, I cleared some of the detritus out from the seat. I made sure to throw the trash in a nearby can instead of the side of the road, because Cali had said that only assholes littered. I then checked the back of the truck and noticed the coil of a chain on the floor.

I smiled to myself.

This was perfect.

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Three minutes later, I had the stupid vampire wrapped up in chains, propped up in the passenger seat. Whistling to myself, I sat behind the wheel and pulled out into traffic. It took me awhile to get used to the size of the truck, but it really wasn’t that much different from driving a car.

Rishika would be so proud of me. I was proud of me.

After I’d driven a couple of miles down the empty road, the vampire stirred. His cold eyes met my own, and then he bared his teeth at me. “You bitch!”

Hissing, he tried to break free from the chains. I found his attempt to escape very naïve, considering nobody ever got out of my chains and nets. I had literally made a profession out of capturing people.

As he struggled, I calmly told him, “If you don’t stop making so much noise, I’ll throw you out of the truck. And then I’ll turn around and run you over. Three times. I know vampires don’t die easily, but you’ll be ugly for a while after I finish squashing you.” I glanced at him. “Even uglier than you already are.”

The vampire glared at me. “When I get my hands on you, you will wish you’d never been born.”

I snorted. “Very unique threat. Never heard that one before.”

The vampire looked even more infuriated, now. “You think you’re gonna get away with this, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said honestly. “By the way, do you know where the ocean is? Must be close by, right?”

The guy frowned at me. “Is this a joke? There’s over three hundred miles of shoreline in this area.”

That did not sound promising. “I remember coming from the Fae world by passing through a large rock formation. Have you seen—”

The vampire’s phone started to vibrate, interrupting me. It was sitting there, at the console, looking inconspicuous. I knew the device held a lot of power, though. Cali used to check her phone all the time while Greyson was away.

“What are you doing?” the vampire asked me sharply.

“I have heard that not answering a ringing mobile is impolite,” I informed him. “Therefore I will answer, just so nobody thinks of you as the rude heathen that you are.”

The vampire gaped at me while I swiped on the thingy of the phone, just like I’d seen Cali do a million times. Instantly, a voice boomed out. “Deacon, where are you?”

I recognized the voice. It was the guy who had offered me a ride. The one from the diner, whose car I had stolen. I guess he was a vampire too.

How the tables had turned.

“Deacon is a little incapacitated at the moment,” I said as the chained vampire growled at me.

“Well well, that’s impressive, little Fae,” said the guy on the other end of the line. “What are you going to do with poor Deacon?”

“That depends on how this conversation goes,” I said.

“You stole my car,” he replied.

“You tried to kill me,” I scoffed.

The man chuckled. “That was all a misunderstanding. But I think that we may be able to help each other. What do you say?”

**Episode 1054**

XAVIER

The car wreck had Artemis’s scent all over it.

*She was here!* Rishika told me through our mind link.

I nodded, looking around. *And not too long ago*, I said. *The car is still smoking.*

At this point, I wasn’t even surprised that that girl left car wrecks wherever she went. At least this time she hadn’t ruined mine.

Rishika and I kept an ear out for any incoming cars—the last thing we fucking needed right now was for a human to take our picture and post it all over social media with the caption “OMG, MASSIVE WOLF-BEARS INCOMING!!!!” At the same time, we examined the area around the crash site until Rishika stopped at some tire tracks. She sniffed at them and then turned to me.

*It looks like Artemis might’ve been taken*. Her expression was dark.

*By who, though*? I asked. *Who would take a random Fae?*

*They might not be after* Artemis, Rishika said. *They might be after the orb.*

Shit. She was probably right. Why couldn’t Silas have let that shit lie dormant?

*Who would manage to capture Artemis in the first place, though?* I asked. *She’s pretty crafty.*

My train of thought didn’t seem to ease Rishika’s worry. She sniffed the air before moving toward the totaled car’s door. *I’m picking up another sent that I recognize... A nearby diner.*

I trotted up to her, sniffing at the door as well.

The scent *did* belong to a diner.

The exact diner where I’d seen Ava.

Could this be a coincidence? Because that would be a pretty bad joke for the universe to make. Could Ava have something to do with all this? Could she have taken Artemis somewhere? Why would she be after the orb, though? She knew about its evil powers. She’d seen it in action, had been betrayed by it when it had sucked in Nolan’s wolf.

*I saw Ava at that diner*, I told Rishika.

*We did too*, she said. *When the car brakes were shot.*

This took me slightly aback. Cali had been with them and she hadn’t mentioned Ava at all. Was it to protect me or something else?

*But I can’t see her going to these kinds of lengths to get the orb.*

*Agreed*, Rishika said. *Either way, though, I think we should see this through to figure out if Artemis was taken.*

My chest puffed up at the thought of saving my mate’s sister.

We both ran back into the woods and headed toward the diner.

*How the hell do we go inside, though?* Rishika asked as we approached our destination. *Do you have any clothes on you?*

I snorted at her failed attempt at a joke. *We could steal some—*

I stopped talking, noticing another abandoned car along the way, just twenty feet ahead. The vehicle looked familiar. Very familiar. Extremely fucking familiar. There was no way that it was my car, though. My car was back home, and…

I checked the license plates and realized that the car in question *was* mine.

Fucking hell. When would these girls stop crashing my fucking cars?

*It’s yours, isn’t it?* Rishika asked me.

My tone was curt. *Yup.*

Her wolf sighed. *This isn’t a good sign, is it?*

I shook my head. *Nope.*

After making sure that we were alone on the side of the road, I shifted back to human and headed toward the car. It had some scrapes, but otherwise it was in a good enough shape. Considering Artemis’s track record, I considered myself lucky.

“It’s just out of gas,” I told Rishika. “There’s some in the trunk.” I glanced at her bare body. “I’ve got clothes in there too.”

Our first priority was to get dressed, in case we were seen. I gave Rishika the smallest T-shirt I could find, along with a pair of sweatpants. She was pretty tall, so she only had to roll the waistband of the pants a couple of times to get it to stick around her torso. The shirt was massive on her, though. It was like a tent. Or a parachute. Or a deflated hot air balloon.

“How do I look?” she asked.

She sounded so oblivious that I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the aesthetic she was sporting right now was that of a tent/parachute/deflated hot air balloon. I had also learned, from Cali, that the best answer to give to a woman when she asked you that question was one word only.

“Great,” I said. Then I rounded to the front of the car with the gas can, to pull the lever to open the fuel door. I opened the door only to see the keys dangling from the ignition. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I can’t fucking *believe* she left the keys in the car.” I scoffed as I filled the tank with gas. “Someone could have stolen it!”

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Stop complaining. It’s not like Artemis knows entirely how the human world works.”

I rolled my eyes. “It doesn’t take a genius to realize *that*. I think she just doesn’t give a damn.”

“Unlike Cali, who gives all the damns, all the time,” Rishika said, chuckling.

“Precisely,” I said. “Sisters and polar opposites.”

“Equally impulsive, though,” Rishika noted.

“Ain’t that the truth,” I mumbled.

After I was done filling up the car, we got in and drove to the diner. It was just a two-minute ride. When we got there, I turned to Rishika. “We have to be careful now,” I said.   
“There’s no telling what the orb could have done to Artemis. It can affect people in pretty messed up ways.”

“I know. I was there when everything happened during the battle,” Rishika said quietly. “Do you think it’s possible that Ava has something to do with all this?”

I paused for a moment. “I don’t know.”

A lot of the time, though, I still wondered if I should have killed Ava when I’d had the chance. I didn’t know whether she was involved, but it didn’t seem out of the realm of possibilities.

After I parked the car, Rishika and I headed toward the diner. The closer we got, the distinct smell of weed grew. We parked around back and there was a woman leaning against the side of the diner, puffing away. Her nametag read “Mabel”.

I stopped twenty feet away from her and stared. “Where is Ava?”

Mabel gave me a cold smile and blew out a cloud of smoke. “Hello to you, too.”

“*Hello*. Is Ava here?” Rishika asked impatiently.

Mabel noticed Rishika for the first time. She raised both eyebrows, snorting. “Nice clothes. A little on the large side, though.”

I did not have the time for this fucking bullshit. “I asked you a question. Is Ava here?”

Mabel shrugged. “How am I supposed to know? I’m on my coffee break.”

“More like a smoke break,” I muttered under my breath, motioning for Rishika to follow me into the diner.

The moment we stepped in the place, a guy approached. “Hey, we’re closed right now.”

I assessed the diner—it looked like a tornado had gone through. *Artemis*. It had to be her.

I recognized the guy from when I’d stopped by the diner the first time. Something about him still reeked of bad news. “This shouldn’t take long. Is Ava here?” I asked, for what felt like the millionth time tonight.

“Hey Iñigo, what should I do with this?” someone asked him, holding up a broken coffee mug.

“Throw it out, how many times do I have to tell you?” he said.

So his name was Iñigo. He was fucking *rude* as Cali might say. “Look, I’m just asking a simple question about a waitress. She was working here the other day.”

Iñigo shrugged. “So? I can’t keep track of everyone who comes and goes.”

Rishika’s expression was growing more impatient by the second. “We’re looking for a young, really pretty… no… she’s stunning—you’d know if you saw her. Her name is Artemis. Have you seen her?”

Iñigo glanced between us. “I thought you were looking for Ava. So which is it? Ava or Artemis? Or is Ava really Artemis? Could they be the same person?” He snorted. “As you can see, we’re a bit preoccupied.”

This guy was a fucking tool. I stifled the urge to punch him in the face.

“*Ava*,” I repeated. “I know she was here, I—”

Someone opened a window, and a breeze flooded the space. Suddenly, I was hit by a smell. It was a scent that I could never forget. It was a smell that haunted my dreams; one that I’d wake up smelling as if it were still fresh.

Blood. *Ava’s* blood.

Something was seriously fucking wrong here.

I turned back to Iñigo. When he opened his mouth this time, his smile had fangs.

*Another* goddamn vampire.

Before the leech could even fucking blink, I grabbed Iñigo and slammed him against the counter. “What the *hell* did you do to Ava?”

**Episode 1055**

Greyson was kissing me.

It started softly, tenderly, like he was cherishing every sensation. He mouthed at my upper lip, then the lower, making me hold my breath. I was afraid I would break when his kiss became hungrier, more passionate—overwhelming in its intensity.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, tugging me closer, tight against him, and I whimpered. I gasped when I felt his hardness brush up against my stomach, ready for me as if nothing had changed between us. As if he hadn’t been gone, hadn’t returned with his ex and a child that looked like him.

I wanted him so badly, but I’d spent so long wondering if he still wanted me that my heart was aching. My brain was screaming to jam the brakes on this.

“Wait,” I said, gasping as I pressed both my palms to his muscular chest. I could feel his heart pounding. In the darkness, I felt everything tenfold. “Maybe we shouldn’t… We shouldn’t be doing this…”

I felt Greyson’s hot breath against my cheek. My body was trembling with anticipation. His voice was gruff, grumbly, as his grip around my waist tightened. “Why?”

I wanted to start screaming and crying and laughing at the same time. “Because you ran off on me and refused to talk to me and now you’re back and barely paying attention to me, and it’s fine if you don’t give a shit anymore, but this uncertainty is just killing me slowly day by—”

He didn’t let me finish. He pushed me against the wall, offering me another devouring kiss, like he hadn’t heard a word I’d said. Against my quivering lips, he muttered, “There is no uncertainty. *Ever*. I’ve been trying to deny my feelings because I thought that might make it easier for you to navigate all this fucking madness. But while I was away…” He trailed off. “I thought you’d chosen Xavier, and it felt like the best part of me had died.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. The pleasure and relief of hearing him speak like this was mixed with so much guilt. I was shaking as I spoke. “There’s something I should tell you…”

Greyson went rigid against me.

I swallowed roughly, gripping the front of his T-shirt, afraid to let him go. “I was with Xavier. Recently. I was with him the entire time you were away, because I… I love him.”

The silence was deafening in the dark.

I scrambled to add, “And I love you. I love you so much that I don’t want to hide things from you, I don’t want—”

I couldn’t keep talking without tears welling up in my eyes. My chest was heaving, hurting, but it wasn’t because of any supernatural reason. This was plain old heartbreak. I loved them both so much, and hurting them chipped away at my own sense of self. The constant push and pull made me hate the situation, and myself, even though I knew that the curse was the thing making everything so hard for all three of us.

I just wished that things could be easy.

I just wished that loving and being with one man didn’t mean hurting the other.

In a voice that sounded broken and rough, Greyson said, “I don’t care.”

I was stunned. *What?*

My hands were still against Greyson’s chest, and it felt like his heart was beating even harder. I couldn’t see his expression in the dark, but I could feel his whole body emanating emotion and intensity. “What are you—”

“I don’t care that you were with Xavier, Cali.”

“But how can that be true?” I asked. “I thought you were pulling away because of Xavier. Because you were just so tired of this mess. Because you were done fighting for me and hated me now, and—”

“Don’t you ever doubt my feelings for you again, love.” The words were sharp, hot against my neck. He nuzzled the spot there, like he was trying to memorize my scent.

Relief flooded me. “But what does any of this mean for us?” I asked, shaking.

My head felt full, overwhelmed by how complicated this whole thing was. I didn’t want to be selfish or self-indulgent, not at the cost of Greyson’s feelings, or Xavier’s. But at the same time, it felt like I had no choice—literally and figuratively.

“It doesn’t matter that you’ve been with Xavier. Right now, at this moment, you are entirely *mine*.” There was a growl in Greyson’s voice that made my toes curl. “Do you understand that?”

I’d barely processed his words before he was pushing me backward, slamming my back against the wall. He kissed me. He kissed me like he couldn’t get enough, like a man starved, like he had missed this powerful thing between us as much as I had—perhaps even more.

It felt amazing to be loved this way.

When he broke the kiss, I was still holding my breath.

“Do you understand how fucking hard it’s been to be away from you?” he asked. “How could you ever doubt me, love?”

I was hit by a twinge of guilt for questioning his motives, even after he’d repeatedly told me that he wanted to put my happiness above everything else. “I know your heart was in the right place,” I said, trembling, “but what was I supposed to think? If you keep leaving me without notice, how can I be sure—”

“I never should have left you,” he rasped. He trailed his lips up my throat, leaving love bites all over while I slid my hands under his shirt to feel every inch of bare skin that I could get to.

He was making it so hard for me to concentrate on anything other than the sensation of him. But I still managed to ask, “Then why did you leave?”

Greyson paused. Even though I couldn’t actually see him, I could picture him struggling for an answer. He cradled my face tenderly and whispered, “I had just killed my father. I was emotionally raw and needed time to think. I had to do right by Joss. But the truth is, all the time in the world wouldn’t stop me from thinking about you, Cali. You have to know that.”

I did know that, deep down. *Of course, killing his father had taken a toll on him. Why hadn’t I realized that?*

I shivered at the overpowering emotion in his words. My eyes felt scratchy. “Why couldn’t you just tell me that, then? Why couldn’t you be honest with me?”

“I knew you wouldn’t have let me go. I hate what this curse has done to you, and I thought—I thought I could help by staying away, but that only made me miss you even more. I was barely holding it together the entire time, and right now…” His voice broke. “The last thing I want to do right now is be away from you, love.”

Without another word his lips smashed against mine; hungry, insistent, and unbridled. Liquid heat surged through my body as he found my lips again, kissing me gingerly for a moment before he switched to controlled savagery, nipping at me with his sharp teeth.

His hands roamed my body restlessly, stopping for a second on my ass before coming to rest on the strip of flesh between my shirt and the waist of my jeans. His hands stayed there as if he were considering something, and then he lifted me off my feet. He situated himself so that I could feel the press of his cock.

He pulled away for a moment, and again the darkness shrouded his intent in mystery. “Don’t stop,” I whispered. “Unless we should put the power back on?”

“Not on your life,” he said. “I can’t take my hands off of you long enough to do that.”

He lifted me so that his face was level with my breasts. I gasped when I felt the hot tickle of his breath against them, turning the nipples to hard, pulsing nubs beneath the thin fabric of my cotton shirt. He held me with one arm while he scooped my left breast free from my bra. He rubbed his face against it and then his lips grazed the nipple before he began suckling it. He toed the line between pleasure and pain, alternating between teeth and tongue.

I covered my mouth as a moan tore from my lips. I could feel the arousal pooling between my legs as he moved to the other nipple, licking it and kissing it with the same care that he’d shown the other.

He held me close against him so that my back was no longer against the wall and brought my face back level to his. The gentleness he’d used on my breasts was gone, and now he was ferocious as he positioned his cock just right so that it rubbed against my clit. He was relentless. He gripped my ass, and I hooked my arms around his neck, bent my knees, and spread my legs wide so that he could continue his motion right where I needed it most.

“How’s that feel?” he grunted, his voice a growl in the darkness.

“So good,” I moaned. I could feel the beginning of a climax building, and I lost all concept of space and time. My eyes were wide open, but in the darkness, it was like they were closed tight. I pulled myself close to him and covered his lips with mine. He panted as he moved me up and down against him, and I could tell that his quick breaths were a result of arousal rather than exertion.

Before I could even speak, I felt him slide down to his knees in front of me. He pulled my jeans down, *tearing* my underwear off as I pushed the pants all the way off. He used one hand to grab my thigh and move it over his shoulder, while the other pinned me back against the wall.

A sound escaped my lips, something like a moan and a cry, as I gripped his hair.

“You’re so perfect,” he whispered, nibbling on my inner thigh, trailing down and teasing. I looked down, but I couldn’t see him, and every sensation was heightened. He was the one on his knees, but I was the one who felt helpless, submitting to him in the dark. He used his tongue and fingers on me until my hips were twitching toward him, begging.

I kept begging and begging, and he kept teasing me.

When I came, my entire body was pulsating, the sounds coming out of my mouth so intense that I was afraid everyone in the house would hear. Though, I wouldn’t mind all that much if Maren heard us. I covered my mouth with one hand to smother the noise, tugging at his hair with the other. Even after I was done, he kept licking and kissing between my legs, and I couldn’t stop writhing. I couldn’t stop needing him.

He shushed me a moment later, suddenly rising to his full height. He was still pressing me against the wall, and his hand was over my mouth now. His touch was tender but firm. “You have to be quiet, okay?” I nodded pitifully while he muttered in my ear. “I adore every inch of you.”

It felt amazing to have him touch me, make me feel good like this after he’d been away for so long. He had me caged against the wall, trapped in the darkness, but I felt so safe and cherished that I was melting.

I was still panting, but I managed to get back down to earth long enough to realize that I wanted to return the favor…

“I better turn on the breaker,” he said, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

“Not so fast,” I said, my voice low. “It’s your turn now.”

**Episode 1056**

GREYSON

Cali was shaking in my arms. Her hands trailed all over me while she kissed at my neck, marking me with little bites and licks. I could still taste her on my tongue, could still feel her heat. It was incredible.

Being with her was the most amazing thing I’d ever experienced. Every time felt like the first time, like I couldn’t get enough of her—of her kisses, her skin, her hands on me. She knew my body so well, could make me shiver in seconds.

I’d been such a fucking idiot to think I could stay away from her.

How could I? How could I ever leave her behind when the only time that I ever felt alive was when I was around her? When, no matter how much I denied myself, the thing that mattered to me above all else was having her in my life? When I could feel her love and care for me like a second heartbeat?

“I missed you so much,” she whispered after taking off my shirt. She brushed her lips over my collarbones, my chest, her fingertips pressing into skin that felt feverish under her touch. I rested my hands against the wall while she lowered herself down in front of me, onto her knees. She felt out my body in the dark, making me shudder.

She couldn’t see me, but I could see her.

The thought of Cali getting me off like this was almost too much to handle.

I could see her licking her lips as she unbuckled my belt.

I could see her face, her surprise when she felt how hard I was for her. When she stroked me with her hand, I stifled a groan. It was when she put her mouth on me, first licking and then sucking, that I was a fucking goner.

I’d been a goner for her from the very beginning—I’d known it when I’d almost kissed her on the porch, back at the old pack house. And my feelings had only grown stronger and stronger over time, overwhelming my mind and soul. She made me feel like I had a soul, like I could hope for the future. For a future with her.

It had all come back to me today, but it had never really left. The bond between us had always been undeniable, and at this point, even though I knew I should fight it, be less selfish, I *couldn’t*. If I was going to be honest with myself, I needed to fucking acknowledge that I couldn’t stay away from her. Not when I needed her so much.

“Did you think about us like this while you were gone?” she asked against my hot skin, and I felt a shiver run down my spine.

“All the time,” I choked out, reaching down to brush my thumb over her lips. I traced her smile, a wicked one, before she doubled down on her efforts. She made everything feel hot and hazy all around me as she took me deeper into her throat, swallowing down, as far as she could go.

Dreams of this did no justice to how her mouth actually felt.

She moved her hand at my hip, urging me to move forward, and the heat kept rising in the pit of my stomach. I pressed my lips together to stop myself from making sounds, but I could barely fucking control it.

“*Fuck*,” I groaned.

I was unable to stop myself from grabbing a fistful of her hair as I pushed into her mouth. She moaned against me; I was so goddamn close, and she seemed set on continuing, but I had other ideas. I wanted to come inside her. I wanted to feel that, see it here in the dark, where her body and her heart were mine—and only mine—for the taking.

Where nothing and nobody else existed.

When I tugged at her hair and pulled her back, she gasped. “What—”

Before she could utter another word, I dragged her up by the nape of her neck and pushed her against the wall again. “Let me,” I begged. “Let me come inside you, love. I want to feel you.”

She nodded breathlessly, and I took her mouth with mine for another kiss that made me feel like I was sky-fucking-high. She felt light as a feather, so I picked her up quickly. I pressed her back against the wall, her arms wrapped around my neck, our kissing never stopping.

I’d missed this so much I thought I could fucking die the moment I slid inside her.

She was so warm, so fucking wet for me, that my eyes rolled up into the back of my head.

“*Greyson*,” she moaned. She clawed at my back, whimpering as I moved, my hips angled to hit her at the just right spot. She made a sound that was more like a wail, and I had to smother it once more with my lips over hers.

“I can feel you shaking all over me,” I muttered, sucking on her lower lip. “You gonna come for me again?” I asked in her ear. She nodded again and again, gasping. “I love seeing you like this so much,” I said. She whimpered, shuffling against my neck as I continued. “I missed you so fucking much, love.”

When she came, it felt so good that I wanted to bow down.

“I love you,” she choked out. She grabbed onto my shoulders, her hips stuttering as I moved faster and faster inside her, kissing her once more as I tipped over the edge.

Like always, it was perfect.

She went still afterward, still pressed against the wall, my hands on her thighs, her arms wrapped around my neck. She panted in my ear. We were both fighting to catch our breath as I slowly slid down to the floor, taking her with me. Still together, still holding each other.

I rested my chin on her soft hair, taking in her incredible scent. I felt so lucky to have her. I felt so calm, more relaxed than I’d felt in days. More relaxed than I’d felt in what seemed like the *years* I’d spent without her. How the hell could I ever be without her?

She would always, fucking *always*, be mine.

“Cali…” I trailed off, her name on my lips as I closed my eyes…

And drifted off.

*I woke up in a large bed, tension bleeding off me until I turned to my right and saw her. Cali. She was sleeping soundly, her hair like a halo around her face. She was gorgeous, breathtaking. She looked just like she did today, only her belly was round, poking up through her sleep shirt.*

*And then it hit me.*

*She was already six months pregnant.*

*We were going to have a baby.*

*We were going to be a real family.*

*The image filled me with such a powerful sense of happiness that I almost fucking swooned. Grinning from ear to ear like an idiot, I slipped out of bed. Cali had been craving croissants for breakfast recently, and it was the least I could do to please her. To remind her how much I loved her.*

*I got dressed quickly to head to the bakery. I snuck out of the room, making sure to be entirely quiet. Cali had been having trouble sleeping lately, because the baby kept kicking, so I wanted to let her rest. I had no idea how I knew that, but I just did.*

*And I loved that I did.*

*I looked around the hallway of the house; the residence was strange but familiar. I was pretty sure I’d never seen it before, and yet I was sure that it was our house. Humming under my breath, and with a smile on my face, I headed downstairs and toward the front door.*

*When I stepped outside, I was faced with a gorgeous rose garden that I knew Cali loved. I was thinking about bringing a fresh rose upstairs and placing it on my pillow next to her when I saw movement across the street.*

*I looked up. A woman, tending to her own rose garden, waved at me.*

*I was about to wave back when I recognized her, and my stomach grew tight.*

*It was Lauren, one of the three witch sisters. I squinted at her.*

*What the hell was she doing here? And why did her rosebushes look better than mine? I was about to call out to her when I saw a jogger pass by. She gave me a smile, and I recognized her as Posie, the second sister.*

*This made no sense.*

*I was about to turn back into the house, to check on Cali, when I caught sight of Chloe.*

*She waved at me from her porch—the one that belonged to the house next door.*

*What on earth was happening here?*

*“Have you decided yet, Greyson?” Chloe asked calmly. “Are you ready to change your destiny?”*

*And then—*

I was shoved straight out of the dream.

“Greyson?” Cali caressed my face, looking at me with worry. “Are you okay? Did you black out again?”

I swallowed roughly, shaking.

It had happened again.

Only this time, the witches had been in my dream.

What the hell was happening? Were they the ones doing this to me? And if so…

*Why?*

**Episode 1057**

VIOLET

“What’s going on?” I asked Charlie.

“Accident. We’re being rerouted,” Charlie said, and continued driving.

It was the first conversation we’d had in the past half hour. The silent car ride was making me anxious, but I was sure that my anxiety was nothing compared to how Charlie was feeling right now. Poor thing. He was so tense that I could see his jaw clenching and unclenching. We were about to see his parents, and he was already stressing out about the meeting and what it would mean, how it would go.

I couldn’t blame him, though. Ever since he’d found out he was a werewolf, his life had been an endless roller coaster. And now, learning that he was a legacy vampire hunter? While being a werewolf? It was all too much for him. It was a lot for me, too.

I thought about something that Greyson had said about vampire hunters and felt a tingle run up my spine.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you something…” I said hesitantly.

Charlie glanced at me. “What?”

“Greyson mentioned that vampire hunters don’t… that they don’t stop at vampires,” I said. “He told me that they hunt anything supernatural.” I paused. “*Anything*.”

My insinuation was obvious. It hung heavy in the air between us.

Charlie shot me a look. “Greyson’s reading way too much into this.”

I couldn’t help but press further. “He’s an Alpha, he knows what he’s talking about. Are you sure that your parents have only targeted vampires all these years?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” Charlie snapped.

I flinched at his sharp tone. It always took me aback when he acted like this—like he had no patience to deal with me or my questions. This version of Charlie was just so different to the Charlie I’d originally met.

“Just asking,” I said in a low voice, looking through the window.

We spent a moment in silence, and I felt a lump form in my throat. I wasn’t sure why it was there. The stress was getting to me, too.

But then Charlie broke the silence. “I’m sorry for snapping at you,” he said quietly. “I’m freaking out a little, but that’s no excuse to talk to you that way. It’s not really your fault. None of this is.”

I watched Charlie’s profile. He looked as beautiful as ever, but now some softness had returned to his features. That was the Charlie I loved the most.

“I get that being stressed is a constant thing for you these days, but is there something in particular that’s getting to you right now?” I asked. “Is it because I’m with you? Are you worried about me meeting your parents, or is it something else?”

“It’s really not about you. I’m nervous about seeing my parents in general.” He shook his head. “I have no idea why they felt it was necessary to fly to Portland right this second to meet with me.”

I frowned. “Didn’t they explain why on the phone?”

Charlie sighed. “No. Not even when I insisted. They just kept saying that we’d talk when we met up. I don’t know how to feel about that, though…” He trailed off. “Honestly, I think they’re going to try to bring me back with them to Minnesota.”

The lump in my throat returned tenfold at the idea of Charlie being anywhere away from me. I didn’t know what I would do if his parents kept pressuring him about moving back. But either way, I was certain that we would figure things out together. We were mates, after all.

“Whatever happens, I’m with you,” I said, squeezing his hand.

He glanced at the place where our skin connected and offered me a small smile. It was full of sweetness and longing, and it was the first one I’d seen from him all day. It made my heart race.

It made me feel so hopeful about our future together. About our happily ever after.

Charlie asked me what I wanted to listen to on the radio, and the rest of the ride was uneventful. He smiled a couple more times when I sang along to some cheesy pop song—until his expression shifted entirely to a scowl as we pulled into the parking lot of a seedy-looking motel. He parked the car, and I could see the tension on his face.

Slowly, he turned to me, taking a deep breath. “Maybe you should wait in the car.”

My stomach clenched at his suggestion. “Oh, don’t worry about me. I’ve fought werewolves, vampires, everything. I’ll be fine.”

Charlie reached for the door, but hesitated to get out. He looked so pale and sickly that I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked quietly.

Charlie swallowed visibly, turning to face me. “What will happen if they find out that I’m a werewolf?”

His face was filled with so much vulnerability that I couldn’t help but reach out and squeeze his shoulder, trying to comfort him. “Why are you saying that like you’re blaming yourself for what happened to you? The attack was *not* your fault, and at the end of the day, you’re still the same person you were before. If your parents loved you then, they’ll still love you now. Their love doesn’t come with guidelines. You’re still their kid.”

I didn’t know what to make of Charlie’s expression. He seemed sad, almost bitter, but I wasn’t sure about that.

“All that sounds great in theory,” he said. “In practice, though, I don’t know if things are going to be that simple.”

“Come on, you’re allowed to be optimistic.” I tried to sound as reassuring as possible. “After all, your parents came all the way here to see you, so they definitely care about you.”

Charlie paused, seeming to process my words. And then he turned to me and asked one more time, “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather wait in the car?”

I shook my head, determined. “Let’s do this.”

Quietly, Charlie and I got out of the car and headed to his parents’ room. It was on the second floor. We’d started climbing the stairs, Charlie leading the way, when he froze. He turned to face me, swallowing thickly.

“Maybe we should just forget this and leave,” he whispered, his eyes wide and a little panicked.

I held him by both shoulders and squeezed. “Charlie, come on. They’re your parents, you can’t keep running away from them. You can do this.”

Charlie stared deeply into my eyes, pressing his lips together. The connection between us felt so strong right then that I could actually sense my heart sending courage to his. He nodded curtly, and we continued to climb the stairs to the second floor.

After looking around for a bit, we found the room. Charlie stopped a few feet away from the door and turned to me. “Maybe you should wait here? I don’t want to startle them.”

I nodded, but on the inside I felt hurt. From the very beginning, Charlie had been telling me not to go with him—was there a chance that he was ashamed of me? Because I was a werewolf? Or because I was his girlfriend? Had his other girlfriends been different than me? Nicer, or better-looking?

No. No no *no*—I couldn’t be thinking like that!

I couldn’t believe things like that, or let myself fall down that rabbit hole of self-doubt and self-hatred. Charlie and I loved each other. We were mates. I could feel our connection deep in my bones. But what I didn’t know—and couldn’t feel—was his relationship and connection with his parents. The fact was, he knew them better than I did, so I needed to trust him when it came to dealing with them.

Shooting me a final glance, Charlie stepped up to his parents’ door.

Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the door.

For a brief moment, there was nothing but silence.

And then I heard the sound of locks unlocking—multiple locks.

A second later, the door opened.

A petite but fit, beautiful woman in her forties pulled Charlie into a hug. “You’re here! Oh, my baby, I’m so happy you’re here!” She pushed Charlie’s hair back from his forehead and beamed at him, her expression full of emotion. Her eyes had welled up.

She seemed so nice and endearing that I wasn’t sure why Charlie had been nervous to come here in the first place. I was so relieved to witness such a wonderful, warm welcome. Charlie deserved nothing less than loving and accepting parents.

Hopeful and determined, I stepped toward them. The second I did, Charlie’s mom’s eyes shifted on me. Her smile faded in an instant. Her gaze took a calculating look that was a shock to me. She moved Charlie to the side, bringing herself in front of him as if she wanted to protect him. And then she faced me, staring me down.

In a serious tone, she asked, “And who is this?”

**Episode 1058**

“Greyson? Are you okay?” I asked again. I twisted up to look into his face in the darkness, my heart pounding.  
 “Yes,” he said, nodding, “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, unwilling to let him blow me off. “*Did* you black out again?”

He still hadn’t answered me.

“Cali, don’t worry about it.” He ran a hand through his hair and braced himself to stand.

“I *am* worried about it,” I said, grabbing his arms and helping him to his feet. “And you telling me *not* to worry only makes me more worried.” Why was he trying to play this down? “This is the second time you’ve blacked out in the space of a few hours.”

“I know that—”

“You need to see a doctor—”

“I’m not going to—”

“*Greyson*.” I fixed him with a leveling gaze.

He met my eyes for a moment. “I’ll think about it,” he finally said. Then he reached out and straightened my shirt. “Now how about I go check that circuit breaker?”

Everything we’d just had together was fizzled out in a matter of moments. I bit my lip as I watched him move off into the darkness. I heard rustling and the metallic clank of a metal clasp opening. There was the snap of switches flipping and then the lights flickered back on.

“YES!” Torin’s voice carried from upstairs. “MAGIC!”

When Greyson reappeared, he was shaking his head but also grinning slightly. “Maybe we should head up.”

I nodded, but I didn’t smile back. He could blow me off all he wanted, but something was clearly going on with him, and all the joy I’d been feeling just from being with him—all alone in the warm dark—was slipping away. In its place, fear and anxiety were creeping in. I looked up at his strong back as he climbed the stairs ahead of me. “Maybe I shouldn’t go looking for Artemis right now,” I said.

He looked over his shoulder at me with a frown. “What?”

I shrugged. “Maybe now’s just not the best time to leave, if you’re not…”

He paused and reached for my hand, pulling me onto the step above his so we were level, then he pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I’m fine, Cali. You should go. Find Artemis. She’s your sister; I know you’re worried. Find Xavier and go.”

Still biting my lip, I nodded. “Okay,” I said reluctantly.

I didn’t know why he was being so difficult. And why was he so unbothered telling me to bring Xavier? I knew he wanted me to be safe, but I didn’t know how to take it. Moments ago he’d acted like I was the only person in the entire universe, and here he was being distant again.

*Greyson*, I thought to myself, *why do you have to be like this?!*

As we stepped out of the stairwell and into the kitchen, Torin danced by.

“Thank you!” he sang happily. “Was it difficult to fix the magic lights that shine from above?”

“No,” I said quickly. I loved Torin, but I wasn’t in the mood anymore to talk to anyone, let alone someone so peppy.

“Because you two were down there a really long time,” Torin added.

Heat rushed to my face, but Greyson shrugged casually. “It was nothing I couldn’t handle.”

Astrid was leaning against the kitchen counter. When I looked over at her, she raised an eyebrow, which made me blush. That made her smile.

Greyson cleared his throat. “But from now on, maybe you two should go easy on plugging things in.”

“Oh,” Torin said, looking suddenly deflated. He glanced back at Astrid. “Okay. You know, I saw a tub of paints and brushes in Violet’s bathroom. Maybe we should investigate those.”

I turned to Greyson as Astrid and Torin headed out of the kitchen and toward the stairs. “I hope Violet’s not too attached to her makeup.” I scanned Greyson’s face, trying to decide if he looked more or less pale than usual. “Have you had these blackouts before?” I asked, frowning.

“I’m fine,” he said again.

I huffed out an irritated breath. “You keep saying that, and I keep not believing you. Healthy people don’t just black out for no reason. This is serious, Greyson—”

He put his hands on my shoulders. “I know, and I’m taking it seriously. But you have to understand, I’m not a human, Cali. I’m a werewolf, *and* an Alpha. I can handle this.”

I was worrying my lip so much, I was starting to taste blood on my tongue. I *wanted* to believe him, but the worry made my chest feel tight. “Twice in one day, Greyson.”

He gave me a long look. “If it happens again, I’ll call a doctor.”

“Promise?” I asked.

He nodded. “I promise. Does that make you feel better?”

Not much, but I nodded. “I guess.” A doctor could take blood and listen to Greyson’s heartbeat, but what if none of that was the problem? What if the problem was the curse? What if the problem was me? I looked into Greyson’s eyes. What was going on with him? Was he okay? The curse hadn’t killed any of us on Halloween, but maybe it was going to kill us all slowly, over time.

Greyson gave my shoulders a quick squeeze. “I’m going to head out—”

“Where are you going?” I asked quickly.

“I’m going to check on Sage,” he said, giving me a small smile. “She’s out on perimeter patrol.”

Watching him go, I couldn’t banish the feeling of dread that had settled deep in my stomach. I had been so worried when he was gone, but now that he was back, I had a whole new set of anxieties.

But I was comforted by the knowledge that if anything did happen to Greyson while I was out looking for Artemis, the rest of the pack would be here to look after him. Rishika was as loyal as they came. Though I hadn’t seen her in a while. I frowned. Thinking about that reminded me that I needed to talk to Xavier, by Greyson’s own suggestion. I needed to ask him about coming with me. We’d see how that went.

I looked around, wondering where he might be, but then I stopped, feeling… *awkward*. I squirmed a little, still feeling Greyson’s touch like a physical print on my skin. Maybe it’d be better if I showered before I went looking for Xavier.

As I headed upstairs, doubts crept into my head. It had been hard, with Greyson gone, but it was hard having him back, too. It was just that I loved both of them—so much. And *Greyson* had made the first move in the basement. Yes, I’d *wanted* to kiss him, to hold him, to be with him; but if he hadn’t been into it, I would have known and nothing more would have happened.

It wasn’t like I could explain that to Xavier, but it was the truth, and the reality of my situation. But as I climbed the stairs, I knew I was going to have to talk to Xavier.

With Greyson gone, Xavier and I had been in a decent place. It had felt like we were sort of… *together*, again. At least, that was what it had felt like before I’d said Greyson’s name in the laundry room. After that, we’d been back to square one again. I sighed as I turned on the shower and pulled off my clothes. That was how it always was: one step forward, two steps back.

After a quick—but thorough—shower, I headed back downstairs, running a hand through my damp hair, looking around for Xavier. I checked the living room and the kitchen. Pack members were hanging around, talking and playing video games, but there was no sign of Xavier. I frowned, trying to remember the last place I’d seen him. I headed out the front door and walked around the side of the house, but instead of finding Xavier, I spotted Maren chasing after Fenrir, who was running across the dead grass.

I stood back, watching the little boy as he sprinted, laughing, ahead of his mother. The resemblance between the boy and Greyson just couldn’t be denied, and it made me feel the same way it had the first time I’d seen him—unnerved as hell. Maren had said that Fenrir wasn’t Greyson’s son, but… I just didn’t know what to believe anymore.

Maren slowed in her pursuit of her son and looked up. “Oh, hi. How’s Greyson?”

My eyes widened and a flush heated my face. “*What?*” I spluttered, wondering how she could possibly know about what Greyson and I had done in the basement. Had she heard us?! I cast a furtive glance over my shoulder, trying to gauge how close Maren was standing to the house. There were narrow basement windows all along the base of the house, but they were all closed. I knew werewolves had sensitive hearing… Did Dark Fae have special hearing, too? Had I been loud? I’d definitely *tried* to be quiet.

I must have been thinking these crazed thoughts for a long time, because Maren’s expression grew concerned.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You were just in the kitchen. I could see you from here.”  
 “W-what?” I stuttered. “Yeah!” I said, too brightly. “We were. And I’m *fine*! I’m just… He’s just… We were…” I might have gone on like that, blathering like an idiot, except at that moment, something happened that distracted us both.

Fenrir gave a short yell and then there was a sharp cracking noise, accompanied by the sound of ripping cloth. And there, where the boy had just been standing, was a baby wolf pup. Fenrir’s wolf stood still for a moment, as if shocked, then bounced up, clearly thrilled.

I stared at him, completely stunned.

His wolf looked exactly like Greyson’s.

**Episode 1059**

XAVIER

When Iñigo tried to fight back, I dove on top of him, knocking everything from the counter. Glass shattered as plates, glasses, silverware, ketchup, and mustard went flying across the already fucked up diner. Chairs tumbled backward as we brawled. The vampire was strong as a fucking ox, and I struggled to keep him down. Then, with a growl, he wrapped his cold hands around my wrists and yanked, bucking his whole body at the same time, and knocked me back.

I landed hard but jumped straight up again. Iñigo was coming for me, so I only had time to partially shift before I lunged at him, but he seemed to know what I was going to do before I did it and sidestepped me easily. He danced back and then lunged again, coming for my neck, fangs bared.

With a roar, I planted my hands on his shoulders and threw him back, and he collided with Rishika, who had come to back me up. She had partially shifted and made a swipe for him, but the bloodsucker spun away from her with a surprising amount of grace.

I blew out a frustrated breath. This bastard was crafty. He looked like he was in maybe his late twenties, but he was probably a hell of a lot older than he looked. Vampires were like that. Being dead and having their aging forever stalled made it hard to know how many candles to put on their birthday cakes. That creepy kid-vampire Charlie had killed was a prime example. He’d looked like a nine-year-old yet was a shit-ton older than any kid.

Iñigo leapt away from Rishika but made the mistake of moving right back into my path, and I went for him, but some other guy jumped in. I slammed into him and pinned him down against the diner’s brown vinyl floor. My hand was still human, so I punched him and felt his nose break beneath my knuckles. I looked up at Iñigo, his goon subdued below me.

“*Where is Ava?*” I growled.

Iñigo looked at me holding his guy to the floor the same way he might have if a customer spilled milkshake everywhere. An inconvenience.

“Where is she?” I ground out.

He didn’t look like he was in the mood to talk, which was just too bad. I clenched my fist and hit his guy again, then again.

“I could do this all day,” I breathed. “You want his blood on your hands, bloodsucker?”

As blood streamed from every hole in his colleague’s face, Iñigo glanced at a door behind the counter. I followed his gaze. The door looked like it led to a storage room or something, though it was locked with a giant deadbolt.

In a split second, Iñigo was gone, likely using his vampiric speed. Leaving his guy for dead? Fucker.

With one final punch, I knocked the other vampire out and got to my feet.

Rishika looked annoyed. “I fucking hate vampires.”

“I know,” I said, staring down at the unconscious one at my feet with distaste.

“At least this one doesn’t reek of rotting flesh,” Rishika said with a shrug.

I frowned. “That *is* weird. Why doesn’t he, though? Why couldn’t either of us smell him?”

Rishika wiped a smear of blood off her cheek with the back of her hand. “Maybe he’s using some kind of spell to mask it?”

“Maybe.”

Rishika bent and started going through the guy’s pockets, throwing what she found onto the floor. Wallet, phone, lighter… She hit the jackpot when she found a ring of keys attached to his beltloop.

“Looks like he doesn’t care if we go snooping, does it?” she said.

We tried about a dozen keys before we found the one that fit the deadbolt on the storage room door, but when we finally got it open, we found that it wasn’t a storage room at all. It was a set of stairs that lead downward, presumably to a basement.

Rishika started down, but I laid a hand on her arm.

“Let me go first,” I said when she looked back.

The stairs were narrow and creaked with every step. I’d been expecting the basement to open up when we reached the bottom, but instead there was a narrow passageway—like a hallway—which led to a series of cages. They were large, waist high, and big enough to fit a large dog. Or a wolf.

Or a person.

“What *is* this place?” Rishika asked quietly, a slight quaver in her voice.

I shook my head. “Not sure. And keep your voice down. He could’ve come down here through a back way.”

I looked in each cage we passed, but they were empty. Until we came to the very last one, where I could see a thin, pale hand sticking out from between the bars.

*Ava*.

She was lying on the bottom of the cage, apparently asleep. The bars looked rusty, which was strange, as all the other cages were gleamingly clean steel.

“Xavier.” Rishika had stepped forward and was looking closely at Ava and the cage. She looked up at me, her face pale beneath the bronze of her skin. “That’s dried blood.”

My whole body was cold as I looked at Ava’s limp form in the cage. I crouched down and picked up her hand, which felt like ice. I stared at her still, pale face. She was dead. After all this—after *everything*—she was dead. I could feel my hands starting to shake.

This didn’t make any sense. Didn’t I *want* her to be dead? I’d *killed* her, the first time. I had tasted her blood on my tongue and lived with it for years. And then, when she’d come back, there’d been plenty of moments when I’d wanted to kill her again.

She’d been nothing but trouble for me. She’d deceived me. And Greyson. She’d pretended to be Cali. She’d betrayed me. *Again*. I could never forgive her for that. But this… I hadn’t expected this. My body suddenly felt heavy, like it had been turned to stone.

Then her hand twitched. I looked up, my heart pounding. Had I imagined it? Was that just her nerve endings firing?

“What the hell was that?” I murmured, looking at her closely. I could sense Rishika behind me, but I didn’t look at her. I was watching Ava, carefully, until she shifted slightly, like she was moving in her sleep, and moaned softly. “Holy shit.” I grasped her hand. “Ava? Can you hear me?”

She didn’t move, and she didn’t respond to my voice. I shook my head. There was nothing simple about the way I felt about her, but it was clear she had nothing to do with the orb’s disappearance, and there was no way I was going to leave her to rot in this hellhole.

“We’re getting you out of here,” I told her.

“What are you going to do?” Rishika asked doubtfully. She glanced back toward the stairs. “Vampires are crafty bastards. He *let* us come down here. We have no idea what he could be planning.”

“I’ll kill him first.” I concentrated so I could partially shift, then used a claw to break the lock. Then I shifted back and pulled Ava carefully out of the cage and into my arms.

She weighed nothing, and—distantly—I wondered if she’d been eating since she’d left the pack house. She was still out, but her body nestled into me, her head resting against my chest as we headed toward the stairs.

But, as I started to climb up, Rishika laid a hand on my arm.

“What?” I snapped, looking back at her.

She raised her eyebrows. “I’m going first this time.”

I ground my teeth but stepped back so she could go first. She moved cautiously up the stairs, and I followed behind, Ava beginning to stir in my arms.

Rishika reached the top of the stairs and stepped into the diner. When she turned back to look at me, her eyes were wide. “He’s gone!”

“*What?*”

“Iñigo’s guy.” Rishika shook her head. “He’s gone.”

“Shit.” I hurried up the stairs. Rishika was right. The vampire was gone. There was only a bloody stain on the floor of the ruined diner to indicate where he had been. “That’s not good.” I looked around at the empty place. ABBA’s “Dancing Queen” was blaring from the speakers. “We have to get out of here.”

Rishika shot a glance at the unconscious Ava in my arms. “What are you going to do about her?”

Ava’s thin cheek was pressed against my chest. Her face was pale and bloodless, but calm, like she trusted me to take care of her. Dammit. I couldn’t just leave her here. “Let’s go,” I muttered, dodging Rishika’s actual question.

Outside, we saw Mabel again, still leaning against the building, still smoking. Her eyes were so red and glazed, and though she looked in our direction, I was fairly certain she didn’t actually see us.

I yanked the car door open with one hand and gently placed Ava in the back seat.

“I’ll drive, if you want,” Rishika said, an odd look in her eyes as she watched me.

“Fine,” I said, tossing her the keys.

I braced a hand on the seat and leaned across Ava to grab the far seat belt, but then I looked down again as Ava’s eyes began to flutter.

“Xavier?” she murmured.

“Yeah,” I said, gruffly. “You okay?”

She didn’t answer. Her eyes were barely open, and I wasn’t even sure she was truly conscious, but she reached for me and pulled me into a kiss.

**Episode 1060**

“Oh my god,” I gasped, as baby Fenrir-wolf jumped up on me. He was heavier than I’d been expecting, like a furry, excitable bowling ball, and I stumbled back as he licked my face.

“Oh, Fenrir, don’t!” Maren chided, making a grab for him. “She’s already taken a shower, baby. She doesn’t need another one.” She looked up at me, her dark skin reddening. “I’m so sorry about that. He just gets so worked up.”

“That’s okay,” I said, wiping the warm, wet wolf drool from my face.

“He’s just discovering his wolf and keeps shifting at unexpected times,” she explained, putting him back on the ground, where he scampered around in a tight circle. She watched him, a fond smile on her face. “He loves it. His favorite thing is exploring these woods. It’s hard to keep up with him, but it’s so beautiful out here.”

“Yeah, it is,” I said, with a vague glance toward the trees.

Maren glanced up at me and pointed discreetly at my jaw. “I think you missed a spot, there. Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine,” I said, wiping the drool away. But it wasn’t fine. It wasn’t fine at all. Inside, I was *freaking out*. Everything about Fenrir’s wolf looked like Greyson. He was a mini-Greyson, nose-to-tail. It was completely adorable, but also totally terrifying. What did it *mean?*

I couldn’t stop thinking about what Artemis had told me—about how Fae couldn’t become werewolves. I had believed her, but as I watched Fenrir, whose silver-grey coat shone brightly in the sunlight, I started to wonder. If that were true, then how the hell could I explain this kid? He was clearly a werewolf, but his mother was Fae. Did that mean he had Fae magic, too?

And if so, what could that mean for me? If Fenrir could be both, did that mean there was a way I could become a werewolf, too?

My mind was racing along at about a million miles an hour when Fenrir bounced away from his mom and toward me again, ready to pounce. I caught sight of him just in time and jumped away—I didn’t want to get slimed again—but Maren must have had the same thought, because she moved toward me to catch Fenrir, and we collided, our heads slamming into each other, making a sound like two coconuts knocking together.

“Ow!” I said, my hand flying up to my head. I looked around quickly and was surprised to see Maren on the ground. “Oh my god, Maren! Are you okay?”

Fenrir shifted back to his human form and scrambled across the grass to his mother’s side, his face scared. “Sorry Mom! Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay,” she said. She put a hand on Fenrir’s round face and gave him a calm, reassuring smile. “I’m fine, baby. Cali and I just bumped.”

“Maren, I’m so sorry,” I said, twisting my hands. “Did I hit your face?”

“I’m fine,” she said, rubbing her cheek. “It was just an accident.”

It *had* been an accident, but on her beautiful skin, I could see the dark mark I’d left on her high cheekbone. “I’m *so* sorry. Maybe we should put some ice on it, so it doesn’t bruise.”

She rubbed it for a moment more, then opened and shut her jaw a couple of times. “Yeah, maybe some ice would be good.” She scooped up Fenrir, who was starting to shiver in the cold November breeze. “Come on, little one. Let’s get you inside and find some new clothes.”

“I’ll get the ice, if you want to get him dressed?” I offered as we headed back inside.

“Thanks,” Maren said gratefully. “I think there are some clothes in the dryer.” She disappeared into the laundry room, then reappeared with an armful of clean clothes. She sat at the kitchen table and balanced the little boy on her lap while she shook out a pair of tiny jeans and a sweatshirt. “Honestly, at the rate we’re going, I’m going to have to get this kid a whole new wardrobe. I have no idea how many clothes this little guy has ruined.” She shook her head. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

I laughed as I grabbed a handful of ice from the freezer and dropped it into a clean dishtowel. “I’ll bet.”

“I hope this sporadic shifting thing is just a phase.” She glanced up at me, sighing. “How do werewolf parents keep up? What do they do in the winter months? How are their kids not freezing their little wolf butts off?”

“I remember when I first realized how many pairs of jeans Xavier went through,” I chuckled. “At that point, I think I owned, like, four pairs of jeans. *Total*. I was appalled.” Maren laughed. “Since then, though, I’ve realized that werewolves are basically nudists. It’s kind of shocking at first, but it makes sense, economically. And environmentally. Here.” I handed Maren the ice pack.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile. She settled Fenrir in her lap, then took the towel and pressed it to her cheek.

Fenrir looked up, curious, and touched the towel. “Cold.”

Maren nodded. “Cold,” she affirmed.

I took a step back, feeling a little awkward. It was a strange moment. I wasn’t exactly sure how I felt about Maren. It had felt like we were at odds when she’d helped me with the fairy ring, but now she was being really nice and really cool.

She was also incredibly beautiful, which was deeply annoying, but I knew I shouldn’t hold that against her. People couldn’t help what they looked like.

I cleared my throat. “Um, thank you.” Maren looked up, curious. “For your help, earlier. With the fairy circle… ring… thing. From before.” Nice, Cali. *Really* smooth.

Maren nodded. “I’m sorry it didn’t work. I know you were hoping for more guidance.”

I shrugged. “Well, you know. Fae magic. Not always reliable.”

“That’s true.” Maren smiled. She hesitated. “I’m sorry for being terse with you earlier. I wasn’t expecting to come here. It’s been hard—harder than I thought. I’m trying to adjust to everything: leaving Portland, coming here with Greyson…”

She trailed off, and there was a strange pause. I looked down at Fenrir. I wondered if the shifting had tired him out, because he was sitting very still on his mother’s lap, his startling grey eyes half-closed.

“How *is* Greyson?” Maren asked, breaking the silence. “Is he okay?”

I looked at her, surprised. “What do you mean?”

Her dark eyes searched my face for a moment. “I’m just worried about him.”

“Why?”

She frowned. “Has he… passed out at all around you before?”

I felt like I was a step behind in the conversation. “You mean before today?”

“Um…” Her eyes darted away. She adjusted the compress on her cheek, like she was trying to give herself something to do—stalling for time. “It’s just that something actually happened when we were in Portland, at his apartment.”

Maren’s voice was light and musical, but this statement rang in my ears like she’d screamed it at me. I didn’t even want to *think* about the context of that incident, and what Maren might have been doing at Greyson’s apartment in Portland, but I couldn’t help it, and my head spun with possibilities. I took a deep breath, trying really, *really* hard to fight against the hot, bitter feeling clawing its way up my chest. I knew it was jealousy, and I tried to push it back down. I had no reason to feel jealous. I had literally *just* been with Greyson. I had no reason to doubt his feelings for me.

And, as hard as it was to believe, Maren was really nice. I mean, I hated to admit it—it was always a pain when exes turned out to be nice, especially when they were beautiful, too—but facts were facts.

I was saved from answering by the sound of a car pulling into the gravel driveway out front. I walked through the kitchen and peered out the front windows to see Xavier’s car pulling up. *Where has* he *been?* No wonder I hadn’t been able to find him.

“Excuse me,” I said, glancing over my shoulder. “That’s Xavier. I have to ask him something.”

“No problem,” she said, getting to her feet and dropping the ice pack onto the counter. “I’m going to take this kid upstairs.”

I nodded and hurried out the front door.

“Where have you been?” I demanded, as Xavier stepped out of the car. Again, smooth, Cali.

But I stopped short when he opened the back door, reached in, and pulled Ava to her feet.

For a moment, I stood frozen on the porch steps, too stunned to move.

All I could see was Xavier’s hand in hers, and I saw red.

“What are *you* doing here?” I demanded. And then, without waiting for an answer, I lifted my hands and, using my magic, blasted Ava back.

**Episode 1061**

CHARLIE

“*Mom*,” I said, stepping out from behind her arm. “Calm down. This is Violet, she’s with me.”

“Who is she?” my mom snapped, looking up at me.

“She’s my new…” I paused, thinking hard about the right word to describe Violet. “Girlfriend” didn’t sound right—she was so much more than that. But I couldn’t exactly tell my mom that Violet was my mate. That was a pretty werewolf-y term and it was *not* a discussion I was prepared to have at the moment. So I was going to have to settle for something simpler. “She’s my new girlfriend.”

“Your girlfriend?” my mom asked, confused. She looked at Violet with a frown. “What happened to Sandi? When did you break up with her?”

I flinched. “Um—”

“Is this…” My mom glared at Violet. “Is *she* why you left Minnesota?” she asked coldly.

I looked at Violet, who was looking miserable. I hated that my mom had brought up Sandi.

*I’m sorry, Sunshine,* I mind-linked to her. *I’ll handle her.*

“No, Violet’s not why I left.” I nervously shook my hair out of my eyes. “I just needed to get out of there for a bit. I’ve never really been out on my own, and I wanted to get some space. Some time for myself. That’s all.”

Next to me, I could feel tension radiating off Violet’s body. I reached for her hand and gave it what I hoped was a reassuring squeeze. Her hand was cold in the November wind, but she squeezed back. I didn’t want her to be worried or scared. I felt so certain about her, and I wanted her to know that there was no way I was going to go anywhere without her.

I took a deep, steadying breath. “I’d never left Minnesota before, except for a couple of family vacations. I’ve always lived within fifteen minutes of our house, Mom. My whole life—”

“That’s because that’s where our family is from, Charlie,” my mom broke in. “That’s our home. It’s where we have our roots.”

“Roots you *hid* from me,” I snapped, more forcefully than I’d intended. Apparently I was a little more upset than I’d thought.

My mom’s eyes widened with surprise, and she darted a quick glance at Violet.

“Don’t worry about Violet,” I assured her. “I’ve told her everything.”

Now my mom’s eyes grew round as dinner plates, and the color drained from her face. “You *what?* *Charles!*”

“You know, there must be a vending machine around here somewhere,” Violet said. She looked pale, too, as she took a step back from the door. “I’m just going to go find something. Get something cold to eat. Something crunchy to drink.” Violet started to blush. “I’ll be back.”

I was still holding her hand and gave it another squeeze, as if to tell her it would be okay. But maybe it was for the best that she was giving me a minute alone. Maybe it would be easier to talk my mom down without her there, and she could be normal again by the time Violet got back.

Violet shot me a scared smile and headed off down the hall in the direction of the ice machine.

My mom opened the door of her room wider. “Inside, Charlie. Now.”

“Where’s Dad?” I asked as I walked into the room.

“He’s just out on an errand,” my mom said, closing the door. She flipped the lock and rounded on me. “How could you tell her about us, Charlie?”

Part of me wanted to sit down and tell my mom the whole story, but I hardly knew where to begin. “Because I love her, and we trust each other,” I said. “That’s why. I couldn’t keep something this big from her.”

But my mom was already shaking her head. “Isn’t that what you said about Sandi?”

“This is different,” I said quickly. “Totally different.”

“*Charlie*—”

“Besides, you never told me not to tell anyone,” I added, though this felt petty. “Don’t tell people you’re a vampire hunter” probably wasn’t something my parents had thought they’d have to spell out when we’d last spoke.

My mom must have been thinking along these lines, because she narrowed her eyes. “Don’t play this game, Charlie. This is serious. And this isn’t just about you or me or your dad. This is much bigger than all of us.”

“How much bigger?” I asked hesitantly.

“We belong to a society.”

My heart thudded. “Like a club?”

“Like a *secret society*,” my mom said. “The Land O’Lakes Defenders.”

My brain spun with this information and I said the first thing that popped into my head. “‘LOL’?”  
 My mom glared. “And our lives often depend upon our discretion. No just *our* lives, but the lives of all hunters.”

I glanced around the room. I was going to need somewhere to sit down. “How many of you are there?” I asked quietly as I dropped into the desk chair.

My mom folded her arms across her chest. “In our chapter, probably about fifty active hunters. But that doesn’t include relatives. Spouses and children and retired hunters.”

I swallowed hard. “So, wait… If this is passed down through the family, does that mean that Grandma was a hunter, too?”

My mom nodded, her gaze steady on me.  
 I let this sink in, trying to imagine the tiny old lady who’d made soup and baked cookies for her bridge club every Thursday taking on vampires in the dense forests of the Midwest. I dug a hand through my hair. “I don’t believe this,” I murmured.

“And now it’s time,” my mom said.

I looked up. “Time for what?”

My mom raised an eyebrow. “Time for you to be inducted into the Defenders.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked warily. “‘Inducted’ is kind of a loaded word. Like a ritual? Are you and Dad going to haze me?”

But before my mom could answer, there was a quiet knock on the door. My mom tensed, then peered through the keyhole. She made a short hissing noise of irritation and flipped the lock.

Violet stood in the doorway when she opened the door, holding an armful of soda. “I wasn’t sure what you liked,” she said to my mom, “so I got a few.”

“Thank you,” my mom said politely, though she didn’t move to help Violet with the cans.

I stood and grabbed half of the cans, and Violet and I placed them on the small table near the window. I opened up a cola and downed half the can in one gulp. I hadn’t realized how thirsty I was, and maybe the shock of everything was lowering my blood sugar, because I felt an instant hit of energy as the sugar and the caffeine hit my bloodstream.

“Have whatever you’d like,” Violet said, trying to smile naturally. “I got plenty.”

“Thank you, Violet,” my mom said, but she still didn’t move take anything. She looked tense and strained.

“Mom,” I said with a sigh. “Whatever you’re going to tell me, I’m going to tell Violet anyway, so you might as well just tell us both.” I looked at Violet. “She was just telling me about the induction process for the Defenders.”

Violet’s eyes grew wide, but she stayed quiet.

“So what happens?” I asked, turning back to my mom.

My mom blew out a breath out through her nose. “Charlie, she can’t—”

I interrupted her. “Violet stays.”

Mom huffed again but began to speak. “It is a ritual, one that’s been carried on for hundreds of years to bring new hunters into the society. This is what we’ve wanted for you for years. We just wish…” She glanced between Violet and me. “We just wish that it wasn’t like this. But you will learn everything. All your questions will be answered.”

I tightened my grip on the soda can. “I can’t even think of what questions to ask.”

My mom nodded. “There’s a whole world out there that so many people don’t even know exist.” She began to pace the length of the room. “But it’s our job—our *duty*—to protect everyone else from it. From the nightmares that they don’t even dare to think about—”

It sounded like she was just about to start on some pretty epic lecturing, but then the door burst open and my dad rushed through it, looking windblown and alarmed. He slammed the door shut and locked it. Then he flew to the windows and yanked on the blinds, dropping them down.

“Um, hi Dad,” I said.

My dad looked over, confused, but when he saw me, his face broke into a smile. “Charlie!” His gaze moved to Violet. “Who’s this?”

“Violet,” my mom said, not bothering to mask the disgust in her tone. “Charlie’s new *girlfriend*. Who apparently knows everything now.”

Dad absorbed this information in just a heartbeat, then he rushed to his suitcase at the end of the bed and threw it open. Then he pulled out a pair of silver-bladed knives.

I took a step back, staring at him as the blades of the knives flashed in the light of the bedside lamps. “What are you doing, Dad? What’s going on?”

“Paul?” Mom asked.

My dad stepped forward and pressed a knife into my hand, then turned and held the other one out to Violet. “Ready yourselves. There are werewolves.”

**Episode 1062**

Ava collapsed to the ground in a heap, and I spun to look at Xavier. “Why the *hell* did you bring her here?” I demanded.

But Xavier had rushed to Ava’s side and was looking at her closed eyes. When he turned to look at me, his blue eyes flashed. “What the *fuck* is wrong with you, Cali?”

“I-I blasted her,” I stammered, astonished by his reaction. What the hell had he expected me to do? “It’s *Ava*, Xavier.” As far as I was concerned, she deserved it. And I’d do it again. I held up my hands, ready if Ava went to attack me.

“Open your goddamn eyes, Cali,” Xavier growled at me.

And then I *did* look at her, and I saw what I hadn’t immediately seen before—Ava looked terrible. She was pale, and her neck and chest were a bloody mess. She had circles beneath her closed eyes so dark they looked like bruises. For a wild moment, my heart thumped in my chest. Had *I* done this to her?

But no. I couldn’t have. Some of the blood was dried and dark—hours, if not days, old.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked, coming down the steps.

“She’s hurt,” Xavier snapped. He pulled Ava’s frail form into his arms. Her pale, thin limbs looked fragile and bird-like, and on closer inspection I could see that she was covered in bruises.

“Why isn’t she healing?” I asked nervously. “She’s a werewolf.”

Xavier shook his head, his mouth pressed into a grim line. “I don’t know. It might be the blood loss. Maybe she’s just lost too much.”

“And how did she lose so much blood?” I asked, my stomach knotting.

“She was captured by vampires,” Xavier said, still not looking at me, his eyes still on Ava.

“*What?*” I gasped out. I looked at Ava’s mangled body again. “A *vampire* did that to her?”

“At that diner,” Rishika said. “Remember that shitty little place off the highway where we saw her?”

I nodded mutely.

Rishika shook her head in disbelief. “Can you believe it? A diner run by vampires.”

We all looked down when Ava mumbled. She shifted a little in Xavier’s arms, then winced in obvious pain.

Guilt washed over me. Ava looked so frail and was clearly in a lot of pain, and I’d made it worse, but…

Wait, was I feeling *sorry* for her?

For *AVA?*

For the woman who’d pretended to be me and slept with both my mates? The master manipulator? The guilt was washed away in a moment. Clearly Ava was hurt, but I also knew that—deep down—the woman was despicable.

I mean, what the hell was she doing working at a diner run by vampires, anyway? The moment I’d walked into that place and seen her there, I’d known there was something shifty going on. Who knew what she’d done to make the vampire attack her? I folded my arms across my chest as Xavier and Rishika helped Ava to her feet, and I scowled as Ava leaned heavily against Xavier’s side.

She probably deserved it. I tried to be a nice person, but she really didn’t bring it out in me. I wouldn’t apologize for it.

“Where are you going?” I demanded, as they started moving toward the house.

Xavier eyed me. “She needs to rest. I’m bringing her inside.”

INSIDE?!

Before I could say a word in response to this spectacularly insane statement, Greyson stepped out of the front door and moved down the steps.

“What’s going on?” he asked, looking around. His eyes widened with shock when he saw Ava. He looked at her for a moment, taking in her pallid appearance, then a shadow darkened his grey eyes and he turned on Xavier. “What is she doing here?”

Xavier met his eyes. “I brought her,” he said, a challenging note in his voice.

“Listen,” Rishika said, shifting Ava’s weight a little. “Maybe it would best if I brought her inside. I don’t know how much longer she’s going to hold up out here. She’s freezing.”

Xavier nodded. “Yeah, that’d probably be best. I need to talk to my brother. Thanks, Rishika.”

Rishika nodded and, mostly carrying Ava at this point, helped her up the steps and through the front door.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Greyson rounded on Xavier. “Are you out of your *mind?* How could you bring her here? She may have helped us fight Silas, but she also deceived us. All of us!” he growled, his eyes dark with remembered anger.

“You brought Maren here,” Xavier shot back.

Holy shit, he was right. *Both* my mates now had their exes at the pack house. What the fuck was going on here?

“I don’t remember *you* running that by anyone,” Xavier continued.

“Maren has nothing to do with this,” Greyson snapped, gesturing at the door through which Ava had disappeared.

Xavier shook his head with a bitter laugh. “Of course she doesn’t. Your actions never have anything to do with anything, do they?” Greyson’s eyes glittered dangerously. “But the fact remains that Maren’s here. And Ava needed help.” He turned to me. “I found her locked in a cage by a vampire. Would you have wanted me to leave her there? To die like that?”

I bit my lip. No matter how much I hated Ava, I’d also seen the condition she was in. “No,” I admitted reluctantly. “But why were you even at that diner?” I asked, my eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“I was looking for your sister,” Xavier growled.

My eyes grew wide. “You were? I had no idea.” He hadn’t said anything about looking for Artemis. I gave my head a shake, trying to push past the surprise of this announcement and get to the information. “Did you find anything?”

Xavier nodded. “We found her scent. Found the car she took—*my* car—abandoned, near the diner. That’s how we ended up there.”

“*And?*” I asked impatiently, when he didn’t go on. I was desperate for information—*any* information—about Artemis.

Xavier’s face fell and he shook his head. “Nothing. She wasn’t there, and with everything that happened with the vampire and Ava, we lost her scent.”

My heart sank. They’d found her scent. She had been in Xavier’s car, and then left it. She had been close—so, *so* close. I bit my lip again, thinking. What could have happened to her? Where was she going? And why? Was this the orb’s doing?

I looked up. “I need to go find her.”

“Cali—” Xavier started.

I shook my head. “I *have* to. What if the orb is doing something to her? Making her do things she wouldn’t normally do? I have to find her before it’s too late.”

Greyson nodded. “I think you should go. But not alone.” He glanced at Xavier. “Both of you should go.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes and scoffed. “You’ve got to be shitting me. This? Coming from *you?*”

*See?!* I wanted to shout.

“Don’t start, Xavier,” Greyson said, and there was a warning note in his voice. “If the orb is affecting Artemis, there’s no telling what could happen. You know what that thing’s capable of. We sealed Silas up inside it, and the last thing I want is for that piece of shit to have a second coming.”

Xavier passed a hand through his hair. “Well, we can agree on that much at least.”

Greyson nodded. “But Ava—she can’t stay here, man.”  
 Xavier’s eyes hardened. “She has to. She’s weak. She’s lost a lot of blood. Listen, I don’t trust her any more than you do, believe me.”

But as I looked at Xavier, I wondered if this was really true. I knew he and Ava had a complicated past. Of course they did. He had saved her—even after everything she’d done—when he could have just left her to die. The old Xavier probably would have left her.

He was being the bigger person—really trying to be a *better* person—and I knew I should try to do the same.

Even if I did hate Ava’s guts.

Greyson was looking at Xavier with a hard expression. He didn’t look angry, but he did look like he was doing some very hard thinking. “She’ll have to be monitored, then. Closely. I’m talking twenty-four seven. She won’t be able to leave without any of us knowing exactly where she is.”

“Yeah, fine,” Xavier said dismissively. “Rishika’s already on that. You know her. Besides, Ava might end up being useful. This vampire, Iñigo—he was a real bastard. Ava worked at that diner for a while; she might have some information on him.”

“Maybe,” Greyson said, though he didn’t look convinced.

“She might have some information about Artemis,” Xavier added. “The place was destroyed before we got there. Artemis might have been involved somehow. Maybe Ava could give us some answers about this guy.”

Greyson rubbed a hand along his jaw, thinking. “You think she might be playing us again?” he asked.

A jolt of fear forked through me as Greyson gave voice to what I’d been worried about. I stepped forward, my heart beating fast. “How do we know that Ava didn’t set all of this up?”

**Episode 1063**

ARTEMIS

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Deacon swore, twisting around to see his phone bouncing down the highway behind us. “That was my phone! I need that! I have an audiobook on there that I’m only halfway done with—”

“Shut up!” I snapped. “I meant what I said before, vampire. You keep talking, and you’re going out the window just like your little phone thing. Now *stop* talking,” I added, because he was still whining, and I was trying to think. Iñigo had offered to help me, but I knew he couldn’t be trusted—my first clue had come when he’d tried to cut a deal with me for his blood feasting friend. Maybe throwing the phone out the window had been a bit of an extreme reaction, but long-term planning had never been my strong suit.

Deacon blew out a huffy sigh. “So what now, smartass?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, cutting a glance his way. The truck was big, and I didn’t like to take my eyes off the road.

Deacon rolled his eyes. “I mean, you’ve stolen Iñigo’s car, you’ve kidnapped me, and you’ve commandeered the company truck. You’re in a shit-ton of trouble, little girl. What’s your plan?”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “Listen, little vampire man. I get that you don’t know me, so I’m just going to tell you that I have been in *much* worse trouble than this. This—with the kidnapping and the stolen metal horses and stuff?—this is *nothing*. This is like a day’s worth of trouble for me. Besides,” I said, shooting him a smile, “I don’t need a plan.”

Deacon stared at me. “And why is that?”

My smile grew into a grin. “Because you’re going to help me get out of this.”

He shook his head and turned to the window, looking sulky. “Fat chance.”

“Okay,” I said lightly. I looked around at the desolate dunes as we zoomed past. “I guess I’ll just drop you off somewhere, since we obviously can’t be of any use to each other.”

Deacon shifted, a little uncomfortably.

“Cold day,” I added. “Getting to be winter. Not much food for all the wild animals out there. They’ll take what they can get. Even if it is some stinking bloodsucker, wrapped in chains who can’t feed—”

“Okay, okay,” Deacon said quickly. “God, you’re sick. Okay, yeah, I’m Iñigo’s driver, so I know the terrain and all the supernatural checkpoints around here.”

*Supernatural checkpoints?* I tried not to look too surprised by this information.

“—and I’ll help you, on one condition,” Deacon continued.

“I’m listening.”

The skinny guy shifted to look at me. “I’ll help you if you agree to release me when you get to where you need to go—unharmed, and with transportation home,” he added.

I thought about this for a moment. I wasn’t crazy about the idea of releasing a vampire back into the wild, but I figured there might be a way for me to use my Fae magic on him if he tried to double-cross me again, so I nodded. “Fine. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Good,” Deacon said with a sigh of relief. He glanced at me. “Any chance you’d let me have a cigarette?” He caught my lethal glare. “Fine, fine. Okay. I know of this place by the shore, it’s called Haystack Rock. A lot of supernatural shit passes through near there.”

My heart sped up—maybe that was the portal. “Okay. What I’m looking for is a really big rock formation. With a lot of small rocks around it. Dark sand. Cold water.” I thought hard, trying to remember every detail of the place where I’d first set out on my journey into the human world with Cali and Greyson.

Deacon nodded. “Yeah, that sounds like Haystack to me. Especially right now—that water’s going to be cold as a witch’s tit this time of year. It’s just a couple of hours away from here.”

I nodded, a smile growing on my face. “Good. Then that’s where we’re heading.”

Deacon sighed. “Well, we’re on the right road. Not too many ways to get lost, so you’re not going to need me.” He leaned his head back on the ripped seat and closed his eyes. “Wake me in an hour and a half.”

The atmosphere was better without Deacon’s whining voice echoing through the cab of the truck, but it left more room for my thoughts, which only grew louder as the miles flew past. I glanced down at the bag at my feet. It was a strange feeling, because it scared me to look at it, but it was also a relief to know that I was soon going to be rid of it. *And* ridding this world of its danger.

I glanced over at Deacon as he started to snore. Maybe I should have used his phone to call Cali before I’d tossed it out the window. She’d probably appreciate knowing that I was okay. Knowing Cali, she was probably freaking out. I felt bad about running off the way I had. I knew Cali was bound to be worried about me; but I also knew that this was for the best. Everyone had been so worried about the orb—or, more accurately, not worried *enough* about the orb—and now it wouldn’t have to concern anyone anymore.

“*I thought you were smarter than that.*”

Staring determinedly at the road ahead of me, I gritted my teeth. I was *not* going to listen to that silky voice that slipped into my brain. I was *not*.

“*How do you know that you can trust him?*”

I couldn’t, that was true—wait. *Stop!* I was *not* going to have a discussion with the orb.

“*He works for someone who wants to use you and me to gain power, Artemis.*”

The voice rang like a silken bell in my ears.

I flipped on the radio, but there was just static. Irritated, I flipped it off again and started to hum tunelessly—anything to block out the sound in my head. But it didn’t work. Nothing could stop it. The voice wasn’t a sound, it was a *being*, slipping soundlessly and weightlessly through the air.

“*We’re in this together, Artemis. Can’t you see that? We have to protect ourselves.*”

I didn’t want to listen to the orb’s words—I knew it was trying to deceive me—but I had to admit that some of what it was saying actually made some sense. I mean, Deacon had *bitten* me. Yeah, he was helping me, but only because I’d fought him off, chained him up, and threatened to leave him stranded on a dune if he didn’t. We weren’t exactly partners in crime.

“*What if they’re leading you into a trap, Artemis? Have you considered that?*”

“Of course I’ve considered that!” I snapped, out loud.

“*If you keep going this way, you’ll probably end up trapped by Iñigo and the rest of his vampire friends. Deacon is just the beginning.*”

My hands on the wheel had started to shake with sudden fear, and—without thinking—I began to pull on the wheel to turn it.

Pushed by the momentum, Deacon rolled to the side and hit his head against the window. Jolted awake, he looked around, terrified and confused. “Whatsgoingon?”

“I know this is a trap!” I screamed.

“*What?*” Deacon shrieked, trying to brace himself with his feet as the truck continued to circle. “What are you *doing?*”

“*It’s a trap!*”

“You’re crazy!” he screeched. “You’re going to kill us both! Stop it!” He struggled, trying to free himself from the chains. When that failed, he threw his weight against me, pushing into me, trying to shove me away from the wheel.

The truck was turning in a tight circle now, and leaning threateningly to one side. I was grasping the steering wheel with all my strength, trying to keep us from going over, and now also trying to push Deacon off me and back across the cab.

“Stop!” he screamed again and flashed his fangs. Leaning down, he nipped me on the wrist.

I let out a yelp of pain as his razor-sharp teeth sliced into my skin, then—pulling one sweat-slicked hand from the steering wheel—used my power to push him back. Most of my concentration was on the road, so I wasn’t sure how powerful it was going to be, but he went rocketing back into the passenger door. It burst open on impact and Deacon tumbled out onto the road below, screaming.

The buzzing in my ears was so loud, I could barely hear the names he called me before he hit the ground, but then there was silence.

I straightened the truck out and looked in the rearview mirror. He was lying motionless on the empty, cracked road. My heart hammered in my chest. Holy shit, had I killed him?

But, as I watched, he pulled himself to his feet, the chains still binding him. He stood up straight and stared after me.

“*You know what you have to do.*”

The orb was right. I did know.

I turned the truck in a screeching U-shaped turn and floored it straight toward Deacon.

**Episode 1064**

VIOLET

I was freaking out.

That’s what was happening inside my head. A total, complete *freak out*.

But, on the outside, I was trying my best to remain calm. I pressed my lips together and looked at Charlie, who was looking pale but like he was also trying to keep it together.

“How do you know there are werewolves?” he asked his dad.

*They must sense it! We can’t tell them it’s us! We have to get out of here!* I tried to catch Charlie’s eye as I mind linked to him, but he wouldn’t look at me,

“My compass,” Charlie’s dad said, still peering out the window. “It indicated that there’s at least one in the vicinity.”

A *werewolf compass?* Was that a *thing?*

Charlie swallowed roughly. “*Werewolves?*” He gave a high, nervous laugh. “They’re not real, are they? Come on, Dad.”

Great acting by my mate over here.

His dad turned a leveling gaze on him. His eyes weren’t the same golden color as Charlie’s—they were darker brown. “We don’t just hunt vampires, son.”

“We hunt *all* monsters, Charlie,” his mother added, and there was something in her tone that sent a shiver up my spine.

I suddenly understood why Charlie had been so reluctant to bring me here to meet them. It wasn’t that he was ashamed of me—it was that he was worried his parents might hurt me. I was a werewolf, and as such, I didn’t usually have much to fear, but this was different. I was surrounded by real threats, and I felt a drop of nervous sweat slide down my back.

“You guys both need to calm down,” Charlie said, stepping toward them. “I need to understand what’s going on here, and I need you talk some sense. Tell me more about the Defenders.”

His father turned away, back to the blinds, one hand still grasping a knife. The light was bright enough for me to see that his knife was pure silver. “We’re sworn to protect humans from supernaturals.”

“But not all supernaturals are bad,” I ventured. Both of Charlie’s parents turned their intense gazes on me, making me feel about an inch tall, but I took a deep breath and went on. “And you’re hunters. Aren’t hunters supernaturals themselves?”

Charlie’s dad shook his head. “It’s not the same. Hunters are the exception. We exist to protect humanity, while all other supernaturals exist only to destroy it.”

I wanted to frown at this, but I fought to keep my expression neutral. *I* wasn’t out to destroy anybody. Who the hell were these hunters, anyway? Had they ever actually *spoken* to a supernatural? Who did these guys think they were?

“—and are there rules?” Charlie was asking. “Rules that you have to follow to be in the Defenders?”

“Yes, of course,” Iris said. “There are rules, and all hunters have to abide by them, or they’ll end up in front of a tribunal. You must learn them in order to join the Defenders.”

“What are they?” Charlie asked.

Iris glanced at her husband, who still had his eyes out the window. “You can do no harm except to supernaturals. You must always answer the call for help when a supernatural is near—”

“Like Superman,” Charlie piped in. His mother narrowed her eyes, and he closed his mouth.

“Never reveal your identity as a hunter to an outsider,” she finished, with a glance at me. She raised her eyebrows. “So we’ll just have to pretend this never happened.”

I held up my right hand, which still happened to be clutching my ginger ale. “I swear I’ll never tell anyone.”

“She won’t, Mom,” Charlie assured her, backing me up.

It was a tense moment, but Charlie’s faith in me felt like a warm hug, and I ducked my head to hide my smile.

Iris might have caught it anyway, because her eyebrows drew down in a frown, but before she had a chance to say anything, Charlie’s dad turned from the window to look at the rest of us. “We should get out of here.”

“Is that really necessary, Paul?” Iris asked.

He nodded, looking grim. “I think so.”

“What’s out there?”

Paul shook his head. “I don’t see anything just yet, but the compass is never wrong. And if a werewolf *is* out there—and especially if it’s after us—I don’t want to just sit here.”

Iris nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

“Wait, why?” Charlie asked, looking at them in confusion.

“We’re hunters,” his father said. “We should hunt.”

As he reached for the door, Iris put a hand on his arm.

“What about Charlie?” She shot a glance back at me. “And his girlfriend,” she added, in an undertone that nonetheless carried.

*I have a name you know*, I thought tersely.

Charlie rolled his eyes.

“Should we bring them along?” Iris asked Paul.

Paul looked between us for a moment, thinking hard. “Yeah, I think so. They’ll be safer with us.”

Based on what I’d just heard them say, I doubted that very much. These were people who had sworn to kill all supernaturals, so the idea of going for an armed stroll with them didn’t really appeal to me.

But there didn’t seem to be any way out of it. Paul pulled the door open and peered into the hallway. “Let’s go,” he whispered, waving us forward. Once we were out in the hallway, he turned to us. “Only use those knives if you’re attacked. And stay close behind me and your mom. You got me?”

Charlie nodded, glancing around the motel hallway. The wind blew through, sharpening to jagged points as it narrowed in the breezeway around us. “Where are we going?”

Paul looked at Iris, who nodded. “The woods,” he said, jerking his chin toward the back of the motel.

“Where?” Charlie looked around, confused.

“There’s a patch of woods bordering the back of the property,” Paul said. “Werewolves love the woods, so we’ll start there.”

He wasn’t completely wrong—I did love the woods. But I also liked going to movies and out to eat and shopping, and saying all werewolves loved the woods felt insultingly reductive. Like he thought all werewolves lived like animals. I wanted to argue, but I bit my tongue. I was frustrated as hell, but, feeling the cold bite of the silver knife in my hand, I knew now was *not* the time.

We headed down the steps to the first floor, then around to the front of the motel, working our way toward the back of the property. We passed the pool, which was fenced in and had a heavy lock and chain on the gate. It was filled with water, but not covered, so the top was covered with a layer of leaves and pine needles.

Beneath it, the murky green water moved sluggishly, and the smell wafting from it was thick with mold and decay. I turned away as the wind blew a particularly strong blast of it toward us. Charlie did too, wrinkling his nose, but his parents walked on, seemingly unaffected by the putrid smell. Did that mean that hunters didn’t have the same keen sense of smell as other supernaturals—like werewolves?

Possibly not.

I tucked that bit of information away as we continued toward the trees at the back of the property. When we stepped into them, I registered the sharp smell of pine right away, but that wasn’t unexpected. I took another breath, breathing deeply, but there was nothing. I got damp earth and the smell of the small animals that made the trees their home, but there was no trace of werewolves in the air. Other than Charlie, who was standing right next to me.

Iris and Paul looked around through the shade of the trees, their eyes narrowed. Without taking his eyes off the trees, Paul reached into his pocket and pulled out a long brass chain with a teardrop crystal on one end.

I watched, curious, as he held it out in front of him. Of its own accord, it began to spin back and forth. With a sinking feeling, it suddenly occurred to me that this was the compass he had been talking about, and it was seconds away from zeroing in… on *me*.

Charlie’s hand flashed out and snatched the compass from his father’s hand.

Paul looked up, surprised. “What the hell are you doing, Charlie?”

Charlie’s eyes were wide with fear. “I-I think I should get Violet back inside. Sh-she’s freezing. It’s freezing out here,” he stammered. “We’ll just go wait in your room. We’ll be fine.”

I took a deep breath and a step closer to Charlie, relieved that he was trying to protect me.

But Iris pulled the compass out of her son’s hand with an angry look. “Do *not* interfere, Charlie.”

“Mom—” Charlie started, reaching for the compass again.

“Charlie, stop! There’s much you don’t understand,” she said, growing angrier. “You need to learn to watch and listen.”

“I really don’t want—”

Charlie stopped talking as his mother gasped. The compass’s needle had stopped moving, and was pointing directly at Charlie.

**Episode 1065**

Xavier looked at me for a moment, then tipped his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

My eyes widened. Having to explain something that felt completely obvious made me feel like I was losing my mind, but I swallowed hard and gave it a go. “I mean, what if Ava kidnapped Artemis? What if she has Artemis hidden somewhere, and she’s just here playing the victim to get back on your good side? You know, to lull us all into a false sense of security so she can trick us? It wouldn’t be the first time.”

But Xavier was already shaking his head. “No, that’s not what’s going on.”

I stared at him in total disbelief. What the *hell* was happening? My idea was just an idea, but… was I *right?* What was happening to Xavier? Why wasn’t he even *listening* to me? Why was he taking Ava’s side over mine?

“How do you know that?” I asked. “What’s stopping her from doing anything in her power to try to get you back, Xavier? She has nothing else left. Would it really be so shocking to find out that’s what she’s doing?”

“Cali—”

“She *wore my face*, Xavier!” I snapped, anger coursing through me. “She wore my face so she could get to *you*!”

“I agree with Cali,” Greyson said, stepping forward. Xavier glared at him, but he shook his head, his grey eyes grave. “We don’t know Ava’s motivations, here—”

Xavier opened his mouth to respond but stopped and looked over when the front door of the house opened. Ava walked out, wrapped in a sweatshirt and a pair of pajama pants. “What the hell is she doing up?” Xavier snarled at Rishika, who was following behind her.

Rishika shrugged, holding her hands up to show she had nothing to do with it. “I tried to stop her, but she wouldn’t lie down.”

The clothes on Ava’s back were practically swallowing her, and she looked pale and wispy, but—*dammit*—she was still stunning. Her curtain of dark hair swung behind her, and the cold of the November day made her pale cheeks pink, and her eyes were brighter now as she looked around at all of us.

Without meaning to, I lifted my hand to my own hair, which I always felt like looked vaguely like a squirrel was about to nest in it.

Life just wasn’t fair.

“I didn’t have anything to do with the orb,” Ava rasped, her gaze on Xavier.

He raised his eyebrows. “And how do you happen to know what we were talking about?”

She pulled the sweatshirt close around her as a breeze whipped up. “Isn’t that why you showed up, X?”

I flinched at the familiarity of the nickname.

“Because of that girl?” Ava continued.

“What girl?” I asked quickly, taking a step forward.

When Ava’s eyes shifted to me, they looked almost black. “The one who looks like you, your sister. She was there, at the diner. She had something.”

“What was it?” Greyson demanded.

But it didn’t seem like Ava heard him; she was still staring at me, but it didn’t feel like she was seeing me, either. “It made all of us crazy,” she said. “We were trying to fight her for it, but she got away.”

I thought about this for a moment. “That’s a pretty tidy story,” I said, a touch of anger in my voice. “She was there, then she was gone.”

“But,” Rishika added, “Artemis fighting a bunch of people…” She trailed off.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “That’s not exactly out of character.”

It was quiet for a moment, the only sound the wind whipping around the house. Ava shivered.

Xavier pointed at Ava. “You—in the house, now.”

We all trooped into the house and filed into the living room. I wouldn’t have thought it was possible, but Ava was looking even paler than before, so she sat on the couch while the rest of us gathered around her, sort of looming over her.

I tapped my foot, though what I really wanted to do was crawl out of my skin. I couldn’t believe I had to stand in the same room as this woman. “How do we know you’re not lying?” I demanded. “You could be faking all of this.” I turned to Xavier and Greyson. “She doesn’t look *that* hurt.”

Anymore… *Ish*.

Ava looked at me, disbelief etched onto her face. “What are you talking about?” She tipped her head and shook her hair away, exposing the ragged fang marks in her neck. “You think I bit *myself?* And what exactly would I be setting up?”

Everyone looked at me, like they were waiting for me to answer. I felt my face flush hot. This was all too much. I didn’t need this chick waltzing in here and putting me on the spot. Hell, she didn’t even have to do anything for me to hate her. Just listening to her *breathe* pissed me off. I crossed my arms defensively. “You’re just taking advantage of the situation to get closer to Xavier because you know he wouldn’t come near you under normal circumstances.”

Ava gave a short, bitter laugh. “Yeah, that’s right. That’s exactly what I did. I planned to become a vampire’s blood bag and get myself locked up in a fucking cage like an animal, just so I could end up back here with a bunch of people who hate me.” She nodded. “I was playing a real long game with that one.”

I glared at her. “Well, if you’ll recall, you pretended to be me, so I don’t think that any of that sounds very far-fetched at all, do you—”

“That’s enough, Cali.”

I felt like I’d been slapped. I looked up at Xavier in shock. “*What?*”

“That’s enough,” he said quietly.

“Are you—” I spluttered, struggling for a breath. I stabbed a finger at Ava. “You can’t tell me you seriously believe her—”

“Yeah, I do,” he said. “I was there. I saw it. I smelled the blood. She was attacked.”

But it could *still* be some weird, elaborate scheme of hers, and I opened my mouth to say so, but Xavier’s voice spoke in my head.

*I don’t trust her either. But please, Cali, trust* me*.*

I looked into his blue eyes. *I do*.

But I bit my lip. Doubts were already creeping into my mind. I did trust Xavier, but I didn’t trust Ava, and her proximity to him wasn’t going to be good news for anyone.

Greyson cleared his throat. “What do you know about the vampire who attacked you?”

Ava sighed and put her hand to her head, like it was hurting her. “His name is Iñigo. He’s a vampire, but I couldn’t get a sense of how old. He’s crafty as hell, though. He masks his scent somehow.”

Xavier and Rishika nodded in conformation, and Greyson looked interested in this information.

I felt my hackles rise. She was an outsider, so it was easy to dismiss her, but watching Ava rattle off that information with such easy confidence reminded me that she was a werewolf, and one who knew this world well. She fitted in easily.

I gave my head a shake. “How is he able to do that?”

She shot a glance at me, then looked away quickly and shrugged. “My guess, based on where he was keeping me? It’s in his best interest to.”

“Why?” I asked.

Ava shrugged again. “It seemed like he was running a blood business.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“There are vampires who have particular… tastes,” Xavier explained.

I wrinkled my nose. “Gross. Like they prefer O negative?”

Greyson shook his head. “Like they prefer werewolf.” He raised his eyebrows. “Or Fae.”

Ava looked up at Xavier. “He was interested in Artemis.”

“What?” I breathed.

Ava’s eyes flicked over to me. “Yeah. I know he sent someone after her when she stole his car.”

My eyes grew wide. “She stole a car?”

“That must have been the scent we picked up,” Xavier said to Rishika, who nodded, looking worried. “They must have taken her.”

My heart was thumping hard, and fear was making me feel cold all over. “Artemis is strong. But if she was able to get kidnapped in a car…” I shook my head. “That’s some karma.” I looked at Ava. “What would they do to her? She’s Fae!”

Ava shrugged, and I had to ball my hands into fists to keep from punching her in her stupid face.

We all turned when we heard footsteps on the stairs and saw Big Mac coming down. Seeing us, Big Mac stopped on the last step. She looked at us, and the group of us looked back at her. For a long moment, no one spoke—like everyone was waiting for someone else to make the first move. I supposed I could be the one to break the tension.

But, in a flash, Big Mac sprinted toward the front door as fast as she could.

Without thinking, I raced after her. “Wait! Stop! Where do you think you’re going?”

**Episode 1066**

ARTEMIS

The truck was barreling toward Deacon, and I was pressing down on the gas as hard as I could. He was staring at me, his mouth stretched open in a silent scream.

Or maybe it wasn’t silent—I didn’t know. All I could hear was the roar of the truck in my ears.

I was close enough to see the whites of his eyes. He was struggling, trying frantically to hop out of the way, but the chains were binding him too tight, making it impossible for him to move. I was almost on him—the front of the truck about to be introduced to his skeletal system—when I blinked out of my blind rage and yanked on the steering wheel.

The truck swerved at the last moment, missing Deacon by inches, but unbalancing the truck so much it lifted onto its wheels on the driver side. The still-open passenger side door slammed shut, then the truck bounced back down onto all of its wheels with a teeth-clattering crash.

I blew out a long breath as I got the thing under control again. The ride might have been fun under different circumstances, but this was anything but. I could hear Deacon shouting at me in the distance, but I ignored him and kept my eyes on the road.

What the *fuck* had just happened? I tried to breathe slowly as my heart rate wound down to a normal pace. I had felt so much rage—like I was on fire, burning from the inside out. I’d never felt anything like that before. It was like I was outside myself, looking in. Out of control. I shot a glance at the bag at my feet, holding the orb. It was as though the orb had magnified my anger and my fear, making it larger and more dangerous.

This thing was a nightmare. I gripped the steering wheel tightly, more convinced than ever that I *had* to destroy it. It was dangerous as hell, but I still didn’t regret taking it. It had tried to control me—it had even succeeded there, for a moment—but I had fought it off. Because I was strong. A hard life had made me that way. Cali had her gifts, but I doubted she—or anyone else—would be able to be that strong.

Not against the orb.

\*\*\*\*

Deacon had said there weren’t a lot of ways to get lost on this road, but after driving for what felt like hours, I was starting to wonder. The road seemed to go on forever—flat and featureless and endless. I had no idea where I was going. I was hungry and thirsty, and I just wanted to stop and think for a moment. I’d been trying to breathe deeply, the way Cali was always telling me to do, but it wasn’t helping. My heart was still beating fast, and now my head was pounding, too.

For about the hundredth time, I kicked myself for throwing Deacon’s cell phone out the window. It would be really nice to talk to Cali. I had a feeling that just hearing her voice would calm my racing heart. Or Orla’s. I just wanted to hear their voices.

I shook my head, thinking hard. It felt like I couldn’t even remember the sound of their voices. Could that be? How long had it been since I’d heard them? Not that long, surely…

All I could hear now—all I could *think* about—was the orb’s silky whisper. Sometimes, I thought it was my own voice.

But that was how it was going to get me, so I couldn’t let it fool me. I could still fight it. Of course I could. I was Artemis. I had both Light and Dark Fae blood coursing through my veins.

That had to count for something… Right?

“*Of course*,” the orb said soothingly. “*You are special, and you have such a special gift. Two types of Fae blood. Dark and Light.*”

“Shut up!” I snapped. “I wasn’t talking to you! And I’m not listening to you!”

“*You have no choice*, *Artemis*,” it said, the sound like velvet knives. “*You are listening, because deep down, you want what I have. And you know that only I can show you the gifts—the miraculous gifts—that your blood promises.*”

I gritted my teeth so hard the pounding in my head grew worse. I knew what it was doing. The Kollector used to use the same tactics on me—the orb was trying to infect me. I kicked it with my foot, sending it flying to the far end of the cab, where it bounced off the passenger door. It was ridiculous, of course—as if a small amount of distance could keep the orb’s influence at bay.

A completely illogical part of me had also hoped to hurt the orb in some way, but it remained silent.

With a sigh, I rubbed my eyes until they felt like sandpaper beneath my lids. I was exhausted, and autumn’s early dusk was starting to fall. I felt around on the control panel until I located the headlights and flipped them on, illuminating the road ahead of me. It wound on for miles upon miles, until, up ahead, I saw the glare of lights.

“Oh!” I said, surprised. It was one of those… places to get the fuel for the car. *Gas stations!* And they also had other things there: food and drinks and bathrooms. And there would be someone I could ask for directions to get to the portal. But—*shit*—I couldn’t call it a portal. I thought hard. What had Deacon called it? Something rock… “*Haystack Rock!*” I shouted, victorious, immeasurably proud of myself for remembering.

I pulled into the gas station and brought the truck to a sudden, jerky stop. I was going to have to work on that. I reached across the cab and grabbed the bag holding the orb—there was no way I was going to let that thing out of my sight even for a moment—and slung it over my shoulder as I dropped down from the cab of the truck to the parking lot.

I got a strange, unsettled feeling as the weight of the bag fell against my shoulder blade, but I set my jaw. *Just ignore it*, I told myself. Just a little while longer, and I could be done with this cursed little sphere.

I strode across the empty parking lot and into the market. A bell over the door announced my arrival, and the young guy behind the counter looked up from his phone with a frown, like he was irritated about being interrupted.

He was pale, with light blond hair. Now that he was looking up, he eyed me with interest, but I looked at the phone in his hands. Maybe he would let me borrow it. Then I could call Cali. Maybe I could even say hi to Rishika. I missed her, too. Kind of a lot more than I was expecting.

But then, a realization hit me, and it dropped like a stone into my belly. I had no idea how to call anyone. I wasn’t exactly sure, but I didn’t think phones just did it themselves. And anyway, the blond guy had a small, pointed face, and judging from the glare he gave me when I walked in, it didn’t seem likely that he was going to let me borrow anything.

I shifted the orb’s bag on my shoulder and walked forward. “Do you know how to get to Haystack Rock?”

The guy smiled, and his face changed completely. He still looked kind of squirrelly, but much nicer. “Sure,” he said, sort of half-rolling his eyes. “Everyone knows where that is.”

“I don’t,” I said defensively. “I’m asking a question. Why are you trying to make me feel stupid?”

He raised his light blond eyebrows. “How do you not know?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not from around here, okay?”

“So where are you from, them?” he asked, leaning across the counter.

It occurred to me that this kid was trying to be cute, and probably trying to flirt—albeit clumsily—and I narrowed my eyes. “Far from here. Now are you going to tell me how to get to Haystack Rock or not?”

The guy smiled again. “Sure thing.” He pointed through the big glass window at the front of the store. “You want to keep going down this road, straight. It’s about forty-five minutes from here. There’s a turn-off. You can’t miss it.”

“What does it look like?” I asked, annoyed.

“You can’t miss it,” he said, grinning. “I swear. There’s a sign.”

“Okay,” I said, finally satisfied. “Thanks.”

I was turning toward the door when a felt a shiver run up my spine.

“*You can’t leave.*”

I stopped, frozen with fear, right next to a display of Mountain Blast Power Punch.

“*You can’t just leave, Artemis. You have to kill him.*”

**Episode 1067**

Big Mac made a beeline for the front door, and she was a lot faster than I would have given her credit for. What was that all about? She’d just taken off without a second glance back at us.

“Hey!” I snapped, chasing her down.

She yanked the door open and flew down the steps to the front yard.

“HEY!” I called again, louder now. “STOP!”

The witch finally stopped and turned to look at me, her eyes blazing like furnaces. “What do you want?” she demanded.

“What do I *want?*” I gasped, my breath coming fast. “I asked you a question. I want the answer. Where are you going?”

Big Mac was breathing hard, too, but she still managed to give a disdainful sigh and roll her eyes. “I am so sick of you getting all up in my business, Caliana Hart.”

I goggled at her. “Are you *serious?* *I’m* in *your* business?” I heard footsteps on the porch behind me and turned to see Xavier and Greyson walking toward us. They stepped next to me, one on either side.

“Where are you going, MacKenzie?” Greyson asked, folding his arms.

But I didn’t bother giving her a chance to answer. I was so over this shit. “*I’m* in *your* business?” I repeated. “*Me?* *You’re* the one who ruined my fucking life!”

Big Mac stared at me, her eyes wide with shock.

I stabbed a finger at her, furious now. “*You’re* the one who told me I was a *due destini* mate, and then did nothing to help me deal with it. Then, when we risked our asses to get that spell book and brought it to you—dropping it in your fucking lap—all you gave me was attitude and a stupid-ass spell that put two people I love in mortal danger. How could you be so careless with our lives?” I was screaming now, my voice disappearing into the cold autumn air, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t stop myself. My heart was beating fast, and tears were filling my eyes. “We could have been *happy* if we hadn’t known! If you’d never told me about any of this shit, maybe things would have been different! *Why did you have to tell me?*”

Big Mac stared at me in the ringing silence. My chest was heaving, and I could feel myself shaking as every emotion I could think of—fear, anger, sadness, loss, rage, guilt, dread—coursed through me, powerful as poison. I had *never* said any of those things out loud. Hell, I’d never even fully let myself *think* them. And now I’d just screamed them into Big Mac’s face.

An extra stab of panic shot through me—had I just made a *witch* angry?

I swallowed hard. In for a penny, in for a pound. “I asked you a question,” I said. “Where are you going?”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes, and suddenly I remembered the threat she had made—about me and Artemis staying out of her way.

I took a deep breath. “Big Mac, are you going to hurt my sister?”

She stared at me for another moment, her eyes very dark, then took a step forward. When she spoke, her voice was low and icy cold. “Let’s get one thing straight before we go any further, Cali: your choices have been your own. I might have told you that you were a *due destini*, but that would have been true no matter what.”

I opened my mouth to respond—to protest—but Big Mac held up her hand, silencing me. For a moment, I thought she was just indicating that she wasn’t done speaking, but then she gave her hand a slight half-turn, and my mouth slammed shut of its own accord. Panic coursed through me. It was like I was back at the Lupo Finale, when Big Mac had frozen me to take my blood. I’d been afraid then, and I was afraid again. Big Mac lived in our house and ate at our table, but she was a witch, and she was stronger than she let on. Stronger than maybe any of us actually knew.

“MacKenzie,” Greyson growled, taking a step toward her.

“What did you do to her, witch?” Xavier demanded.

Big Mac glanced at each of them. “I am *done* with the three of you demanding my services and providing nothing in return. The orb isn’t safe because you couldn’t decide to let me take control of it.” Her eyes narrowed to slits as she looked between us, and her voice was sharp as daggers. “You may think you’re wise—beyond your years, in your own eyes—and that you’re both Alpha enough to control your own destinies, but let me assure you, you’re *not*,” she spat.

I fought to open my mouth—to move at all—as Greyson and Xavier advanced on her. But with another flick of her hand, both of the strong, muscular men stopped in their tracks, seemingly frozen in place.

This shook something loose in me, and I took a step forward. With a jolt, I realized it had only been fear holding me still, and I held up my hands, focusing my power on Big Mac. Never totally reliable, my magic shot past Big Mac, missing her, but it must have done something to our connection, because the spell that was silencing me vanished.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked her. “All I want is to come with you! I don’t want you to hurt my sister. *Please*, Big Mac,” I said, stepping toward her across the dead grass.

Big Mac looked at me, apparently wholly unmoved by my pleas, but as her gaze shifted to something over my shoulder, her expression suddenly softened.

I turned as well and saw Mrs. Smith walking down the porch steps toward us. “*Mrs. Smith!*” I cried, running toward her, relief flooding through me. If *anyone* could talk sense into Big Mac, it was Mrs. Smith. “Please, Mrs. Smith, tell her not to hurt my sister. If the orb really is controlling Artemis, we can’t hurt her. We have to save her! *Please*!”

Mrs. Smith looked thunderstruck by my pleas. She looked at Big Mac for a moment, then at Greyson and Xavier, then back at me, like she was trying to piece everything together. She frowned and took a step away from me, wrapping her arms around herself.

“This is dangerous, Cali.” She shook her head. “The orb is very powerful.” She shook her head again, looking genuinely confused. “I don’t know what would be the right thing to do.”

I stared at her, shocked. Mrs. Smith *always* knew what to do. She could usually be counted on to be calm and soothing, and it was strange to see her looking so scared. I looked over at Big Mac, and found her looking at Mrs. Smith with a soft expression. Perhaps it was upsetting for Big Mac to see Mrs. Smith looking worried, too.

Maybe that was good! Maybe Mrs. Smith was getting through to her.

Big Mac caught me looking at her and her expression hardened again, though she did look *slightly* less angry than before. “Cali, listen to me,” she said. “My goal isn’t to hurt anyone, but if I’m going to get that orb back and take care of it once and for all—which I am—then I need to do what has to be done.” She paused for a moment. “I’m sorry.”

My heart sank. “Then let me come with you,” I said, taking a step toward her.

Big Mac shook her head firmly. “No.”

“Big Mac—”

“I’ll move faster without you.”

“Artemis is my sister! I’m going!”

But Big Mac was already walking away, moving quickly toward the road. I started after her. I could hear the witch muttering something under her breath. I couldn’t quite hear the words, but she was speaking fast and low. Suddenly, my knees buckled beneath me and I fell to the grass. Xavier and Greyson stumbled forward, falling to their knees. Big Mac’s hold on them had been released.

“I’ll be back in two days’ time,” she called over her shoulder, without looking back.

“Wait!” I shouted. I scrambled to my feet and started after her. Big Mac was moving quickly, almost at the road, but I sprinted after her, desperation speeding me onward. I had almost reached her and was just about to grab for her arm when I bounced painfully back, like I’d hit an invisible wall. I fell backward onto the grass.

“Hey! Big Mac! What did you do?” I yelled after her.

She had reached the road, and she didn’t turn around.

I scrambled to my feet and ran after her again, but then the same thing happened, tossing me onto my ass. I looked up at the tall pines and the grey skies above them. There was nothing to see, but it was there all the same. Some kind of boundary, surrounding the property.

I couldn’t go any further. I was trapped.

**Episode 1068**

VIOLET

I froze, watching helplessly as the compass pointer swung toward Charlie. Beside me, my mate was locked in place as well as his parents stared at him in abject horror, as if they were willing the compass to point another way, to not further incriminate their only son in this hot mess of a reunion.

My mind crawled to a halt, my gaze darting between Charlie and his parents. I could feel my fight-or-flight response kicking in. With each passing second, the need to shift, to attack, to flee, itched just beneath my skin.

*We’ve been found out! They’re going to kill us!*

And still, the silent standoff continued, and I didn’t know what to do. If these people had been anyone else, I would have either shredded them or made my escape the moment Charlie’s dad had pulled out that silver knife. But they weren’t just anyone. They were Charlie’s *parents*, whom he *loved*.

And who were currently staring at him like he’d grown a second head. In all of my worst-case imaginings, I’d never even come close to this situation. But then again, I’d never imagined that my mate would come from a long line of paranormal hunters, either.

It seemed that neither of our families were very “normal,” were they? Mine was a pack of werewolves that had looked after me time and time again. And Charlie’s family seemed to have a natural talent for murdering us. Lovely.

We shouldn’t have come here, and we needed to get the fuck out before things got any more out of hand. Maybe if we could cobble together an excuse and make our escape, we could regroup and find a workaround, somehow. A way for Charlie to keep his parents in his life and have a real relationship with them away from the werewolf/hunter dynamic.

I tried to reach out to my mate with my mind. *Charl—*

“Charlie?” Iris said slowly, drawing out each syllable into the most loaded question I’d ever heard. Her fear and denial were audible as she stared at her son.

The compass kept swinging toward us.

My mate unfroze so quickly it looked like he’d flinched, and his words came out in a jumbled rush. “I can explain!”

Iris held up a hand, and her gaze locked on to the compass swinging toward Charlie.

No, wait.

I followed her gaze down to the compass and took in the trajectory of the needle’s elliptical swing. It wasn’t swinging toward Charlie. It was swinging toward me, too, seesawing back and forth between the two of us, obviously indicating—through whatever magic these paranormal hunters had imbued in the device—that Charlie and I were *both* werewolves.

I watched Iris’s gaze shift back and forth between the two of us, confusion flashing in those deep, dark pools. And then she gasped and looked beyond Charlie, her gazing narrowing on me. I realized the conclusion she must have come to and felt my heart sink.

This… didn’t look great.

“*You…*” Iris hissed, and I swallowed roughly. I’d never heard such all-consuming hatred distilled into one word. “What did you do to my son?”

I heard another intake of breath, and I knew that couldn’t have been me—I’d stopped breathing the moment Paul’s eyes had widened even further. “Charlie,” he barked. “Step away from the girl! Now!”

Looking back and forth between his parents, Charlie frowned. “What are you talking about?” He looked at me in confusion, but his dad called his name again, and his attention snapped back to Paul’s wide eyes and colorless face.

“Son, please.” The man looked like he was either going to completely Hulk out and lose his shit on me, or pass out from fear. He spoke slowly, like he was trying to soothe a wild animal, which I guess wasn’t too far off the mark. Charlie hadn’t been a human like them for a long time now.

“You’ve been attacked,” Paul continued, reaching his hand out toward his son. “Now, I don’t know what this girl has told you, what she’s promised you, but she’s messing with your mind. We can get you help, but you need to move away from her. Now.”

My stomach lurched. I knew Iris and Paul were just being protective of their son, and that they didn’t really know me. With their backgrounds, it made all the sense in the world for them to view me as a threat—because I was. But not to Charlie. And I would never, *ever* attack an innocent human, much less my mate. Not that I’d ever known Charlie as a human.

But Iris and Paul didn’t know that, and I could tell from the fear and disgust and horror etched onto their faces that both of my mate’s parents were convinced that I’d attacked their son and turned him into a werewolf myself.

“There’s been a misunderstanding,” I said, trying to defend myself. “I didn’t—”

Iris turned to me with murder in her eyes. “*Silence*,” she spat. I jerked back as if she’d physically slapped me.

“That’s enough.” Charlie stepped in front of me, facing his parents with a determination that made my throat tight. He was doing this for me, for us, and he was willing to choose me over his own parents if necessary.

“You don’t understand,” he continued. “Violet didn’t attack me. In fact, she *saved* me. Many times over. I wouldn’t even be standing here in front of you if it wasn’t for her.”

I swallowed down the emotion clogging my throat. I could only imagine how hard this had to be for him. He’d been so worried about facing his parents again, coming clean to them about becoming a werewolf and all the reasons he’d left Minnesota—especially since he’d found out the truth about his hunter abilities. And after all the fear and anxiety he’d had leading up to this meeting, Charlie had been proven right. In fact, things were likely even worse than he’d imagined.

And he was still protecting me.

But Paul and Iris were staring at their son with matching expressions of doubt and confusion.

“Charlie,” Iris said gently, much softer than the way she’d spoken to me just moments earlier. “I know this is probably a lot to take in, and very confusing. You must not remember the truth of everything that happened to you, but I promise you were certainly not born a werewolf. You were attacked.” Iris pointed at me, her lip curling into a snarl. “*This monster* might look innocent, but she’s a killer. And you’re not at her mercy anymore. Now step away and let us take care of this.”

Before either of us could respond, Iris pulled a silver dagger out of her pocket and held it up high. For a split second, I saw my own terrified face reflected in the surface of the blade, and then Iris was in motion, her face grim as she advanced on me.

I froze helplessly. This was my mate’s mother, ready to snuff out my life. Just like that. And I didn’t know what to do. Normally, I’d shift and attack to defend myself, or at the very least try to run away, but I couldn’t just kill Charlie’s parents—even if they didn’t seem to have any issues with trying to kill me. I’d seen firsthand how the death of a mate’s parent had worked out for Ava and Xavier, and I had no interest in repeating history with Charlie. Still, the lady was coming at me with a silver knife! What was I supposed to do?

Charlie shoved me entirely behind him. If Iris wanted to kill me, she’d have to go through her own son to do it.

“Mom, you can’t kill her! She’s my mate!”

Iris froze and then skittered backward into Paul, who was also recoiling in disgust.

“Your *what?*” Paul demanded.

Before, their hatred and disgust had been focused entirely on me. Now it was focused on *both* of us. They looked at Charlie, their own son, like he was disgusting, like they didn’t know him at all.

“Oh, Charlie…” Paul whispered. His expression shifted from horror to grief, like Charlie’s words had broken his heart. Iris, on the other hand, only deepened her look of disgust.

Charlie’s face fell, and I watched the tears brim in his eyes. His parents were looking at him like he was some kind of disgusting monster. I couldn’t help but reach out and squeeze his hand. I didn’t want him to forget there was still someone here who believed in him. Who loved him just as he was. Unconditionally.

Iris’s grip on the dagger tightened, and Paul reached over to push her hand down. “Don’t be crazy,” he hissed. “This is Charlie. Our son.”

Iris’s eyes were flat and hard as flint. “Listen to him, Paul. He called her his *mate*. He’s not our son, not anymore. The wolf has taken him!” Then Charlie’s mom turned toward us and moved forward, her silver dagger held high.

**Episode 1069**

What the actual hell? I threw my hand out experimentally, watching in shock and fury as my palm made contact with something solid and unyielding. Like an invisible wall.

*Is Big Mac seriously keeping me trapped on the pack house grounds while my sister is off gallivanting around with the most dangerous magical object that anyone’s ever heard of?*

“No!” I cried. This couldn’t be happening. I wouldn’t allow it. I had to help Artemis. I banged on the barrier. “Let me out! I have to find my sister!”

Nothing. I was still stuck on the pack grounds, behind some kind of magical barrier, and it didn’t look like help would be coming anytime soon.

*I can’t believe this!*

I knew Big Mac had a bit of a bossy streak, but physically keeping me from protecting the people I loved? She didn’t get to make that kind of call, bossy or not. Witch or not. Maybe I’d gone a little overboard when I’d yelled at her, and maybe I had accused her of being responsible for things that weren’t really her fault, but this was some serious bullshit.

I turned to face Mrs. Smith, an unfamiliar wave of irritation washing over me as I took in her placid smile. “Why didn’t you help me convince Big Mac to take me with her?” I demanded. I pointed to the barrier and the world beyond it. “That’s my sister out there. And I’m Fae. I could be helping!”

Kind woman that she was, Mrs. Smith took my anger in stride. “I’m sorry, Cali, but I think MacKenzie is right,” she replied softly. “It’s probably best that we let her handle this on her own.”

I couldn’t contain my panic or frustration any longer. “That is definitely *not* best! I should have gone with her. I could have helped her speak to Artemis, and maybe all three of us could have worked together to get rid of the orb. Big Mac might think she’s making the right decision, but I’m sure Artemis does too. Do you really think she’s going to just give the orb up? What’s going to happen to her if she says no to Big Mac?”

Mrs. Smith’s grimace was all the answer I needed.

“If she hurts my sister, I’ll…” I faltered. I’d do *what*, exactly? I was getting a better handle on my Fae powers, sure, but was I really a match for a powerful witch like Big Mac? “Well, she’d better not.”

“Hey!” Maren raced up the lawn, heading toward us. She held Fenrir in her arms. “I heard shouting—is everything okay?”

*Great,* I though gloomily. *As if this situation isn’t already crappy enough, Greyson’s ex and mini-me are getting in on it too.*

A new realization struck me. Was I stuck with these people now? Were we all trapped behind this magical barrier until Big Mac returned?

I tried to formulate a response that wasn’t one hundred percent bitchy and came up short. When Maren reached our group, she set Fenrir down and the boy immediately shot off, darting and dodging around the yard playfully. I couldn’t tell how much of his rambunctiousness was due to being a four-year-old and how much was because he was basically half-puppy.

Then Fenrir darted toward the outskirts, heading straight for the barrier. I opened my mouth to warn him, “Hey—”

And he ran straight through it.

I blinked. *The force field doesn’t affect him.*

I tried to wrap my head around this new development. How was this possible? When I’d tried to get through it, it had been literally like walking into a brick wall. What made Fenrir so special? Were kids immune or something? I looked to Greyson, Xavier, or Mrs. Smith for an explanation, but they looked just as shocked as I felt.

“Um, sorry, but is everything okay?” Maren pressed. “You all look like you’ve just seen a ghost or something.” She strode forward to collect Fenrir.

“Um…” I began, not sure how to explain what was happening, because I didn’t fully understand it myself. “It’s fine.”

Okay, that was a big fat lie—everything was pretty much the exact opposite of *fine*. But I really didn’t want to get into it with my mate’s gorgeous ex, and even if I had wanted to keep her in the loop, I had no idea what I’d have even said.

I watched in confusion and awe as Fenrir darted back and forth across the barrier while he played. It was like it wasn’t even there. What even were the rules of this thing?

*Is it like the opposite of a roller coaster? “You must be this* short *to cross the barrier”?*

“Fenrir!” Maren called. “Come here, baby.” When her son ignored her and kept playing, she strode toward him with a sigh—and crossed the force field to reach her son.

I gasped.

*What the hell? How come* she *can go wherever she wants, but I’m stuck here?*

I took a deep breath and tried to focus. Maybe the barrier only affected pack members? That made sense, right? Those were the people who knew the most about Artemis, Big Mac, and the orb, and were therefore the most likely to get in Big Mac’s way.

Greyson and Xavier both moved closer to me, their eyes narrowed on the force field as well. It was only a slight comfort to me that they seemed just as confused as I was.

Greyson took another step toward the barrier. “If Big Mac trapped us all on the pack house grounds…” Then he moved forward and walked through the barrier with apparent ease. He spun around to face me when he reached the other side, his eyebrows knitting together. “It’s not affecting me, either,” he said.

I crossed my arms with a huff. *Thanks, Captain Obvious…* I was starting to get more and more pissed off by this magical—and apparently prejudiced—wall.

Xavier followed after his brother and crossed the barrier too. “Are you sure that you didn’t imagine it?” he asked.

*Typical Xavier.* I glared at him and strode quickly toward the barrier—

Only to hit a very solid wall, hard enough that I fell back on my ass. I climbed to my feet with a snarl, Fae energy crackling off me. “What the hell!” I shrieked. “So what, this is like my own personal magic doggy fence to keep me stuck in here?”

I was dimly aware of Fenrir nearby, and his childlike whisper-yell to Maren. “Mommy, she said a bad word.”

I ignored Greyson’s maybe lovechild and stared straight ahead at Greyson and Xavier. Both Alphas were looking at me with sympathetic expressions, but I’d gotten to know them well enough to pick up on the signs that they weren’t nearly as upset by all of this as I was: Xavier’s lips kept twitching like he was trying not to laugh, and Greyson’s eyes had a mischievous sparkle.

“Oh, you think this is funny?” I spat. Tiny fireworks were exploding along my fingertips, and I’d never felt closer to absolutely losing my shit.

Xavier cleared his throat and immediately rearranged his face. “No, it’s not funny,” he said solemnly. “But I can’t deny that the idea of you being forced to stay safe instead of rushing off to do your typical Cali heroism does sound somewhat appealing.”

Greyson snorted and nodded. “No kidding.”

*WHAT. THE. HELL.*

*And these were my mates?!*

“What, you can both agree that I deserve to be penned up like an animal? Is that it? Like I can’t be trusted to make my own decisions?” My voice had risen to a shriek. My anger had grown so much that Fae energy was making my limbs vibrate with suppressed power.

I shook my head and approached the barrier. “I’m not going to let a witch treat me like more of a child than the literal toddler!”

“He’s not a toddler,” Maren interjected, her tone way too mild for this conversation. “He’s four, and he’s actually very advanced for his age.”

*Oh no she didn’t! This Fae* *did* not *just correct me about my mate’s possible lovechild’s age! No way. Screw this! I’m going to go find my sister, and no one can stop me!*

I reached deep into my overflowing well of power, letting the energy build inside me. It felt good—satisfying, like I was finally in control. Xavier and Greyson exchanged a look.

“You all might want to step back,” I warned, raising my hands. I focused all my considerable energy on the barrier…

Greyson’s eyes widened. “Cali, n—”

And then I released all my power in a massive rush. There was an enormous flash of blinding light as my energy made contact with the barrier, followed by a huge explosion that rocked the ground.

I was thrown backward so hard I skidded across the grass. Dirt, Halloween decor, clumps of grass, and even bits of candy flew every which way, like we were in a giant snow globe that had just been upended.

Looks like they were right. I was stuck here.

**Episode 1070**

CHARLIE

I couldn’t believe my mother was doing this—lunging toward me with a silver dagger in hand, ready to stab me. Probably going for a killing blow. And if the stab wound didn’t kill me, the silver certainly would.

“*Mom*,” I said, my voice wavering. I was her son. She’d carried me and raised me. How could she just ignore that? I had to do all I could to remind her of who I was, and that I wasn’t just some anonymous monster, and what she would lose if she killed me now.

She didn’t seem to hear me. She kept advancing, the knife raised in front of her. She wasn’t going to stop. My own mother was going to murder me.

Violet grabbed my hand again and I heard her voice thundering through my head. *We have to get out of here!* Then she yanked my hand, hard, trying to pull me away from the threat and back toward the way we’d come from.

But I stayed in place. I didn’t want to run away, not if it meant leaving things like this. These were my *parents*. They loved me. Maybe they were shocked by me turning into a werewolf, and maybe they weren’t handling it super well, but this didn’t mean that we were enemies now, right? Surely we could work this out. Come to some sort of understanding. We loved each other.

Didn’t we?

“Iris, no!” my dad called out. He looked just as pained as I felt, but he wasn’t trying to stop her, either. Not that she would let him.

Dread began to sink in as my mom closed the gap between us, and I realized she wasn’t going to stop. It didn’t matter that I was her son, that she’d loved and cared for me for eighteen years. The moment I’d become a werewolf, my entire relationship with my mother had become a thing of the past. I wasn’t her son anymore. I was a monster that needed to be exterminated.

Violet was right. We needed to leave. I’d seen this look on my mother’s face before—I remembered it from my previously suppressed memories of my parents killing vampires in front of me.

“Iris, please! Wait.” My dad called out again. “There must be some kind of way to reverse it—we can reach out to some of the contacts we’ve made. We can fix this. Don’t hurt our son.”

My mom paused, but only for a second. Then she shook her head. Her voice was deadly soft. “You know as well as I do that there’s nothing else to be done here. Once a wolf, forever a wolf. Our son is dead.”

An involuntary cry clawed out of my throat, and tears blurred my vision. “*Mom.*”

Violet tugged on my arm again, harder this time. Her voice flooded through my mind, breaking my grief-frozen trance. *Charlie!* *We’ve got to get out of here!*

I looked around the trees helplessly. Everything felt like it was going in slow motion. My dad watched, distraught and impotent as my mom lunged forward, ready to kill me where I stood.

And then, quite suddenly, I knew what I had to do.

I shifted. And behind me, Violet followed suit.

When I looked back at my parents through the eyes of my wolf, everything seemed to have screeched to a halt. Violet was tensed behind me, ready to spring into an attack the moment I gave the signal.

But we were at a standstill—me showing them the truest, darkest version of myself, them frozen, gaping at the reality in front of them. My mother looked like she’d just tasted something sour, and I could see tears shining in my father’s eyes.

Then all the blood came rushing back in my head, and suddenly I could see and hear everything with perfect clarity. My werewolf and vampire hunter senses were working in perfect harmony. It almost felt like I could read my mother’s every intention on her face, in the lines of her body, and as she raised the knife to slash at me, I dodged, shoving Violet out of the way of my father, who had also pulled out a silver knife and had been about to attack her.

I threw my head back and let out a loud howl—the only warning I would give them. My parents staggered back just a bit, in shock and fright, no doubt. Just as I felt certain I could predict my mother’s next move, I felt similarly certain that if the werewolf standing in front of them wasn’t their son, they wouldn’t have been thrown off-guard quite so much.

Which meant I had to take advantage of every split second of opportunity I’d been given. Once my parents rallied, I might not get another chance. I bared my teeth and backed up, pushing Violet back, blocking her with my body.

I mind linked with her. *Go!*

Then I turned to face my parents. My dad was holding my mom back, keeping her from pursuing us while she struggled to break his grip.

“Let me go, Paul!” she cried. “That is not our son! We have a duty to protect humanity!”

More than the knife, more than the intent to harm me or the mix of horror and disgust etched into my mother’s face, it was the word “that” that set my teeth on edge. My parents truly no longer viewed me as a human, as something good and worthy of life.

And if that was the case, then they weren’t my parents anymore either. They thought I was a monster? Fine. I’d show them just what a real monster looked like.

Hurt and disgust and grief and fear knotted together in a toxic lump that threatened to suffocate me, and I opened my mouth and *roared*. I was sure the entire forest shook with the force of it. My mom stopped fighting, and Dad’s face lost what little color it had left.

I spun and followed Violet through the woods until we burst onto the parking lot.

The sunlight hit me square in the face and I blinked rapidly, my wolf’s eyes adjusting to the sudden shift. We were standing in the middle of a square, in the parking lot, in the middle of the day—in wolf form. If anyone saw us… *Shit*.

But if we just up and shifted right now, we’d be standing naked in the middle of the parking lot, since we hadn’t exactly had time to remove our clothes before shifting to run from my parents.

That thought made a whole new kind of dread unfurl down my back.

*My parents.*

They wouldn’t stay out in the woods for long, and they wouldn’t just return to their room as if nothing had happened. Even now, they could be following us, ready to finish what my mother had started.

Naked or wolf?

If we wanted to get out of here and blend in, we couldn’t do it like this. It was probably better to be naked in public than run around as gigantic wolves.

Violet mind linked with me. *What do we do? Do you think they’ll come after us?*

I looked back to the tree line to see if my fears had come true and my parents were following us, but I couldn’t see, hear, or smell them. I shifted back into my human form, naked though it was.

Another perk of shifting back? My parents likely wouldn’t attack us out in the open like this if we looked like normal humans.

Violet shifted back too, and for a moment we just stood there naked in the parking lot.

I heard tinkling laughter from behind me, and I wheeled around to see a kid, maybe ten or so, standing on a balcony on the upper level. He was pointing at us and cackling. “You’re naked!” he called out. “That’s rude!”

*Shit*. I grabbed Violet’s hand, she collected her bag, and we ran to our car and got in. We peeled out of the parking lot and down the highway. There was no sign of my parents in the rearview mirror, but I knew better than to assume that they’d given up on hunting us, so I kept driving.

I had no fucking clue where we were going, but the destination didn’t matter as long as it was away from here. Away from my parents. Away from this entire *mess*.

We drove for nearly an hour before Violet put her hand on my thigh. “Enough,” she said softly. “Pull over. We need to make a plan.”

I pulled over to the shoulder in a quiet spot on a back road, tucked far enough away from the highway that we wouldn’t be spotted. There was no traffic around here, and only a few cars were passing on the highway nearby.

Once I put the car in park, I turned to Violet, my mouth open to speak. But no words came out. The shock and horror of what had just happened, of what my parents had tried to do, was finally setting in now that we were safe.

For eighteen years, I’d thought I could count on my parents, that we could trust each other… And now? Now, I didn’t know what to think. My parents had tried to kill me. They no longer recognized me as their son. Did I even have a family anymore?

Violet gently squeezed my knee, and I focused on her face. On my mate, this girl who had become so important to me so quickly. She was my family now, and the one constant in my life. I didn’t know what I’d do without her.

Violet opened her mouth to speak, but I was already leaning forward. I cut her off as my lips crashed into hers.

**Episode 1071**

ARTEMIS

I did a double-take. Had the Orb just told me to murder a *child?*

Wow. It was going to need to up its manipulation game if it was hoping to take advantage of me. Really, this was a joke. If this was its usual method of controlling people, I really had been giving the rest of the world too much credit. Even Torin would’ve been able to resist this sort of brilliant suggestion.

“*You need to kill him*,” the Orb urged me. “*You can’t just leave here without resolving this threat.*”

I rolled my eyes. What in the goddess’s name was the Orb doing, trying to cajole me into an unnecessary murder? And of an innocent gas station child, no less. I laughed out loud and continued to walk away from the kid.

“*Just think about it, Artemis. It would be so easy. He’s young and unsuspecting and disarmed by your great beauty. He would never see it coming. You’d be foolish not to neutralize him.*”

“And you are a very stupid talking ball,” I muttered, heading back to the truck.

“*I’m not stupid. I know you, my dear. And I see you for who you truly are—powerful, dynamic, wild, and great, and terrible—*”

“Did you just say I’m great *and* terrible? Now you’re just hedging your bets.”

“*You are* Artemis*. A violent bounty hunter who has never let anyone or anything stand in the way of what you want. But this human could.*”

“How? He doesn’t know me, and he’s not part of this,” I said. “And even if, by some crazy chance, he tried to make things difficult, I could bowl him over with half a thought. He’d never lay a hand on me, nor would he get in my way.”

“*He could talk. He could tell everyone about the beautiful woman who came into the gas station, and they could use that information to follow you. How long has it been since you let go and leaned into who you are? Wouldn’t it be fun to live a little?*”

I rolled my eyes again. “My definition of ‘living’ doesn’t include murdering innocents, and whether or not that boy tells people I was here is irrelevant. I’m not going to be here much longer. Now shut your nonexistent mouth and give me a few moments of peace.” I climbed into the truck, tossed the Orb onto the passenger seat, and slammed the driver’s side door.

As I turned over the ignition, the Orb tried again. “*You don’t know people like I know people. I can see into his soul. He’s just going to grow up and become an investment banker. Spare the world one more suit, Artemis. Take him out.*”

The truck started and I snorted. “An in-vest-man… what? What the hell are you talking about? I don’t know what the hell that is, but it can’t be as bad as a murderer.”

The Orb laughed bitterly. “*I guess that depends on who you work for.*”

“Shut. Up.” I pulled the truck back out onto the road and began fiddling with the buttons on what Rishika had told me was called the “dash”. The radio turned on, and music filled the cabin. I scrunched my nose up at the sound of a twangy stringed instrument and an even twangier voice singing about some guy’s dog and an ex-wife. A little depressing for my tastes.

I flipped through the channels until I found a beat I liked and turned the music up loud enough to drown out the Orb. In the song, a woman was singing about being a “single lady” and putting rings on things. Like so many other aspects of the human world, I didn’t really understand it, but I liked it. There was something about the beat and the lyrics that felt somehow… empowering?

And because I was having a brief moment of joy and freedom, the Orb just had to find an excuse to speak up.

“*You do know this song is about getting married, not being independent, right?*”it said.

I slapped the steering wheel. “My god, can’t I just have one thing? Leave me alone!” Then I cranked up the music and kept driving, bopping along to the music, psychotic murder orb be damned.

After what felt like more than enough time to reach my destination, I found myself second-guessing the directions the gas station child had given me.

*Has it been forty-five minutes yet? It feels like it’s been at least twice that, but I haven’t arrived at the portal yet.* I sighed. *Time works so differently here.*

There weren’t a lot of other cars on the road, and the sun was getting lower—a sign that the day was moving on in this world, and in my own. I spotted a run-down-looking roadside shack. It looked deserted, but by this point I was losing confidence that I’d gone the right way. Maybe there would be someone at the shack, and perhaps they would be kind enough to give me directions. Bonus points if the Orb didn’t try to convince me to murder them for the crime of existing.

I sighed, pulled the truck over, and pushed my door open.

“*You don’t want to go in there, Artemis,*” the Orb said. “*It would be a mistake.*”

“Sure. Going into a roadside shack is a mistake, but killing a child is all in a day’s work. You need to get your story straight.” I hopped out of the truck.

“*Everything I am doing, I am doing to help us. Heed my warning: Don’t go in there.*”

I rolled my eyes, slammed the door shut, and started for the shack. I arrived at the door in a few strides, reaching out to grab the doorknob.

*I’ve had just about enough of this gods damned voice.*

I jerked my hand out and wrapped it around the doorknob—and then I felt it. White-hot pain shooting through my hand, up my arm, down my shoulder, and ricocheting across my entire body. I was knocked back by the force of the… whatever I’d been hit with, and tumbled down the stairs.

I landed right on my ass, shaking out my hand. “What the hell?”

Balling my fists, I let out a scream of pain and frustration. I was *so damn* *sick* of the Orb!

The door to the shack swung open, and I was greeted by a long, pointy object. The woman holding it stared me down through a spyglass fixed on top of it, doing something to make a distinct clicking noise.

“Who’s there?” her voice rasped. I wasn’t good at guessing human ages yet, but the woman holding the weapon-looking object was probably older than my grandmother.

I scrambled to my feet. “I’m a harmless traveler in need of directions! Don’t hurt me!”

The woman scowled. “Do you think I’m a fool? You’re Fae. That doorknob is pure iron. I have to protect against your type, being so close to the rock. Now, what do you want?”

*Oh.* Relief and apprehension simmered in my stomach in equal parts. This was… good? If this woman was close enough to the rock to feel the need to protect her shack from the Fae, then the portal couldn’t be far. But if this seemingly human woman knew enough to do all of that, then what else was she capable of?

“Who are you?” I asked, clutching my iron-shocked hand to my chest.

“That’s no concern of yours. What I will tell you is that you don’t want to cross me, girl. Now get out of here.”

“*She’s a witch,*” the Orb said.

My eyebrows lifted. “Are you a witch?”

The woman’s eyes widened and then narrowed at me, as if by recognizing what she truly was, I’d marked myself as even more dangerous than before.

I resisted the urge to gulp. *That’s the last time I take the Orb’s word on anything.*

“I said it’s none of your business,” the witch snapped. “Now get *out*.”

“Wait,” I blurted out. “Please, just tell me where the rock is and I won’t bother you again.”

The woman stared at me for a long beat, then let out a long-suffering sigh. She pointed down the road. “Take the left up here and continue on a bit—you’ll get right to it.”

Then, before I could fully process the directions she’d given me, much less ask for clarification or, gods forbid, *thank her*, she yanked her weapon back inside and slammed the door.

Okay, no more chit-chat with the unfriendly neighborhood witch. Still, relief poured into my chest. I’d gotten the exact information I’d needed, and my quest was almost complete. “See, that wasn’t so bad. Let’s go!”

The Orb was mysteriously silent as I jogged back to the truck, got in, and continued driving. It was a bit unnerving not to have the magic item nagging me to death about murdering children or whatever else it was into, but I tried to savor the silence instead of worrying about what might be wrong.

I followed the witch’s directions and soon saw the silhouette of Haystack Rock as I approached the beach. But there was someone standing in front of it.

My jaw dropped. How the hell had Big Mac beaten me here?

**Episode 1072**

GREYSON

The world had exploded around me, and I was thrown to the ground. The scent of dirt and grass and ozone and, oddly enough, burned sugar, filled the air. Everything had turned to chaos and bright light and deafening sound, and in the midst of the madness, I looked around for little Fenrir. He hadn’t gotten caught up in the explosion, had he? If anything happened to him…

I spotted the boy a few feet away, tucked protectively underneath Maren as she shielded him from the blast. She looked absolutely petrified, and I could only imagine this would strain things between her and Cali. Honestly, I couldn’t say I’d blame her if her opinion of my mate changed after this.

*I made Maren come here so she and Fenrir could be protected, and now Cali’s literally blowing up the place.*

I was sympathetic to Cali’s frustration, and how helpless she had to feel right now, being unable to leave the pack house to go help Artemis—but this was *not* the way to go about solving the problem. More than anything else, this just seemed like a temper tantrum.

As quickly as the explosion had ignited, silence set in, and I lifted my head from the ground. Bits of dirt and candy wrappers slipped off of me and onto the grass. That explained the burned sugar smell. Some of Torin’s Halloween candy must have been hit by Cali’s spell.

As the dust and debris settled, I glanced over at Maren and Fenrir again. They were dusting themselves off, and they both seemed just fine. Fenrir smiled brightly. “That was so cool! Can we do that again?”

Maren’s eyebrows lifted and she gave me a small smile. “Your mate really packs a punch.”

*She has no idea.*

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?”

I turned to see Cali, covered in grass stains and dust, a candy wrapper sticking out of her hair. She was standing upright, banging on the magical barrier, which didn’t seem to have been harmed in the explosion.

*Wow, that is some spell.*

I didn’t have much time to admire Big Mac’s handiwork, though, because Cali was raising her hands again, apparently ready to take on the barrier a second time. I rushed toward her, only just beating Xavier. He threw me a dirty look, and I smirked.

That smirk melted off my face when I turned to Cali and saw the panic and fury in her eyes. I honestly wasn’t sure if she was going to blast me into oblivion or throw herself into my arms and start crying.

“Cali, love,” I said gently, grasping her heaving dirt- and grass-stained shoulders. “This isn’t going to solve anything. Come inside and let’s see if there’s some other way we can work this out.”

Xavier edged his way in. “For once, I agree with Greyson. Come on, Cali.”

She looked from my face to Xavier’s, tears brimming in her eyes. “Don’t you understand? This is my mess. My fault. I caused all of this chaos, and now *my sister* is out there with an evil orb—sphere, whatever the hell shape it is—and I can’t do anything to help her. How would you feel if your brother was in danger and you couldn’t save him?”

She glanced pointedly between the two of us. If Xavier ever ended up in a similar situation, I probably wouldn’t cry about it, but I’d want to help him. And if those tables were turned… Well, I liked to think he’d want to help me, but I couldn’t forget the fact that he’d left me for dead in the Kollector’s zoo—something Cali still didn’t know about. But now was not the time for that particular conversation.

I sighed and opened my mouth to respond, but Xavier beat me to it.

“I understand, Cali,” he said. “If Colton needed my help, I’d move heaven and earth for him. But Big Mac is a very powerful witch, and this is clearly a very powerful spell.”

Cali’s jaw tensed, and her face turned a strange—and kind of hilarious—beetroot-red color. That was clearly not the answer she’d wanted to hear.

*If this were a cartoon, there would be steam coming out of her adorable little ears right now…*

I tried like hell not to smile at that thought, but the corners of my mouth tipped up anyway. I pretended to rub at my mouth to cover it, but Cali caught me.

Her eyes narrowed, and the color of her face deepened. I was starting to worry she was going to have an aneurysm or something.

“Seriously? *Seriously!*” she screeched, loudly enough that I winced. “YOU’RE LAUGHING AT ME? Wow, some mate you are, Greyson Evers!”

I looked down at the ground with a sigh, and then met Xavier’s eyes. He also had the beginnings of a smile tugging at his mouth—which Cali caught. Her lips twisted into a snarl and she leaned in close to Xavier’s face. “THIS. IS. NOT. A. JOKE!”

Xavier backed away with a grimace, putting some space between his sensitive ears and our screaming mate.

Cali followed him, yelling. “You two are supposed to be my *mates!* You’re supposed to support me and trust me and *help* me. And now I’m trapped and my sister is in mortal danger and my two big Alpha wolves can’t stop laughing at me! What is the point of having TWO MATES if they won’t help you when you need to save your stupid half-sister!”

Much as I found her fiery attitude adorable even though I shouldn’t have, I *did* want to help her. I wanted to follow after her as she slowly chased Xavier across the lawn and pull her into my arms. But she was right: she had *two* mates, and if I reached for her now, then that would no doubt start a whole other drama with Xavier, which was the last thing we needed.

“Cali,” I started, hoping I would find some comforting string of words. “We will figure this out and find a way to help Artemis.”

“But to do that we need you not to barbeque yourself,” Xavier deadpanned.

I was opening my mouth to reply when I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned to see a middle-aged man and woman, standing nearby, looking completely astonished. They’d clearly heard everything we’d all just said.

The woman, I noticed, looked a lot like Cali. And she had the same confident swagger that I’d come to associate with Artemis. Realization hit me like a brick.

*Shit. Are these…*

The woman cut off my thoughts. “Caliana, what’s going on here?”

I turned to look at Cali, who had gone white as a sheet. She stared at the couple, her mouth opening and closing silently. “Mom? You’re here already?”

“Well we did call,” her father said, his words coming out in a slow, measured way. He looked at Xavier for a long moment, and then at me. “Honey, what do you mean you have two mates?” he asked with the frighteningly controlled fury of a father who had just walked in on his daughter having a threesome.

*Which… I guess wasn’t far off the mark.*

I didn’t know how much Cali’s father knew about his daughter’s life. Obviously he must know about his wife being Fae, and who Artemis was, but that barely scraped the surface of everything that had been going on around here.

Silence set in between us for a long, heady beat, and I was dimly aware of Maren and Fenrir standing nearby, completing this awkward and dysfunctional tableau.

Finally, Cali found her voice, though it sounded a little squeaky at first. “Mom! Dad! What are you doing here? You shouldn’t have heard any of that.” She laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of her neck. Did she really think that making light of things would help this situation?

The woman—who could only be Orla, Cali’s mother—spoke up. “Don’t try and shrug this off. I told you the Sphere is incredibly dangerous. I told you to get far, far away from it, and now here you are in some kind of werewolf love triangle? Your sister is in danger! Do you have any idea what could be happening to her right now?”

I winced on Cali’s behalf. *This woman is a force to be reckoned with,* I thought to myself.

“I—we—no, that’s not…” Cali stammered, trying to explain things, but Orla held up her hand. “There’s kind of a situation going on here too.”

*Yeah, like that she can’t leave the house*, I thought, but I wasn’t going to step in the middle of these two. Let Xavier make that fumble.

“Enough. We’re going inside and you, young lady, are going to help come up with a plan to get your sister back. *Now*.” And with that, Cali’s mother stomped into the pack house, Cali’s still eerily quiet and calm father trailing behind her.

We watched them disappear into the pack house, and then Cali turned to Xavier and me, a pained expression on her face.

“So,” I said. “Those are your parents?”

**Episode 1073**

I watched my parents make their way into the pack house, my heart sinking more and more with each passing second. I buried my face in my hands with a groan.

*What fresh hell is this? Of course Mom and Dad would pick THIS EXACT MOMENT to show up unannounced and hear everything!*

And I had even more explaining to do about Artemis. I mean, the fact that Mom had specifically warned us against seeking out the Orb had definitely played a role here now that Artemis had actually gone missing *with* the Orb. And I probably could have handled that better—but the other stuff? The stuff about having two mates? That wasn’t something I’d *ever* planned on telling my parents.

I thought back to the expression on my dad’s face when he’d asked me—oh so softly and oh so calmly—to clarify what I’d meant about having two mates. Oh my god—I still couldn’t believe I’d shouted that I had TWO MATES in front of my DAD!

Heat crawled up my neck and into my face. God, he probably thought I’d joined some kind of weird sex werewolf cult. No father wanted to hear his daughter say something like that! And from a daughter’s perspective, I could one hundred percent confirm that no daughter ever wanted her father to hear her say those things.

He’d *just* been reaching the point where this supernatural stuff didn’t send him spiraling. How was this going to help him adjust to this new understanding of his world? My humiliation was slowly giving way to panic. I knew my parents were waiting for me inside, probably ready to give me the verbal ass-whooping of my life, and lingering in the yard wasn’t doing anything to help my case.

But I really, really, *really* didn’t want to go in there.

I wished Artemis were here.I could’ve asked her to quietly remove the last five minutes from my parents’ memories, and then I’d never have to explain to my father how his darling daughter was basically in a low-key throuple.

*Or maybe I can just run away…*

I looked over my shoulder at the grass around the house, then at the lake and the forest beyond. *I could run away now and never look back. Get a new identity. I always thought I’d make a really good Penelope. I bet Penelope doesn’t have parents who pop in for embarrassing conversations.*

My eyes landed on a torn-up crater of dirt, the place where my magic had struck against the barrier the hardest. As far as I could tell, unleashing my strongest show of magic so far had done exactly jack squat to that force field. All my magical temper tantrum had done was make a mess of the yard and put me in an incredibly awkward position with my parents.

*And I can’t even run away. I’m basically trapped in this fishbowl, thanks to Big Mac.*

“Cali.”

I turned to Xavier, who was looking at me sympathetically. “There’s no point in trying to avoid this.”

I grimaced. That was *so* not the answer I wanted to hear right now. I looked at Greyson, hoping that he might have some better insight—or maybe a way out of this—but he looked almost as uncomfortable as I felt.

And then it sunk in that this was the first time he’d ever seen my parents.

*Oh god. Could there* be *a more awkward way to introduce your second boyfriend to your parents?*

With a defeated groan, I spun on my heel and forced myself to walk across the lawn and into the house. My parents were perched on the very edge of two chairs in the living room. My dad was looking very nervous, probably because he was still coming to terms with the whole werewolf situation.

Fortunately, the pack house wasn’t as rowdy as usual—hopefully, there’d be no werewolves or Fae causing mayhem while my parents were trying school me. And even though it was the pack’s house and not my parents’, I still felt a bit like a child who was about to be scolded as I walked in with Xavier and Greyson behind me.

My parents both stood up, and my mom didn’t even take a breath before starting in on me. “You’d better start talking, Caliana. You said that Artemis is in danger, that she’s with the Sphere. What on earth were you thinking?”

“Um…” I scrambled for a response. This really wasn’t my fault for once. Artemis was the one who’d taken the Orb and GTFO-ed. I would have gone with her, and I’d been trying like hell to go after her. If Big Mac hadn’t put up that force field, maybe I would’ve been tracking Artemis down right now instead of having this spectacular chat with my parents. “It’s not like I told Artemis to take it. She just left!”

Mom shook her head. She wasn’t going to let me escape what she clearly viewed as my responsibility. “Well, I did tell you *both* to get out of here as quickly as possible, which neither of you did I might add. And now one of my daughters is gone, in need of saving!? What were you thinking?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but my dad cut in, glaring daggers at Xavier and Greyson over my shoulder. “And what’s this you said about having two mates?” His voice cracked, and his face went a dark shade of red, but he didn’t look away from the two Alphas. He looked like he was about to have an aneurysm. That would be just what we needed to round out this warm family reunion.

I laughed—*way* too loudly. I sounded unhinged, practically cackling, and waved a hand at my dad in what I hoped looked like a nonchalant gesture. “Oh, that?” I cackled again. “That’s just werewolf slang, you wouldn’t understand.”

A crease appeared between my dad’s eyebrows, and he looked like he wanted to ask a follow-up question, but Mom jumped back in. “That’s not important, Tom. What we need to focus on right now is the fact that one of my daughters is gone.”

Mom let her words sink in while her eyes bored into mine, and I realized that there was no way I was going to be able to convince my mom that everything was fine. Maybe it was part of being a full-blooded Fae, but Mom had always been able to tell when I was lying.

And the truth was, I really didn’t know if Artemis was fine. She was Light and Dark Fae, so she probably had a better shot than any of the rest of us at destroying the Orb, but that didn’t mean the odds were in her favor.

I sighed. “So, I told you how the Sphere—the Orb—was starting to affect everyone in the pack house. People have been fighting a lot more, and it kind of started… speaking to me—”

“It *spoke* to you? Caliana!” My mom’s eyebrows disappeared into her hairline as she gaped at me in horror and disappointment.

“Look, I was fine and was able to resist it,” I said, giving Greyson and Xavier a pointed look. “But we really needed to get the thing out of here. And Artemis had a theory that since the Orb is a Dark Fae object, maybe she was the only one who’d be able to resist its evil call, since she’s half Dark Fae and all—”

“*What?*” Mom snapped. “That isn’t at all true! You should have stopped her, Cali! She’s in grave danger with every single second that she spends with that malignant object.”

My own eyes widened. If Artemis really didn’t have an edge over the Orb… We’d just sent her off (albeit not of our own accord) on a death mission. That thing was crafty and had such a tinge for aggression, it couldn’t be safe to handle it. We’d seen how it’d gotten into Silas’s head—he thought he was all powerful! But he hadn’t been.

I’d just gotten my sister, I wasn’t going to lose her.

“It’s not my fault!” I said, indignant. “I *would* have stopped her, had Artemis bothered to tell her what she was planning to do. She just ran off in the middle of the night, and now we have no clue where she is.”

“No clue?” Mom repeated. “You have no clue? None at all?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to upset my mom any further, but as Xavier had so eloquently said, there was no point in avoiding the inevitable. My mother could be absolutely relentless when she wanted to be—that was where I’d gotten that particular personality quirk. I suddenly had new sympathy for Greyson and Xavier—it was annoying as hell to have the same brand of determination used against me.

I looked down at the floor and mumbled, “I think Artemis decided that she’d be able to destroy the Orb where it was first created: back in the Fae world.”

All the color left my mom’s face. “So she did go back to the Fae world? Alone?”

I felt tears pricking my eyes as my own worries about my sister were dragged to the surface. “I genuinely don't know.”

She straightened. “Well, then we have no choice.” She met my eyes, steely determination in her own. “We’re going after her.”

“Really?” I asked. “Right now?”

My mom nodded. “Right now.”

**Episode 1074**

VIOLET

Our meeting with Charlie’s parents had been… well, a complete nightmare. Now that we’d finally managed to put some space between ourselves and those self-righteous murderers, I knew it would be difficult for Charlie to come to terms with everything his parents had said to him and everything they’d tried to do. That was why I’d told him to pull over. So we could talk about everything and I could, hopefully, help him work through what had to be one of the most traumatic experiences of his life so far.

What I hadn’t expected was for Charlie to stare at me for a solid four seconds and then kiss me like he’d never kissed me before, a kiss full of desperation and need. I barely had the wherewithal to kiss him back before he hauled me onto his—very naked—lap in the driver’s seat.

Charlie brushed his lips over mine, once, twice, and then sighed against my lips when I opened for him, letting him taste me, lips and tongues working in tandem. My fingers sank into his hair as I lost myself in the kiss.

I couldn’t believe he’d stood up to his parents (his parents!) like that—for me. He could have simply thrown me to the wolf hunters, especially since they’d already believed it was my fault that Charlie was a werewolf. And instead he’d thrown all of it away to defend me. Gratitude didn’t even begin to cover how I felt about it, how touched I was that he valued our connection so much that he’d been completely honest about who we were to each other, even when it meant his parents disowning him—and even trying to hurt him.

I deepened the kiss, pouring my feelings of love and awe and protectiveness into it. I never would have let those monsters lay a single finger on him.

I knew that it had to be a painful and traumatic experience for him—and that what had happened today would probably haunt us in some way or another for a long time to come—but I couldn’t deny that there was some part of me that had been turned on by watching him stick up for me like that. I never would have asked him to side with me over his own parents, but now that he had, I couldn’t help but feel like we were finally really and truly mates. And all I wanted was to make it official, to be with Charlie—really be with him. We were already so close, lost in the sensations and emotions flooding through our bond, pressed up against each other’s naked bodies in the relative privacy of the car.

For the longest time, we simply kissed, me straddling him in the seat, but it wasn’t enough. His kisses, his touches, the memory of him shielding me with his body, it all drove me crazy, and I wanted more. I didn’t think I could ever get enough of him.

Soon my lips trailed over his skin, pressing a line of kisses down his neck and chest. Charlie let out a tiny groan and my lips quirked up into a smirk. He drew me back up and covered my mouth with his own, carefully and gently guiding my tongue into a passionate dance.

I took one of his hands, entwining our fingers and guiding it to cup my breast. Charlie slowly took the hint, swirling his thumb on my skin as I leaned into his touch.

His free hand found its way up to my other breast and gave it the same treatment. His mouth traveled down the valley of my chest. I writhed on his lap, feeling ready beneath me, gasping against his mouth.

And then, as suddenly as all that desire had crashed into me, I was hit by a wave of reality. I pulled back to look at his face. His lips were swollen, his pupils were blown wide, and his cheeks and neck were flushed. But beyond that, I knew there was a deep, aching sadness in his eyes.

Charlie caught my face, framing it with one hand and pulling me in for another kiss. I could see the need on his face, but unlike mine, it was fueled by desperation—not desire.

*He’s not ready for this.* I realized. *Not now.*

This wasn’t the right time for him, for *us*. The adrenaline and emotion had just swept us away from common sense. I needed to stop this before we did something we’d both regret.

I held up a hand as he leaned in for another kiss, stopping him in his tracks. “We should stop,” I said, my voice raspy.

“What?” Charlie blinked up at me. “Why?”

“You’re not… I don’t think you’re in the right headspace for this,” I said slowly, carefully watching his expression. “I’m so sorry, Charlie, but you just had an incredibly traumatic showdown with your family.”

He shook his head. “You don’t have to apologize at all.”

I felt like I did though. Awkwardly, I eased off him and slid back into my seat. “It’s not that I don’t want this…” I forced myself to finally meet his eyes. “I really, *really* want this, just not—”

“Just not like this,” he finished, and offered me a weak smile. He let out a ragged breath and looked down at the steering wheel. And then he let out another breath. And another.

His shoulders bobbed and his chest hitched and his face crumpled, and Charlie finally broke down. Great heaving sobs racked his chest, and he covered his face when the tears finally began to flow. I gasped and gathered him into my arms, pulling him into me as much as I could with the center console between us.

My mate buried his face in my neck and wrapped his arms around me, so tight I could barely breathe. Charlie clutched me like I was the only thing keeping him together, sobbing into my neck with broken little cries that snapped my heart in two.

I ran my hands up and down his back, trying to soothe him. “It’s okay. Let it out. You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

That only made him cry harder. I couldn’t stand to see him like this, broken and bereft, but I knew what grief looked like. I’d personally stared into its face more times than I could count, and I knew Charlie was doing the same thing now.

He might not have lost his parents the way I’d lost Lilac and my own parents, but this was still a great loss. Worse—he’d been betrayed by the people who should have loved him the most. His life as he knew it was over; his world had been ripped apart. And nothing would ever be the same again.

“Violet,” he whimpered, his voice breaking on my name so that it was little more than two shattered syllables. He clutched me tighter, and I kissed the crown of his head.

“I know,” I whispered. “I know, and I’m so, so sorry.”

He hiccupped. “I c-can’t…”

I carded my fingers through his hair. “It’s okay. I’ve got you. And I won’t let go. I promise.”

It felt like years passed while Charlie fell to pieces against me, his tears pouring down my neck. I lost count of how many times he stilled and then broke all over again. Whenever I tried to mind link with him, all I saw were fleeting images of his parents, and the emotions I felt through our bond were enough to pull tears from my own eyes.

Finally, Charlie’s sniffles and sobs quieted. His breathing evened out. And I knew that, at least for a little while, the storm had passed. It would undoubtedly return, but at least we could take a moment to regroup.

Charlie slumped back in his seat, looking completely wrecked. I glanced through the car’s partially foggy windows to the empty road around us. “We should probably get dressed.”

“Okay.” His voice was hollow. He twisted to grab our spare clothes from the back seat, and I couldn’t help but admire the toned lines of his body, the rippling of his muscles.

*His body is absolutely unreal.*

Charlie turned back and handed me my clothes. When he caught me staring, he gave me a little smirk. It was weak, but it was there. And that more than anything loosened some of the worry from my chest.

I lightly whacked him on the arm and grabbed my clothes. We dressed quickly—and awkwardly, in the small space—in silence, but the silence wasn’t as heavy as it had been moments before. Fully clothed now, I waited for Charlie to start the car and then frowned when he didn’t.

“What are you waiting for?” I asked.

“I’m trying to figure out where we should go next.”

“Next?” I echoed, confused. “I mean, we should go back to the pack house.”

He shook his head. “No.”

“What do you mean ‘no’? That’s where we live! Not to mention that it’s pretty much the perfect spot to hide from paranormal hunters. We’ll be protected there. Safe.”

He turned to look me in the eye, sadness and certainty in his expression. “My parents aren’t just going to let me go. They’ll keep hunting me. And if we go back to the pack house, we won’t be safe—and we’ll be endangering our friends and family.”

I stared at him in shock. “What are you saying?”

“We can’t ever go back to the pack house, Violet.”

All the air left my lungs. Was I going to have to choose between my mate and my pack?

**Episode 1075**

ARTEMIS

This… shouldn’t have been possible. Through the windshield of the truck, I stared out across the beach toward Haystack Rock, where Big Mac was standing, watching me with an expression that did *not* indicate that she wanted to hug me.

*How the hell did she get here so fast?* I’d practically raced straight here, and I’d been certain the other occupants of the pack house wouldn’t even realize I’d left—not quickly enough for anyone to possibly intercept me, at least.

And yet, there she was. Waiting for me on the beach. No, not me. The Orb. There was no doubt in my mind that the second I stepped out of this truck, the witch would try to take the Orb from me. She’d never wanted me involved with its disposal, despite my innate ability to defy its manipulations. I couldn’t imagine she’d offer me a warm welcome after the way I’d stolen the Orb from her bedroom and tried to take it to the Fae world on my own.

The Orb, I noticed, was oddly quiet. I should have been happy about the silence that had settled around me, but it left me uneasy. What was the Orb planning?

I gripped the wheel harder. If I could just get to Haystack Rock—which was situated out on the beach several hundred feet out from where the truck was parked—and through the portal, Big Mac wouldn’t be able to follow me.

At least, I didn’t think she’d be able to follow…

*Who knows, really, when it comes to witches?* I thought. *Especially this one. For all I know, she has a Fae token of her own and can pass through the portal just as easily as any Fae.*

Either way, I had a demonic orb riding shotgun, and a portal to throw it into. And there was no time to lose. I slammed my foot down on the gas pedal and wrenched the wheel into a hard left, sending the truck careening off of the road and directly onto the beach.

The cabin of the truck bucked like an untamed horse, and I couldn’t help but grin as I imagined myself racing over the sand like a true badass, blowing past Big Mac and gracefully leaping into the portal. Perhaps I’d throw her a little kiss, just to prove that there was no ill will on my side of things, and that the task of destroying the Orb had gone to a more capable woman.

Big Mac, of course, wouldn’t see it that way. And if my smile grew a little wider thinking of how I’d bested the witch, then that was between myself, the Orb, and my spectacular metal steed.

The truck made quick work of the gravel and dirt on the side of the road, but once the vehicle made it to the beach, the whole thing lurched to a stop. I was tossed forward like a ragdoll, the breath wheezing out of my lungs and a hot line of pain striping across my chest where the seat belt lay.

“What the hell?” I gasped. *Did the witch do something?*

I clambered out of the truck, still wheezing slightly. *Oh.* It wasn’t magic that had stopped the truck, but all the soft, horrible sand on the beach. The wheels were all gummed up.

*Ugh. I’m going to have to make it on foot… I wish Astrid were here. She could glamour me into some kind of crab that could skitter past Big Mac without her noticing.*

There was, of course, the matter of being unable to carry the Orb with crab claws, but maybe that could be solved through another layer of glamour—

*Focus, Artemis! Who are you, Cali? That witch is trying to murder you with her eyes, and you have to get past her to reach the portal.*

Without further ado, I hoisted the Orb up and started making my way across the sand. Or at least *trying* to. Given how quickly it had stopped my truck, just walking in it felt impossible. I stumbled over a chunk of dried wood and then righted myself.

Big Mac, of course, was staring right at me. The witch raised her hands, and I reached for my well of power, preparing myself to use my mind control on Big Mac. I took a deep breath and let loose some magic—but Big Mac immediately repelled it.

“Clever witch,” I muttered.

Her eyes narrowed, clearly having heard me. “Oh, you are on my *last* nerve.” Big Mac threw her hands up again, and the battle officially commenced—an all-out, magical, Fae-versus-witch showdown. A bright purple spell whizzed toward me and I leapt out of the way just before it made impact. Sand exploded around me.

“HEY!” I shouted.

“Artemis, put down the Orb,” Big Mac snapped. “You don’t know what you’re doing, what it’s capable of. You’re being a silly little girl, and you have no idea what you’re meddling with!”

I fired another blast toward her—only for it to hit her shield. “The Orb will be safer back in the Fae world! I’m no little girl. I’ve dealt with more in my life than someone like you could possibly understand, so I can certainly handle this!”

Big Mac scoffed. “That just goes to show how young and naïve you really are.”

The fight continued. I ducked and wove around the spells she blasted at me, and she kept blocking my power—no matter how much intensity I wove into it.

“*She thinks you’re weak,*”the Orb cut in. “*That you aren’t to be trusted. Show her what you can do. Prove yourself.*”

The Orb was right. Big Mac was belittling me, underestimating me, treating me the same way I’d been treated by so many other people. Lost, pathetic Artemis. Not sadistic enough to be Dark Fae, too obviously Dark to ever pass for Light Fae. An unwanted orphan. A tough bounty hunter too hardened to deserve love or respect or even the smallest hint of kindness…

Fury bubbled up inside me. *How dare this witch treat me like this!* I’d made my own way all by myself in the Fae world for so many years. I knew that terrible world in a way I would never truly understand this gentler human one. Could this witch say the same?

“*No,*”the Orb whispered. “*She can’t. And you’ll need to take her out to get what you want.*”

As my anger grew, I felt the Orb strengthening me, adding a sharper edge to my magic, enough that even though her shield blocked my blasts, Big Mac was beginning to falter. She was tiring, and when her defense dropped, she’d be mine. I doubled my attack.

My lips pulled back into a feral grin. Victory was so close, I could almost taste it. I was going to defeat this witch. And when I did, I could end her once and for all. I could make this beach run red with her—

The savage violence of my own thoughts brought me up short, pulling me out of the moment just long enough for me to realize I was proving Big Mac’s point. I might be able to resist the Orb more than others, but it did still wield power over me. I didn’t actually want to *kill* Big Mac! Sure, the witch could be frustrating, but she didn’t deserve to die.

The truth hit me somewhere between my chest and my stomach. *The Orb is trying to make me kill her. It’s evil and manipulative. It’s really the Sphere, just like my mother said. I have to get rid of it. RIGHT NOW.*

Fresh resolve fueled my limbs. I breezed past Big Mac, who’d been knocked down hard by my last blow, and sprinted toward Haystack Rock. Just like when I’d initially stolen the Orb, I had a head start on the powerful witch, but it wouldn’t last for long.

I recognized the spot on the rock where we’d all emerged from the Fae world, and I remembered what Cali had told me about how to open the portal. I whipped back a hand and pulled one of my arrows from my quiver. Glad I’d kept these around.

Quickly, I dragged the arrowhead across my palm, drawing blood, and then smeared the bloody Fae arrow over the rock. This was my one chance to do it, to get rid of this thing once and for all. Then I grabbed the Orb with my bloodied hand and reached into the portal opening. It disappeared into the Fae world.

“NO!”

I turned my head to see Big Mac racing toward me, her face twisted in panic, and I then realized my hand was meeting resistance on the other side of the portal. I tried to shake free from whatever grip it was locked in and was knocked back.

The portal closed, and I looked down at my bloodied hand.

It was empty.

The Orb was gone.

**Episode 1076**

XAVIER

Well I could certainly see where Cali got her “jump first, ask questions later” attitude. Watching Orla take control of the conversation and quickly and casually determine that she and Cali were going to run off to the Fae world to save Artemis, I got an inkling that the trait was genetic.

*I should have suspected it, with what I know about Orla’s past, but the similarity is so striking in person.*

“Um, well… about leaving,” Cali said, interrupting my thoughts with a grimace. “I—”

“Take ten minutes to pack up anything you might need.” Orla stood up. “And then we’re going after Artemis. If she’s really heading to the Fae world alone with the Orb, she needs to be found and brought back immediately.”

My mate sighed. “Mom, can you please just listen to me for a second?” I could see the pain and frustration on her face. Locking her here on the pack house grounds had been a cruel move on Big Mac’s part. Effective, but cruel.

“What is it, Cali?”

Cali stood too. “I would *love* to go after Artemis. Believe me. There’s nothing I’d like more.” She laced her fingers together and then looked down at her woven hands. “But due to… unforeseen circumstances, I can’t actually leave the pack house grounds right now.”

Orla’s voice was sharp. “What do you mean you can’t leave?”

Tom stood as well, looking between Greyson and me. His chest puffed out a bit, and his nostrils flared. Was he… trying to act like an Alpha? From what little I knew of Tom, he really didn’t seem like the type. I tried not to laugh.

“Cali,” he said. “Are these men keeping you here?!”

“What? No.” Cali scoffed. “A witch put up a magical barrier, and now I’m not allowed to leave the pack house grounds.” She looked sullen as she admitted it, like it was some kind of dirty secret rather than a decision that had been made without her input or consent.

To be perfectly honest, I was relieved that Big Mac had put that spell on Cali. It was so freeing to not worry about her safety for once, to not dread the moment when she’d up and leave on her next impulsive adventure, a.k.a. Going off to save Artemis who had some Sphere, Orb, whatever the fuck.

Of course, I’d never say that to Cali.

Orla shook her head. “I don’t understand, but if you’re not coming with me I’ll just go alone. Artemis needs my help. She might have been alone in the world for the last twenty-three years, but she’s not alone anymore.”

“Mom, no. You can’t. It’s too dangerous. We don’t know where Artemis is, and Big Mac is a powerful witch. She wants the Orb, and…” Cali faltered a bit, some of her own worry for her sister slipping into her tone. “We don’t really know what she’s capable of.”

Greyson, who had been silent and oddly passive up until this point, stepped forward. “You don’t have to go alone. I can arrange to have you escorted to Artemis.”

“I’ll go,” I said quickly. I wasn’t about to be outdone by Greyson in front of Cali’s parents.

“No,” Greyson said. “I need you here if the vampires return.”

“Vampires?!” Tom asked.

Orla interrupted. “I’ll do this myself.” She turned to Tom. “Stay here and keep an eye on Cali, okay?”

His eyes widened. “But—”

“I love you, Tom. I know this is a lot for you, but I’ll be back as soon as I can.” She leaned in and gave him a kiss, then pulled Cali into a hug and kissed her cheek. “Now, where exactly do you think Artemis will be heading? What portal?”

Cali’s eyes were shining. “Haystack Rock.”

Orla nodded, looking resolute. I had to admit, I was impressed by this woman’s fortitude. Not ten minutes after learning her eldest daughter was off on a dangerous mission, she was already signing herself up for a solo journey to rescue said daughter. I did see where Cali got it from.

“I’ll be in touch as soon as I can,” she said.

My mate threw her arms around Orla one last time. “Please be careful.”

“I will.” Without looking back, Orla rushed out of the pack house to find Artemis, leaving Tom, Cali, Greyson, and me all standing awkwardly together in a living room that suddenly felt too small.

Tom looked at my brother and me, his eyes narrowing. “So, I never did get an answer to my question.”

Greyson, idiot that he was, took the bait. “What’s your question?”

“What’s all this about ‘mates’, exactly?”

On the other side of the room, Cali blanched, and Greyson made a pathetic little choking noise. This was… unlike anything I’d ever experienced. Of all the shit I’d faced in my life, I’d never expected that I would a) have a mate who was mated to two men; or b) be put in a position to explain any of this bullshit to her human father.

I didn’t know Tom all that well, but he wasn’t hard to read. He was ready to go full Papa Bear on Greyson and me, and he was stressed about being left in a werewolf house while his wife went off to find her daughter.

This would take some finessing if we wanted to keep things civil. Not that I cared if Tom liked Greyson or not—if he was going to *like* either of Cali’s mates, it was sure as shit going to be me.

I cleared my throat. “Tom, are you hungry? We’ve got some leftovers. Can I make you a cheesesteak?”

Based on my own experiences and what I’d learned from Cali, Tom was at his happiest in the kitchen. Hopefully returning him to his preferred habitat would diffuse some of the tension from this godawful conversation.

Cali brightened. “Yeah, Dad. That sounds like a good idea.”

Before Tom could reply, Cali ushered him into the kitchen. I met Greyson’s eyes and smirked. Greyson might still be Alpha here—for now, at least—but I had a rapport with Cali’s dad. I’d met him before, and had even cooked with him. Greyson had not. Cali loved her parents so much, and I couldn’t help but hope that this would give me an edge over my brother.

Greyson frowned. “I’m going to make sure Orla has what she needs.”

I watched him walk away to go catch up with Orla. Should I do the same? Defy Greyson and go with Orla to keep her safe? But then that would leave Tom here alone with Greyson, and I didn’t want that either. He should’ve stayed in Portland with his little family drama.

I sighed and headed into the kitchen, where Cali was helping Tom gather supplies from the fridge. Even though he’d only been in there for a few minutes, Tom had somehow already found a cutting board and an onion.

“I still don’t understand this,” Tom was saying, absentmindedly. “What *is* a mate? How do you have two of them?”

“Well, um,” Cali shot me a nervous look, “a mate is sort of like someone you have good chemistry with…”

“So your mom and I are mates?” Tom asked.

She shook her head. “No—I mean yes, but not exactly. It’s like a bond that can’t be broken.”

“*Oh*. Wait, like *Twilight*?” Tom caught my eye and grinned. “I was a Twidad. And I always thought she would’ve been better off with Jacob.”

“Yeah, and Jacob was a werewolf too!” Cali said, nodding along.

Tom’s smile slipped a bit. “Still, I’m not too keen on my daughter being with anyone supernatural… Even if you’re Fae.”

“Dad, please.”

Tom grabbed some cheese from the fridge and began to slice the block. “I wish I had known about all this before. You”—he pointed at me—“were supposed to keep her safe. We made pasta together, Xavier. I trusted you.”

I frowned. “I meant what I said. I will always do everything I can to keep Cali safe.”

“Okay, but so an unbreakable bond. What does it mean to have two of those?” Tom asked. “Is that like being polyamorous?”

Cali’s face flushed. “Not exactly.”

Tom looked at me again, his expression searching. “Are you with one of them?” he asked Cali. “What’s going on?”

“When you met Xavier, he was my boyfriend,” Cali said.

“And now?”

“Now… it’s complicated.”

Tom continued to slice the cheese. “Well, I’d like you to explain it to me, because the more I learn about everything, the more confused I am. How did you even meet?” Tom’s tone was gentle, which made the anger in his words even worse, somehow.

“Online,” I said quickly. I didn’t want to agitate Tom any further. He was already working himself up a bit, and if he found out how Cali and I had really met, I had a feeling the mild-mannered suburban Twidad would go supernova. It wasn’t exactly as conventional as Tinder.

His eyes widened. “*Online?* That isn’t safe, Cali! Who knows what could have happened to you? We raised you to be more careful. We should never have let you move here so quickly.” He started gesturing with his hands, apparently oblivious to the fact that he was holding a knife. “I always say ‘safety first’, and that applies to locking your doors at night and using a blinker while driving *just as much* as it applies to meeting people online.”

My brother chose that moment to join us. “Orla just left with Rishika.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed on Greyson. “And what about this guy? Is he your boyfriend now? Did you meet him online too?”

Cali grimaced. “No, Dad—”

“Because I have to admit, Cali, this looks really fishy. What do you even know about this guy?”

“Dad, it’s—”

Tom just kept talking. “And I thought I liked Xavier here, but now I’m not so sure. He could have been lying to you from the moment you met, and—”

“Dad, ENOUGH!” Cali snapped. “I’m fine! It’s not like I even went through with selling my virginity to him!”

**Episode 1077**

NO.

No no no no no this could not be happening.

*Oh. My. God.*

I was frozen in shock and horror. For a split second, it was like my *truly horrifying* admission had brought the world to a screeching halt. I could see Xavier, his eyes wide in panic and disbelief; my dad, his expression a mix of horror and fury; and Greyson, who looked absolutely devastated.

And then, in a little out-of-body moment, I saw myself. Saw the “oh shit”written across my face, and the frustrated pink splotches from trying to explain to Dad what *due destini* was while keeping things as private and G-rated as possible.

*I’m dreaming. I’ve got to be dreaming. Even I can’t be stupid enough to blurt out something about SELLING MY VIRGINITY to my own FATHER.*

This was too sick, too horrifying to be real life. This was the stuff of stress dreams and nightmares. I was going to wake up in my bed at the pack house, and all of this—Artemis taking off with the Orb, Big Mac putting me on lockdown, my parents showing up, and *this* fan-fucking-tastic icing on the cake all would be nothing but a bad dream.

*Come on, Caliana. Wake up! Wakeupwakeupwakeup. WAKE UP!*

I pinched myself, hard, and then let out a little yelp.

Then the sheer horror and humiliation set in.

*Oh my god. This is real.* Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought I heard a high-pitched ringing sound. The sound of my own destruction? Or maybe I was just having a trauma-induced aneurysm. Maybe I’d go into a coma and wake up with no memory of any of this, and everyone would be so worried about me and then relieved that I was okay, that they’d forget all about—

*FOCUS. CALI! Your dad now knows that Xavier tried to buy your virginity. Technically Colton, but now is the time for damage control, not semantics!* I straightened and tried to fix my face into something resembling calm. The longer the silence dragged on, the longer I went without speaking, the more unendurably awkward this situation became.

I cleared my throat and tried to muster some kind of response, but my dad beat me to it.

“*Went through with selling your virginity to him?* What are you talking about, Caliana?” he asked.

His voice was deadly quiet, so soft I could barely make it out. My panic increased tenfold. Watching him lowkey rage while slicing up sandwich ingredients was one thing, but this perfect calm was petrifying. This was his “You’re In Big Trouble” voice. I’d only heard it a few times in my life, and that was because each encounter had scared me into not screwing up again. When he was like this, it meant that he was so overcome with rage that he’d entered a whole new dimension where everything came out soft and calm.

*Oh my god, oh my god. Okay, think. You can talk your way out of this. It’ll be okay, just* say something! While I quietly lost my shit—apparently my dad and I had that in common—my eyes skipped from my father’s face, to Xavier (who looked stunned and frustrated by the cat I’d let out of the bag), and then finally to Greyson.

Suddenly, I remembered the utter disbelief and devastation I’d seen on his face when I’d dropped the “sold my virginity” bomb. He’d schooled his expression somewhat, but he still looked like I’d just slapped him.

And then it hit me: Greyson hadn’t had any idea that that was how Xavier and I had met. He had no idea about Colton’s arrangement. He didn’t know about *any* of it.

*Oh god, oh god, oh god.* I watched helplessly as he turned and left the kitchen. *Shit shit shit!*

I wanted to run after him, to try to explain myself. What I would say, I had no idea. “*Oh, sorry Greyson. I forgot you didn’t know because Xavier and I were long past all that pesky virginity stuff by the time I met you*”?

“Caliana,” my dad pressed. “Answer me, young lady.”

I snapped back to the present, to the two men still standing in front of me, wearing eerily similar “what the fuck?”expressions. I tried to think up an explanation but my brain shorted out, so instead I let out another laugh.

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t say that right. I meant, it’s not *as if* I sold my virginity to anyone, let alone Xavier!”

My pathetic lifeline was met with silence. My dad set down the knife and crossed his arms. “Would you like to try that again?” His eyes bored into mine, intense and angry and so, so disappointed.

I grimaced and looked away. This was… possibly the most awkward thing that had ever happened in the history of the entire universe, but my dad did deserve to know the truth. The real truth. I took a deep breath. “I did it all for Mom.”

Dad frowned, but he looked more confused than angry. He must not have been expecting that response. “Please explain.”

I licked my lips. “Mom was so sick, and we thought she was going to die… You were going to take that loan out, Dad. I couldn’t let you do that or get another mortgage on the house. Not when you were already trying to pay for everything else, and my school.” I kept my eyes glued to the countertop. “It all sounds worse than it really is.”

I snuck at glance up at Xavier. He was, predictably, staring back at me, expressionless. The worst way for Xavier to be. I looked away and met my dad’s eyes.

“So, hang on…” he said slowly. “Let me get this straight. This man”—he gestured at Xavier— “tried to… *purchase* you online? And you agreed to this in order to save your mother’s life?”

“It was technically his brother Colton, but yes,” I breathed. “Dad, I know it’s… so much. But we called the entire thing off. We ended up having actual feelings for each other. That’s when I brought him back to meet you guys, and Mom got the money for her surgery. And then she was better, if only for a while. Who would have thought I’d have to go to the Fae world to really save her…” I realized I was rambling and stopped myself. I watched my father’s face, trying to gauge his reaction.

Suddenly his eyes widened in understanding, and then shock. “The anonymous donor.” He looked at Xavier. “It was you.”

Xavier coming home and paying for Mom’s surgery felt like eons ago. Dad was giving Xavier a look I couldn’t really place—some combination of confusion and distrust and anger and amazement. Dad blinked a few times and Xavier, of course, was a closed book.

Before I could say anything more, Lola came bounding down the steps into the living room and spotted us clustered in the kitchen.

“Mr. Hart!” she squealed. She rushed over and wrapped my father in a big hug, completely oblivious to the absurdly tense atmosphere in the room. She pulled back. “I didn’t know that you were coming! It’s so good to see you!”

I stared at Lola intently, my eyes narrowing. What I wouldn’t give to mind link with her and tell her that her timing could literally not have been worse. Lola just grinned at me and turned back to my dad. She held one arm out, Vanna White style. “So, what do you think of our pack house? Pretty cool, huh!”

While my dad made small talk with my best friend, I mind linked with Xavier. *I’m so sorry. I didn't know what to say.*

He didn’t respond, so I tried again. And again.

*I feel like such an idiot, Xavier. I think I’ve almost talked him down, if that makes a difference.*

Finally, he responded. *I’m not in the mood, Caliana.*

Well, shit. That was twice now that I had been Caliana’d. I was in it deep.

Lola was still going strong, oblivious as ever. “So, yeah, it was this huge spell to make me a werewolf full-time, but I don’t really have to worry about that anymore.” Her smile slipped a bit, and I felt a pang of heartache for my friend.

My dad frowned as he cut an onion. He was cooking again. That had to be a good sign, right?

“What do you mean?” he asked.

She sighed. “I’m… not a wolf anymore. I can’t shift, but there’s a chance I might be a vampire now. I’m really not sure.”

“Lola, we can catch him up later,” I tried. My dad looked like he was completely on autopilot at this point. “Let’s just table the talk of werewolves, vampires, and Fae for the time being, yeah?”

My dad looked up at us. “Girls, I don’t really know what you’re talking about.” He moved to slice the onion, but instead, he sliced the index finger of his left hand clean off.

**Episode 1078**

GREYSON

Cali was practically hyperventilating.

Tom, meanwhile, was clutching his hand as blood spewed from the stump of what remained of one of his fingers. That would have been strange enough, but the man was just… staring wide-eyed at the sight. Shock. Had to be. Part of me wished he would scream. The silent staring was eerier than anything, and his skin was going paler and paler until it was practically the color of skim milk.

Then Tom started to sway on his feet as his eyes rolled back into his head.

I dashed forward, rushing to catch Tom as he began to faint and just managed to grab him before he slammed his head onto the floor. I supported him by the waist and shoulder, Xavier on the other side.

“I’ve got him,” I said under my breath, gruffly. I avoided looking at Xavier—the last thing I wanted was to look at him.

“No, I’ve got him,” he gritted out, his lips curled slightly in frustration at my presence.

I ignored him, tightening my hold on Tom.

Lola stared at Tom, fixated on his blood, as she blindly clutched a hyperventilating Cali.

“His finger…” Cali cried out, reaching toward her father helplessly. “What do we do?”

She looked like she was on the verge of fainting, too. I edged slightly closer, prepared to catch her if she did.

Suddenly, Torin popped his head into the room, curious. *Excellent timing, as usual*, I thought with a roll of my eyes.

“What’s all this screaming?” Torin asked innocently, his eyes wide. “Did you just finish watching the episode of *Drag Race* where BenDeLaCreme eliminated herself?”

Torin straightened, fully stepping into the room, dusting off an invisible speck of dust on his clothes.

“Cause I couldn’t believe it either!” he continued, apparently blind to the scene unfolding in front of him.

Finally, Torin lifted his head, focusing on what was happening. His mouth popped open in surprise as he registered all the blood.

“A little help here?” I called out, exasperated.

Without hesitation, Torin rushed over to us and started healing Tom. Slowly, color returned to Tom’s skin, and his eyelids fluttered open.

Once again conscious, Tom noticed Torin.

“What are…” he asked weakly. “What are you doing?”

Torin remained silent, concentrating. We all watched as Tom’s index finger was knit back together, Tom gaping the entire time.

“Good as new!” Torin declared, stepping back as we fetched a chair for Tom.

Once Tom was settled, I turned to glare at Xavier and saw that he was already glaring at me.

I honestly felt like laughing—as if Xavier had a right to feel that way. Well, at least he could find comfort in the fact that the feeling of disgust was mutual.

I still couldn’t believe Xavier had *bought* Cali. Cali was so much more than a commodity. As I eyed Xavier, disgust roiled through me. I hadn’t realized that fate could bring mates together through an online transaction.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt my anger rising. I knew now wasn’t the time to get angry, but as I tried to quell the rage, it just started to make me feel more and more faint…

Wait, was this a rage blackout? Or was I having another one of those weird visions?

*Not now!*

I felt my legs go out, and then I was falling backward. I had just enough time to think about how embarrassing this was going to be before…

*I found myself on a roof, surrounded by snow, freezing my butt off. Then, the window opened, revealing Cali. She leaned out, smiling at me.*

*“You’re here!” she whispered excitedly.*

*She moved away from the window, making space for me to come in. As soon as I stepped into her bedroom, Cali rushed to me and gave me a hug. I quickly wrapped my arms around her, taking comfort in her warmth.*

*Reluctantly, I pulled away and shut the window behind me. Immediately, I whirled around, wrapping Cali up again in my arms. She was smiling up at me, nervous.*

*“Are you sure?” I asked.*

*“Yes,” she said, breathless. “I’m so sure. I want to be with you, Greyson. I want my first time to be with you.”*

*She stood on her tiptoes, leaning in to give me a deep kiss. At the feel of her lips against mine, I couldn’t control myself any longer. I slid my hands past her waist, covering her ass. Squeezing slightly, I lifted her up into the air as she wrapped her legs around me.*

*We continued to kiss, not even breaking for air, as I slowly moved toward the bed. I laid her down gently, pressing quick kisses down her jaw and neck. Her back arched as she let out a pretty little moan.*

*Eager, I made a quick work of her clothes and mine, until it was just us, skin to skin. I reveled in her touch, found myself worshipping her body. The curve of her hips, the smoothness of her skin—it was perfect.* She *was perfect.*

*I slid my fingers across her wetness, gently sucking on her breasts.*

*“Oh god,” she breathed. “Yes.* Yes*.”*

*I positioned my erection against her entrance and leaned forward, gingerly cupping her face and pressing a long kiss against her lips.*

*“Are you ready?” I asked softly. She nodded, her eyes shining bright.*

*With that, I wrapped my hands around her thighs, spreading her legs open for me.*

*“I love you,” I murmured as I pushed in, giving her a moment to adjust to me.*

*She winced slightly, then relaxed. I pushed further in, until I was completely enveloped in the warmth of her core. God, I could’ve stayed buried in her forever.*

*“And I love you,” she whispered back lovingly as she wrapped her arms around me.*

*I started pumping in and out of her, setting the pace. Cali met me each time, writhing and moaning with pleasure, my grunts filling the silence in between.*

*I felt the pressure building inside me as Cali tensed. Then, with one last push inside, we both cried out, unraveling as the pleasure overtook us. This was all I had ever wanted, Cali with me, choosing me, loving only me…*

*Afterward, I lay on the bed, Cali curled up in my arms. I was about to drift off to sleep when I heard a noise at the window. I looked up and saw three ravens sitting on the sill outside, tapping their beaks against the glass, cracking it. With each tap the sound of breaking glass grew louder in my ears before the pane shattered entirely. The ravens flew into the room, transforming into the three witch sisters…*

I woke up with a start, suddenly aware of everyone staring at me. I felt the coolness of the kitchen floor on my back. Cali’s face came into my view as she leaned over me, looking concerned.

I could hear her saying my name, over and over.

“But he’s an Alpha,” I heard Lola say in the background. “How can he not be good with blood?”

There was that memory of embarrassment from earlier as reality filtered back into my foggy brain. I could barely look over at Cali without picturing her as she had been in my mind a few moments ago. God, I was so confused by the visions. Maybe I should tell someone about them—but who?

Cali waved her hands in front of my face.

Definitely not Cali—she had enough going on, and I was still feeling pretty betrayed.

I sat up, swallowing my groan.

“I’m fine,” I assured everyone. “I just need some air.”

I headed out to the porch and stood there, looking out into the darkness. A couple minutes later, I saw Torin come up behind me. I turned slightly, only to see that he was holding a bottle of fireball and two glasses.

“Drink?” he offered.

I looked at him, surprised that Torin would reach out like this. In the Fae world, the guy had been pretty annoying—but he was a good person.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting. “But you do know that fireball is the worst thing you could be drinking, right?”

Torin shrugged. “I like it! Plus,” he continued, “it seems like you could use some cheering up.” He paused. “And I also wanted to say that I appreciate you letting Astrid and I stay here and use your Netflix.”

“Not a problem.” I laughed. “You fought in the battle and helped Cali and me in the Fae world. My house is yours.”

“Things seem pretty tense with you and Xavier,” Torin said.

I chuckled. “My brothers and I don’t always get along,” I said wryly. “Cali is the only thing we’ve ever agreed on. And look where that got us.”

“Yeah,” Torin responded. “That must be pretty rough, with the veins and… all. I didn’t realize how hard the *due destini* was on the three of you until we came here.”

“Thanks,” I said, lifting my drink in the air toward his.

We clinked drinks, and I took a sip.

“Aw, man, I can’t believe you actually like this stuff. You sure you’re not lying for some Fae prank just to get me to drink it?” I croaked out as I coughed, Torin’s laugh filling the air.

“I like how it burns going down.” He grunted. “And it can’t be all bad to have a brother,” he said a couple seconds later. “I don’t have any siblings, and Astrid’s my only friend. I would’ve loved a sibling.”

“It really isn’t everything you think,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Siblings fight,” I explained. “And my brothers and I were raised to hate each other.”

“What?” Torin exclaimed, flabbergasted. “That can’t be true.”

“It is,” I said without thinking. “There’s no lost love between Xavier and me. In the Fae world, he even left me in the Kollector’s zoo to die, just so that he could have Cali.”

Torin gasped. “Wait a second… does Cali know?”

**Episode 1079**

AVA

I watched from a distance as Cali and her little cabal bickered in the kitchen as they cleaned up Tom’s blood.

I’d just come downstairs to see what all the screaming was about, but now I kind of wished I hadn’t bothered. They weren’t even doing or talking about anything interesting, anyway.

With a huff, I turned and headed into the living room. Once I entered, I saw a woman—Maren, was it?—sitting on the floor, playing with a kid. I had to admit, the kid was pretty damn cute, with his earnest grey eyes and light blond hair.

For a moment, I allowed myself to wonder what Xavier’s and my pups would have looked like, if things had turned out differently. Would they have taken after their father, with breathtaking blue eyes and brown hair? Or would they have gotten my black hair, instead?

I didn’t *want* to think about what ifs. They were too painful and only served to remind me of what I had lost.

Honestly, it was difficult, knowing that Xavier had saved me—why had he even done it? I just couldn’t wrap my head around it. There was absolutely no reason for him to have done it. Unless…

I felt a trickle of excitement course through me. There was only one plausible explanation I kept coming back to—that he still hadn’t closed off our mate connection. And if he hadn’t closed it off, that meant…

I sighed, banishing the thought from my mind before I went too far. I couldn’t allow myself to hope too much, not yet.

As I stepped further into the room, Maren looked up. She gave me a cool smile, her eyes guarded. Before I could say something, the little boy galloped over to me and handed me a truck.

I held the truck awkwardly, not sure what to do with it.

“Play!” the kid declared as he stared up at me stubbornly.

I tried to wave him off, attempting to give him back his truck, but the damn kid just kept tugging me by the arm, giving me a cheeky smile. Boy, was he persistent.

“He won’t take no for an answer,” Maren admitted, a soft smile on her face.

*Well, if you can’t beat them…* I let the boy pull me over to where he and his mother were playing and sat. The boy immediately became entranced by his toy truck, leaving me unsure about what to say. I could sit there daydreaming about cubs all I wanted to, but the reality was… I don’t think I was ever that good with kids.

After an awkward moment, I was about to open my mouth to introduce myself when Maren spoke up.

“You’re Ava, right?” Maren said lightly. “I heard about you when Greyson’s brother brought you back.” She gave me an assessing look. “I’m glad you’re doing better.”

Briefly, I wondered what exactly it was that Maren had heard, but I knew asking wouldn’t get me any straight answers. So I didn’t bother.

“You’re Maren right?” I asked, hoping I had guessed correctly. A little bit of relief flooded through me at her nod.

“That’s right, and this little ragamuffin is my son, Fenrir,” Maren ruffled the boy’s hair causing him to squeal in indignation before going back to his truck.

Ah, so that was the boy’s name.

I gave Maren a terse nod in response, staying quiet. We looked at each other, neither of us saying anything. How did I remove myself from this situation without seeming like a complete asshole?

In the end, it was Maren who broke the silence before I was able to come up with an excuse to leave.

“So,” she asked casually. “Are you in this pack?”

The question immediately pulled a harsh laugh out of my throat.

“No,” I barked out.

Maren cocked her head, her brow furrowed in confusion.

I took a deep breath. “I’m Xavier’s mate,” I explained. With a pang, I remembered that wasn’t quite true. “*Was* his mate,” I corrected, my shoulders curving inward.

I felt my lips turn down in a small frown as my heart ached. It hurt me to say that out loud, even when I was still holding out hope that I was wrong. Even when I continued to hope that there was still something between Xavier and me.

“Oh, you were with Xavier before?” Maren pressed, keeping her voice light and innocent.

“In another life,” I murmured, still lost in my thoughts.

Maren gave a noncommittal hum. “The Evers brothers are charming, aren’t they?” she mused.

At that, I perked up, once again focused on our conversation. I had a feeling Maren was saying more than she was letting on.

“That’s one word for it,” I said wearily. “Charming enough that you can’t leave even if you know it’s probably going to be better for your health in the long run.”

“Right,” Maren conceded. “But you could walk away, couldn’t you?”

That was rather forward.

“Like, if Xavier isn’t your mate anymore,” Maren continued. “Why are you sticking around?”

What was this lady insinuating? A little put off by her questions, I narrowed my eyes at her. Xavier had saved my life. I hadn’t exactly had a choice about whether or not to come back to the pack house.

“Look, I don’t know what you heard, but—”

“Sorry if that was a bad question,” Maren interrupted. “I’m new to all this werewolf world stuff. Mates and all that.”

At my questioning look, she spoke again, gesturing to herself. “Fae.” She looked at her son lovingly, who was still quietly playing with his toys. “But this little guy,” she said affectionately, ruffling Fenrir’s hair, “he’s both.”

I raised an eyebrow at the boy. A Fae and a wolf? That would make him rather formidable as he got older.

“So what’s keeping you here?” Maren probed, her eyes searching. “Is it your mate bond?”

I felt my body stiffen with tension at the accusatory tone of her words. Was this lady trying to move in on Xavier? I mean, she had to be questioning my mate bond for a reason, right?

I felt a prickling heat descend on me as I stared at Maren with increasing anger. Who the fuck was she to ask me these kinds of things?

“Well, it’s not like you’re any different,” I said, my voice as cold and even as possible. I glared at her, unwilling to look away. “Why are *you* here?”

Maren stared at me, the air between us becoming static with our growing frustration. If this lady wanted to make things difficult, then I wouldn’t mind getting equally nasty. Xavier would say that’s what I was good at. I shut those damning thoughts up fast.

Just when I thought Maren was going to say or ask something worse, she shifted away from my gaze and looked at Fenrir, breaking the tension that had been building between us.

I glanced at Fenrir, too. Now, he was playing in a beam of sunlight, his blond curls glinting as he babbled happily, lost in his own world. He was completely oblivious to all the tension and drama, unconcerned with the craziness around him.

As I continued to observe his playful demeanor, I couldn’t help but think again about Xavier and me—about if we had kids. Not now, obviously, but one day. What kind of world would we be living in? What would it be like?

“Like I said,” Maren said quietly, bringing me out of my frivolous thoughts. “My son is Fae, but he’s also a werewolf. I wanted him to learn more about how to control his werewolf side, and Greyson offered to bring us here. So, I said yes.”

*Interesting.*

“Hybrids can be difficult,” I commented. “Shifting is hard for them—dangerous.”

Maren looked up at me in surprise, her brows lifting high. “Oh,” she said, clearly shocked by what I’d said. “Fenrir hasn’t had any issues shifting. In fact, he does it so quickly and easily that I never have enough time to adjust from having a little boy to a little wolf.”

So my suspicions were correct. Little Fenrir was going to be a powerful force one day. “Do you believe that has something to do with his Fae blood?” I asked, curious to know from the source.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, after considering it. “But it must be the case.”

I looked at Fenrir again, suddenly realizing just how strongly he resembled Greyson, with his grey eyes and blond hair. Even his cheeky grin—it was like looking at a mini Greyson.

*Oh my god.* My eyes went wide as I pieced it all together.

I swiveled my head toward Maren, pinning her with a look.

“You used to be with Greyson,” I stated, not even posing it as a question.

“Yes,” Maren responded, surprised. “How did you know?”

Learning this, I felt immense relief. Maren wasn’t after Xavier—she was just after Greyson. I swallowed the humorless laugh that threatened the escape my throat. Poor Maren. She was part of the same endless, fruitless chase as me.

The two of them—Xavier and Greyson—were so enamored with Cali, it honestly made me sick at times. I couldn’t understand what that woman had that was so special that the two Evers brothers made themselves crazy over her. It burned me up inside just thinking about it.

“So,” I said slyly, knowing that I’d caught Maren in her game. “Did you bring Fenrir here to be around werewolves, or because you want to get back together with Greyson?”

Maren looked at me again, with that unsettling, inscrutable gaze. “It’s important for a boy to grow up around his father.”

**Episode 1080**

ARTEMIS

What the hell had just happened!?

I shook my head, trying to make sense of things. The more I thought about it, the more it definitely felt like someone had grabbed the Orb from my hand… But as to how? I wasn’t too sure.

I flexed my hand, which was tingling with a strange sensation of lightness now that the Orb was no longer in my keeping. I felt released, free, and the thought of diving back into all of the drama surrounding the Orb sounded completely exhausting. Quite honestly, I was glad to be rid of it—even if I didn’t know where it was now.

“It’s gone now, right?” I asked no one in particular, eager to be done with this whole thing. “Out of our lives?”

I straightened and came face to face with Big Mac, who was still staring at me, her eyes ablaze.

“Did you just *drop it there?*” she screeched, uncharacteristically loud. “Where anyone could pick it up?”

I held my hands out in front of me. “I told you!” I exclaimed. “I don’t know what happened!”

Big Mac let out a choked sound as her fingers curled and flexed. She looked like she was ready to throttle me. “Well, you had it,” she said through gritted teeth, “and now you don’t. It needs to be hidden or destroyed. What part of that isn’t clear to you?”

I glared, feeling my hackles rise. My brows furrowed as I became increasingly irritated by her questioning.

“It’s gone now,” I said, refusing to break away from Big Mac’s stare. “Isn’t that what we wanted? To get it far away from the Redwood pack?”

Big Mac pinched the bridge of her nose as she tilted her face up toward the sky. Her chest rose and fell as she took deep breaths, clearly attempting to calm herself. After a moment, she lowered her hand and refocused her gaze on me.

“No,” Big Mac said evenly. “It is not safe in the hands of anyone. Open the portal again.”

That was the very last thing I wanted to do. Wasn’t this a good thing? The Orb was gone; it was no longer ours to deal with. Let someone other unfortunate Fae deal with sealing the darkness, binding the evil, destroying the undestroyable! I had done my part. But Big Mac fixed me with one of her famous death glares, and I felt even my Fae blood run a little colder at the sight.

“Now,” she added, firmly. “We need to go after it to make sure it doesn’t fall into the wrong hands in the Fae world. That could spill more danger than we’re ready for into this world.”

I swallowed roughly, struck by what Big Mac had said.

The Fae world hadn’t always been the most welcoming place for me, but it was still my home. I felt guilt creep in as I thought about how I might have just introduced a deadly weapon to my brethren who were already dealing with a never-ending war.

I clenched my hands into fists, reining in my emotions. As much as I didn’t want the Fae world to suffer, I knew how I felt about the Orb, knew I wanted nothing to do with it. I couldn’t imagine that going after the Orb would lead to anything good.

“We need to go after the Orb,” Big Mac insisted, bringing me out of my thoughts as she stared at me intensely. “Open the portal! Now!”

I blinked, observing her face. Her eyes were wide and erratic, and droplets of sweat were forming on her face. I started to feel uneasy, the longer I looked.

Why did Big Mac want this so much?

I shuddered as I thought back to how persuasive the Orb had been, even to me. The pull it had… A cold trickle of fear dripped down my spine as I considered what a powerful witch could do if she got her hands on such a powerful object. The thought terrified me.

“No,” I said, lifting my chin in defiance. “I won’t open the portal.”

Big Mac inhaled deeply, seemingly about to lose patience.

“Again,” she said in a strained voice. “The Orb needs to be hidden or destroyed, and neither of those things has been done.”

I took in Big Mac’s disheveled appearance. The crazed look in her eyes, her insistence on getting the Orb, her weird excuses…

My eyes widened as realization hit me.

“You want it,” I breathed, still processing.

Big Mac raised her brows in surprise. “What?” she exclaimed. “No, I don’t.”

I shook my head, lifting my gaze to hers. “Yes, you do,” I said, my voice growing louder as I became more confident in my conclusion about Big Mac. “You want the Orb for yourself. That’s why you insisted on being the one to take it away. You were never going to get rid of it.”

“You’re wrong,” Big Mac scoffed. “I want to take care of this for everyone’s sake. I know how powerful the Orb is.”

“Exactly,” I said, my lip curling. “I can’t believe I never saw this before.”

Big Mac’s eyes fluttered to the arrow covered in my blood.

I just had time to scream out in defiance before I was blown back by magic.

I hit the ground but quickly scrambled up. Big Mac was breathing heavily, her eyes hyper-focused on one thing and one thing only: the arrow with my blood.

I sent a blast of power toward Big Mac as I dashed toward the arrow, trying to prevent her from getting it. Big Mac stumbled backward but immediately regained her balance.

I fought to take my position in front of the arrow, determined not to let her get it. Big Mac began to mumble under her breath, and immediately the tide began to rise around me, threatening to drown me.

I rocked in place as the water splashed around my feet, nearly throwing me off balance. I shot off a blast of magic in an effort to get her to stop messing with the tides, but it was no use.

All of a sudden, Big Mac pushed out a strong beam of magic, keeping its force constant. I barely managed to throw out my own beam in time—it was clear Big Mac had the upper hand now.

I strained against Big Mac’s beam. I didn’t think I could hold on much longer. I was doing everything I could do to keep Big Mac from getting the arrow, or spilling any of my blood…

I staggered back slightly as another realization hit me.

I didn’t have to be alive for Big Mac to have my blood. I glanced at Big Mac, who was muttering under her breath as the tides began to rise higher and higher.

Would she really go that far? Would Big Mac kill me?

I grunted as another blast of Big Mac’s magic beam pushed against me. Sweat poured down my forehead as Big Mac pushed me farther and farther back.

Just when I was sure I couldn’t hold on any longer, a sudden rush of wind swept past me as a big wave engulfed Big Mac.

I watched in awe as seaweed began to wrap itself around all of Big Mac’s limbs, binding her tight. I looked around, confused.

Then, suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Orla running toward us from the beach, with Rishika’s wolf right alongside her. It was my mother!

She’d come for me. I couldn’t believe it. I watched as Orla came bounding closer, overwhelmed by a weird sensation. I’d never had anyone look out for me before—it was a foreign feeling, honestly.

I slowly turned toward Orla, who was rushing toward me, since Big Mac was temporarily out of the way. Without hesitation, Orla wrapped me up in a tight, fierce hug.

“Oh god,” Orla breathed. “I’m so glad I found you before you disappeared into the Fae world.”

Rishika met my eyes over Orla’s shoulder, giving me a nod with her furry wolf head. I pulled away from my mother and threw my arms around Rishika next.

“Thank you,” I said to both of them, blinking away my tears before either of them could see. “Thank you for coming for me.”

I stood up, then quickly launched into an explanation, catching Orla and Rishika up on what had happened.

“—it felt like someone grabbed the Orb,” I finished.

Immediately, Orla’s expression turned grave.

“If it falls into the wrong hands…” she said, her voice low and even. “In the Fae world, the consequences could be worse than you know. We need to retrieve it. Now.”

I blinked at the intensity with which Orla was speaking. It was the same tone Big Mac had used—maybe I’d been wrong about her.

I nodded in resigned agreement. If my own mother was concerned with how I had left things, maybe it was worth revisiting, no matter how trying.

I trusted my mother, and I knew she couldn’t have been tainted by the Orb’s power—not yet, at least. She hadn’t even been near the Orb.

Slowly, from beside me, Big Mac started to rise.

“That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you!” Big Mac cried out. “As long as the Orb is out there, none of us are safe.”

Orla nodded her head in agreement.

“It’s time,” Orla said, still focused. “We have to go get it.”

Orla turned toward Rishika. “Guard the entrance. The portal can be… unpredictable at times.”

Rishika nodded, and I could feel a tug of magical energy as Big Mac stepped up alongside her. “We’ll guard your back, Orla,” she said with a determined nod.

Orla came toward me and took some of my blood from my hand. She put the blood on her necklace—the one with the moon buttercup. Then she held it out toward the portal, waiting for it to open.

But it didn’t.

That wasn’t supposed to happen. Confused, Orla held the necklace to the entrance again with the same results.

Nothing.

Had the portal disappeared?

**Episode 1081**

VIOLET

“You’re seriously saying we can’t go back to the pack house?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. This was absolute crazy talk.

Charlie nodded sagely. “It would be unfair to put everyone in the pack at risk.”

*I… what?* I tried to wrap my head around it, the fact that I’d never get to see anyone from the pack again.

“But…” I said, my voice shaking slightly. “The pack is my family!”

And it was true! I couldn’t imagine a life where I couldn’t ever be reunited with my pack—but, on the other hand, I obviously couldn’t be separated from my mate! God, why did it have to be like this?

I felt tears starting to form in my eyes as the thought of either never seeing my pack or my mate consumed me. I folded my arms across my chest, feeling increasingly upset at this new reality.

Charlie must have sensed my distress. *No duh!* It was obvious as all get out. I didn’t like causing him to worry, but there was no hiding how bad this choice hurt. He came closer, then gently unfolded my arms, taking my hands in his. He started stroking his thumb across my palm as he looked at me with concern.

By now, I’d worked myself up to quiet sobs.

“Hey, hey, hey,” he whispered. “Don’t be upset.”

I hiccupped, trying to hold back tears.

“Hey, please don’t cry,” Charlie gave me a soft smile. “I just think we need time to figure out what we’re going to do, and how we’re going to convince my parents that werewolves aren’t actually evil.”

I gave Charlie my best side-eye. It would have looked a little intimidating if I wasn’t hiccupping from crying so hard.

“I know them,” he continued. “They’re good people.”

I nodded simply, not voicing what I really thought. As much as Charlie wanted to believe that his parents were good people, I wasn’t so sure that that was true. I mean, they went around murdering people in cold blood—people who could very well be my friends and family—just because of what they were.

Now, obviously I wouldn’t say any of this to Charlie, but still. I couldn’t help but feel that what I was thinking was true.

“We just need space to come up with a game plan,” Charlie continued. “To figure out how we’re going to convince my parents to listen to reason.”

I gave another nod, slowly calming down. At least he wasn’t saying that I had to separate from my pack—my only remaining family—permanently. It was just temporary, until he could get through to his parents. Especially considering the alternative would mean that *Charlie* wouldn’t ever see his family again, which was also a non-option.

I lifted my head and looked up at Charlie again. I steeled myself, reining in my emotions and worries about not seeing my pack.

I was determined to be as supportive as possible—Charlie deserved to have his family, too. We had to try, and I would be there every step of the way.

“Okay,” I said, nodding as I squeezed his hand. “So, what exactly do we do now?”

A wide smile spread across Charlie’s face. It was clear he was happy that I was on board.

He pulled his hands away from mine, gripping the steering wheel once more. “I’ve been thinking that we should got back to Portland.”

I arched my brow at him—wasn’t Portland where his parents had *just* turned on us with silver knives? Plus, they’d find us easily, since we’d be in the same city.

Charlie hastily explained. “It’ll be easier for us to lie low around big groups in a city,” he said. “And my parents won’t expect us to turn around.”

I considered his words. What he was saying made sense. Who in their right mind would go back to the place where their mate’s parents had almost killed them? Oh, right—us.

“Well, it’s not… the worst plan. For starters, at least.”

With that, Charlie started the car and took us back into Portland. We drove around, trying to figure out where we were going to stay, but everywhere was either too expensive or too obvious or too dangerous.

As we continued to make our way through the city, I decided to try and cheer Charlie up, knowing that everything was probably still weighing heavily on him.

“Have you seen *Portlandia*?” I asked, in an attempt to make conversation. “This place really is just like the show!”

Charlie just grunted, too focused on finding a place for us to rest and sleep.

Okay, looked like genuine conversations were out. Time to change tactics.

We passed by a little bookshop, which was covered in bird decals and wooden birdhouses. Laughing, I pointed at the store.

“A bookshop with bird decor?” I said loudly. “What were they thinking!”

I looked toward Charlie, hoping to see some sort of reaction. Nothing. I tried this a couple more times. Every time I saw a weird sign or store, I would laugh in an exaggerated manner, point, and try to get him to engage.

He didn’t bother responding, clearly not in the mood.

After driving around for a while, Charlie—still being pragmatic—finally broke his silence.

“Okay, we need a game plan,” he said curtly. “It’s nighttime, so where are we going to sleep? We don’t exactly have a lot of money with us…”

I winced at that. We really hadn’t expected everything to go down like this.

I could probably ask Xavier for some emergency money… But then he’d have questions for me, and I really didn’t want to get Xavier involved. Once I did, I knew there would be no stopping him. He’d go hard and take out the threat, with no mercy.

I couldn’t let that happen. Even if they were currently trying to kill us and hated me with every fiber of their being, Iris and Paul were still Charlie’s parents. I hazarded a glance over at Charlie. He’d never forgive me if I was the reason something happened to them. So… figuring it out the hard way was going to win out.

I took a look outside. The big houses and picket fences indicated that we were in some sort of super quiet residential area.

Charlie slowed the car as we drove down the street, pointing at an old mansion at the end of the block. It appeared to be abandoned. The building was covered in ivy, its stone walls crumbling in places, with dirt and debris everywhere.

“We could park there for the night?” Charlie suggested. “Make a better plan after we’ve had some sleep?”

As unappealing as this place looked, it seemed to be in a relatively safe neighborhood, and it didn’t *look* like anyone lived there. So I agreed.

Charlie started up the car again and parked it in the driveway of the abandoned mansion. Its impressive walls loomed over us.

“The house looks kind of cool,” Charlie commented.

I perked up, excited that he was finally interested in something other than planning how to survive the night.

“Maybe we should check to make sure it’s really abandoned?” I suggested.

Charlie looked up at the house, considering. “Ooh, sounds spooky. I like it,” he teased, the brightness in his eyes suggesting he was excited to go inside.

Yes! A little adventure like this would definitely make him feel better.

We got out of the car quietly, making our way cautiously across the yard, which was covered in brambles, and into the house. Once inside, we found decaying furniture covered in dust. Yup, this place definitely looked abandoned.

As we wandered further into the house, I couldn’t help but admit that the place was actually super cool—*if* you could overlook all the cobwebs and dust. The house was huge and full of cool architectural details.

I briefly wondered why this kind of place had ended up abandoned. It was a beautiful—

I froze, catching an unmistakable scent: death.

Oh god. Vampires!

I turned toward Charlie, who had stopped beside me, frowning as he sniffed the air. I grabbed his arm.

“We need to leave,” I urged, breathless. “Now.”

But before we could do anything, a group of vampires burst into the room, snarling.

*This was a mistake.* I trembled slightly as I realized it was even worse than I’d thought. Charlie and I had stumbled into a vampire’s nest!

I edged closer to Charlie as the vampires began to circle us. The stared intently at our throats, only closing their eyes briefly to inhale deeply—probably picking up the scent of our blood. Every time they breathed in, they shuddered in morbid delight.

Whenever I made eye contact with one of the vampires by accident, they licked their lips, flashing their fangs at me predatorily. Slowly, they made their circle tighter and tighter, trapping us inside.

One vampire stalked closer to me, seeming to have claimed me for himself. When I felt the cold touch of his hand, I shrieked.

Charlie immediately turned and attacked—probably obeying his hunter instincts.

He snarled at the vampire, shoving it away from me, hard. In an instant, Charlie and I both shifted, ready to take on the vampires. It was us or them.

I dashed toward the group of vampires that had fallen back to the stairs, biting, tearing, and scratching at whatever vampire skin I could find. I’d moved away from Charlie, but I wasn’t worried. I knew he could take care of himself.

With a growl, I leapt onto the last remaining vampire on my side, grabbing them by the neck with my teeth and ripping their head off. I dropped the head and looked up. What I saw stopped my heart in its tracks.

Charlie had been backed into a corner by four vampires.

And I knew I couldn’t possibly get to him in time…

**Episode 1082**

I stood in the kitchen with Lola and Xavier, leaning against the counter, still trembling over what had just happened. The amount of blood that had poured from my dad’s hand… Oh god, it felt like it had been endless.

I shuddered just thinking about it as I pushed myself off the counter and went over to my dad. I helped him up, then brought him to my room so he could lie down. He waved away all of my fussing, insisting he was fine.

Once I was satisfied that he was safe and comfortable, I left the room and made my way downstairs.

They hadn’t even been here a full day, and there had been nothing but chaos for my parents. From my mom running off to save Artemis to my dad chopping his finger off—I couldn’t help but think it was an inauspicious sign.

I chewed on my lips, worried. I hoped that my mom and Artemis were okay. I wished I were out there with them, just so I could know that they were all right. But at least Greyson had sent Rishika with my mom. I was grateful to have that peace of mind, to know that my mom had some backup, at least.

I frowned as I thought about Greyson. I knew I didn’t deserve his kindness—especially not after that look I’d seen in his eyes. He was pissed with me, and justifiably so. I knew I should never have kept exactly how Xavier and I met from him, but I’d never known how to really *tell* him. And there was the matter of him passing out again…

I was once again struck by feelings of frustration. The urge to do something—*anything*—was strong, but I was stuck here in the pack house, completely useless. I hated this.

I snapped out of my thoughts and noticed that Lola was looking intently at the last of the blood that Xavier was wiping up. Weird, but not the strangest thing I’d seen today. I moved toward Xavier as he stood, having finished cleaning up the blood.

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “It really means a lot—”

“Someone had to clean it up,” Xavier said coldly. Then he left without even giving me a second glance.

I sighed. There was nothing I could do about that right now. I went to Lola, who looked shaken.

“Are you okay?” I asked her gently.

Lola opened her mouth then immediately closed it. She looked around, making sure that we were alone. *Okay… we’re getting into suspicious territory here.* Then she turned toward me, her eyes full of fear.

“Hey, what is it?” I asked, concerned. I’d never seen Lola like this. “What’s wrong?”

Lola said nothing, just continued to stare at me, tears forming in her eyes.

Hastily, I added, “I mean, I know that looked super gnarly, but my dad’s going to be totally fine. Torin healed him so well that there won’t even be a scar.”

Lola bit her lip. “I know,” she finally said, her voice shaking. “I know he’ll be fine—that’s not it.”

Lola’s face was deeply troubled, which only made me even more worried.

“You know you can always talk to me about anything,” I reminded her.

Lola took a deep breath, nodding almost imperceptibly. Her voice dropped to a whisper, as if it pained her to say anything.

“It’s the blood,” she said.

I spun around, thinking that there was still some blood left, but Xavier had cleaned it all up. There wasn’t even a spot left. I turned back to Lola, a questioning look on my face.

She just shook her head, still looking really strange. I watched her, confused. I didn’t understand what was happening, nor was I able to piece together what she was trying to say. What was going on here?

I wanted to press her for more information, especially since it was clear that whatever was on Lola’s mind was troubling her greatly. But before I could say anything, my father stepped into the kitchen. What was he doing? I had just watched him lop off part of his own hand just a minute ago.

“Go back upstairs!” I chided. “You need rest.”

My father just shook his head. “I’m fine, Cali,” he said, insistent. “Especially thanks to Torin. Good kid.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Lola peeked out from behind me.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” she said to my dad. Even as she said this, her gaze was fixated on my dad’s hand. She let out a little whimper. “I’m going to talk to Jay,” she said quickly, and fled the room.

I opened my mouth to call out to her, but she was long gone. Damn it! She’d been about to say something to me before my dad had interrupted.

My father turned toward me. “You and I have a lot to talk about, honey.”

Just what every daughter wants to hear.

“I know you want answers about the boys,” I said, tired with everything. “But I don’t have any. That’s the whole freaking point.”

My father opened his mouth to say something, but I cut him off.

“And, if I’m being totally honest,” I added, “I’m just super worried about Mom and Artemis. They’re out there with the Orb-Sphere thing, which is really dangerous.”

“I’m worried about them, too,” my dad said, sighing. “But Orla is a very strong woman, and from what I’ve seen of Artemis, she knows how to handle herself.”

“You’re right,” I conceded. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want to help. I hate feeling useless, just sitting here, and it’s not even like I could leave even if I wanted to thanks to Big Mac.”

My dad took a moment to think, considering my words. “Maybe it’s a blessing in disguise,” he said. “You can catch me up to speed with what’s going on. The two guys, the whole mates thing—everything I don’t really get. All of it.”

“Really?”

“Of course,” my dad said fiercely. “You’re my daughter. I meant it when I told you and your mother that I didn’t want my memories erased. This is my family—however surprising some parts of it are.”

I gave my dad a big smile as I wrapped him up in a huge hug. “I’m sorry for not telling you about how Xavier and I met,” I mumbled into his shoulder.

I felt my father shake with laughter as he pulled away.

“I think you did good not telling me the first time around,” he joked.

I laughed, a little sad as I thought about my whole situation. “You have no idea how much I’ve messed up, with both Xavier and Greyson.”

My father gripped my shoulder, his brow furrowing in mock seriousness. “Well now,” he said defensively. “You’re a wonderful young woman. If they think otherwise, they can take it up with me.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at my dad’s antics. Just then, Greyson and Torin came in from outside. I tried to make eye contact with Greyson—we had a lot to talk about—but he avoided my gaze.

Torin gasped when he saw me and immediately came over, throwing an arm around my shoulders.

“Cali,” he declared. “I just had the most amazing idea about how to deal with your *due destini* thing!”

My father blinked. “Dude destiny?”

“*Due destini*,” I corrected. As Torin hung onto me, I detected the unmistakable smell of fireball on him. Man, he’d gotten really obsessed with that.

“I think it’s time we see who you should be with, Caliana,” Torin said. “If you have two mates, you can’t keep avoiding the question. You’re only hurting yourself, and them.”

I looked at Torin, trying to figure out where all of this was coming from. Probably the fireball. Not that Torin didn’t have a point, but I figured we could probably come up with solutions when we weren’t drunk off cheap alcohol. Still, Torin always managed to find the fun side of any situation. It didn’t hurt hearing him out, plus he was definitely entertaining swaying on his feet the way he was.

“I’ve tried so many ways to figure this out,” I told Torin. “And I can never decide.”

The unfair and exhausting reality with seemingly no conclusion—I hated it.

“Plus,” I reminded him. “I can’t choose because if I do choose one, the other dies.”

My father listened to my conversation with Torin intently. His face set in a puzzled frown for a minute.

“One of them will DIE?” my dad finally asked, apparently completely thrown for a loop.

Torin ignored him, instead beaming at me and looking so pleased that it almost weirded me out.

“I’ve got it!” Torin exclaimed. He turned away, cupping his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice. “Xavier, could you join us downstairs pleeaaaaase?”

What the hell was this Fae thinking?

Xavier came in, and I could feel the tension pulse from Greyson, both of them looking quite annoyed.

“Okay, listen up,” Torin commanded. “This situation”—Torin waved a hand between Xavier, Greyson, and me—“is too hard for my dear friend to resolve on her own. After all, you’re both completely smoking hot. And from what I can gather, you guys haven’t even had a proper courtship anyway.”

Xavier opened his mouth to speak, but Torin raised a hand, cutting him off.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said, gesturing to my dad. “This lovely man’s daughter deserves the best.”

Torin walked over to my dad and put an arm around him, causing my dad to smile. Torin turned his head toward Xavier and Greyson, addressing them.

“And to figure out who is the best fit for Cali,” Torin said, his face lit up with glee, “I’ve come up with an idea. I’m going to be the host of the very first werewolf *Bachelorette*!”

**Episode 1083**

LOLA

Everything was going to hell.

I sat on Jay’s bed and stared at the wall. I was losing my mind. I remembered when I’d first lost my wolf. I’d thought it was the most painful thing that could ever happen to me. But I’d been wrong. There were far worse alternatives. And I couldn’t even talk to Cali, my best friend, the person I could talk to about *anything*. I mean, what was I going to say to her? *“You know Cali, when your Dad cut his finger off it really made me feel…”* Even the idea of talking about it made me want to die.

*His blood. His blood was so red. The smell of it, so rich and dark and salty, the splattered droplets glistening like delicate jewels on the knife’s edge…*

Oh my god! What the hell was wrong with me? I was freaking out. Even thinking about this made me want to puke. Vampires and werewolves didn’t mix. Everybody knew that. It was like knowing the sky was blue and the grass was green. Vampires were bloodsucking fiends, undead garbage. I’d learned that before I could read. And now I might be one. I felt a hot lump form in my throat and blinked back tears.

*Don’t cry. Don’t you dare cry.*

“Lola, what’s going on?”

I snapped back to reality and saw Jay leaning forward. His eye was wide, and his forehead had that little crease of concern.

“Seriously, what’s wrong?” he asked.

It was all too much. I jumped up and began pacing, restless, furious energy rushing through me faster than I knew how to control it.

“What’s wrong? What’s *wrong?*”

I was yelling, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself. I wheeled around.

“What’s wrong is that I think I’m turning into a vampire! For real! We were downstairs, and Tom cut himself and he was bleeding and the blood…” I faltered. The shame and embarrassment—such alien emotions for me—were back, but I had to tell him, had to tell someone. “Jay, I wanted it! I could smell it, and it made me… it made me hungry!”

I winced as I said it and stared down at the floor, convinced I would never be able to look him in the eye again.

“Lola?”

Jay sounded calm—not at all like he was going to vomit with disgust. Plus, he wasn’t running screaming from the room, which was a good sign.

“Yeah?” I still couldn’t look at him.

“Have you eaten today?”

My head snapped up. “Seriously? Are you kidding me? I just told you that I wanted to suck my best friend’s father’s blood and you’re asking me if I’ve EATEN TODAY? What the HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?”

Jay wasn’t getting upset. If anything, he was even smiling a little, and somehow that pissed me off even more.

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “Do you want a slice of pizza?”

“That’s not the point!” I screamed.

Jay stared at me, unfazed. “You have to calm down. You’re getting worked up over something that’s probably nothing.”

If there was one thing I truly hated, it was a man telling me to calm down—even if it was a man I was head over heels in love with.

CALM DOWN? “PROBABLY NOTHING”?

“Jay!” I wanted to shake him until his teeth rattled. “Me turning into a vampire is NOT goddamn nothing!”

He was still smiling.

“C’mon!” I persisted. “Where would that even leave us?” My shoulders slumped, and my voice rose into a wail. “I’d be all gross and undead and stinky and you wouldn’t even love me anymore!”

Jay reached over and took me in his arms. Unable to help myself, I basked in his warmth, his smell, his Jay-ness. I found myself untensing. Something coiled tight within me loosened.

Jay could always do that for me.

“Lola,” he murmured into my hair. “What you’re worried about isn’t possible. And even if it were, no matter what happens, I’ll always love you. *Always*. We’ve been over this before. Remember?”

I sniffed. “Yeah,” I muttered into the comforting warmth of his shoulder. “But that was different. That was just me losing my wolf.”

I couldn’t believe I was actually saying “just” about losing my wolf. It was so painful. At the time, I’d thought I’d never get over it. But I’d take that over this fresh shitshow any day.

“Becoming a vampire is a completely different situation and you know it! I mean, how come Tom’s blood didn’t gross me out? How come I just felt curious?”

Jay rolled his eyes. “C’mon Lola, you’ve seen a lot of blood.”

*Okay, maybe that’s true.*

“But why?” I wailed. “Why would I want to try it?”

I expected Jay to recoil, but instead he just laughed. “Because you fixate! You have it in your head that you’re changing. But I know you, and I know you’re not.”

He sounded so sure, but I just couldn’t believe him.

“Okay, think about it and be honest with yourself—could you ever see yourself being in love with a freaking vampire?” I tried to keep the wobble out of my voice, but I failed. I sniffed again. “You can’t, can you?” Everything swam in front of me as the tears blurred my vision and then spilled over, running down my cheeks.

Jay forced my chin upward. “Lola. I could, and I would. Because the vampire would be you.” His voice was steady, and his gaze never strayed from mine.

He pulled me closer and leaned in. His lips were warm and soft against mine. He sucked on my bottom lip, running the tip of his tongue over it. As if by magic, my lips parted and his tongue slid in, smooth and dexterous, rolling around, working up into a rhythm, a promise of what was to come. As he fucked my mouth with his tongue, his firm hands moved inch by inch up my waist, pushing my shirt past my breasts and forcing my arms up. My nipples were already rock hard and crying out for his attention, but he deliberately continued to push my top over my head then threw it down onto the bed. I stood half-naked, shivering with lust and anticipation. He dragged his palms up from my navel and over my breasts, moving them around and around, massaging my boobs with his skilled fingers but never touching my nipples. The warm, teasing pressure was driving me nuts. And he knew it.

I could feel heat pooling in my core. I wanted him so much. His hands ran up over my throat, then his fingers sank into my hair and pulled before descending again to stroke and caress my body.

He was driving me crazy.

He kissed me again, catching my lower lip between his teeth and tugging hard, and I gasped. The slight pain mixed with the pleasure was insanely hot. He ran his hands down my jeans. With one hand, he squeezed my ass. I could feel the heat of his palm through the denim. With the other hand, he slowly lowered the zipper inch by inch. The harsh purr had never sounded so sexy. Now, there was just a little triangle of fabric and the warmth of his hand. I’d never needed to get out my underwear so goddamn fast. As if reading my mind, Jay yanked my jeans down to my ankles. I gasped at the speed of it, but he didn’t pull them off. I was trapped, a prisoner of my own fucking jeans. He grinned and gave me a push. I teetered then fell backward onto the bed, my tits aimed up at the ceiling, my nipples a hard, bright pink. In a flash, Jay was on me, the weight of his body pinning me to bed.

He held my arms down as he nibbled at my ears, my mouth, my neck before he finally lowered his lips to one breast. His tongue swirled around my nipple, grazing it with his teeth, pulling and sucking. I cried out. It felt so fucking good. He kissed and licked the other one, then made his way down my body, taking his sweet time. I writhed underneath him, but we both knew I wasn’t going anywhere.

Slowly, he tugged my underwear down with his teeth. He was torturing me, and just when I thought I would go insane, he buried his face in me, parting my lips with his own. I gasped as his tongue circled my clit with the same rhythmic intensity he’d used around my nipple. He feasted, lapping and flicking, licking and sucking as I moaned with pleasure. Using his long tongue, he corkscrewed and spiraled, and I was rushing toward climax, my whole body shaking. But, as expert as his tongue was, I was greedy for his huge, thick cock.

“Jay,” I gasped.

He emerged, wet with my juices and grinning.

I tried to tell him that I needed him in me, hard and as deep as he could go, but the words wouldn’t come. He still got the point, and we fumbled with his pants, trying to push them down as fast as humanly possible. It seemed like forever before they hit the floor. Then he was on me again, pinning me down, pushing my thighs apart. And then with one huge thrust, he was in me.

He was large, but I was so wet that he slid in fast and hot and *damn* he felt so good. We were moving together. I was holding him tight, kissing his cheeks, his neck, his chest, digging my fingers into his hair, pulling painfully tight as he thrust deeper and harder. Exquisite electricity shot through every part of my body. I was going to explode. I held him tighter and pressed my lips against his smooth, perfect neck. I opened my mouth and bit down as hard as I could—

Jay reeled back with a yelp of pain. “Jesus, Lola! What the fuck was that for?”

**Episode 1084**

XAVIER

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I mean, I’d known Torin was enthusiastic, but there was no way he could be serious. And who the hell let him watch reality TV in the first place? This was a new level of bullshit. Werewolf *Bachelorette*? I was going crazy just thinking about it. Cali must have put Torin up to this—it was same thing she’d suggested to me earlier. I glanced over. She looked as shocked as I was, so maybe not. Regardless, I didn’t want anything to do with this. It was bad enough that Cali told her dad how we’d met in the first place! I still couldn’t believe she’d done that. Eventually, I assumed everyone would cool down, but I really wished she’d thought about it instead of just blurting it out, Cali style.

I turned to Torin. “There is no way in hell I’m doing this.”

“But it’s gonna be so fun!” Torin gasped. He was being extremely melodramatic about the whole thing.

“No way.”

It wasn’t like Greyson would agree to any of this, either.

I looked from Torin to Tom to Cali to Greyson and back to Cali. Silence. The whole thing reminded me of watching *Rocky Horror* with my mom and Colton, back when I was a little kid. This was straight out of the scene when Rocky and Janet were busted having sex in the lab. I was frozen, just like everyone else. Colton had made us watch that movie about a hundred times, he loved it so much. Not that I’d minded. I loved it too. But I didn’t want to live it.

Cali finally broke the silence. Her voice was shaking a little.

“Torin, I appreciate you trying to help but I… I don’t think… The thing is, my dad’s recovering, and I just don’t think any of us are up for…”

“Why not?” Tom interjected.

I couldn’t believe it. Cali stared at her father, but Tom went on.

“I mean, it sounds like it could be fun. It’s like Ben’s season!” he continued, seeming to warm to the idea. I turned to Greyson, who, to my utter shock was nodding slowly in agreement.

“It’s not like it can be any worse than what’s currently going on,” he said gruffy.

This could not be happening. Had another Fae snuck in here recently and drugged us all?

Cali gazed at me, her eyes pleading. Apparently it *was* real. What’s more, it was beginning to dawn on me that if I wanted Tom’s approval, I had better get on board.

“I already regret saying this, but… all right.”

Cali—being Cali—wouldn’t leave it alone.

“Really?” she said. “You both want to do this?”

Greyson spoke up then. “No, Cali. I don’t want to do this.”

I nodded hard, agreeing with Greyson for the first time in quite a while. *Oh thank god*. “Yeah, I take it back. If Greyson isn’t doing it, neither am I.”

But then Tom weighed in. “Can’t we give it a try?” he entreated. “At least let me get to know both of you boys better?”

*Oh shit.*

Torin smiled brightly, like the maniacal prick he was proving to be. “All right, so that’s decided,” he said. “The first challenge will begin in an hour. Wear your finest suits!” He winked with a mock leer. “Shirts are optional!”

I sincerely hoped he was kidding.

I stormed off to my room. This was so fucking stupid! How the hell was this happening?

But if we *were* doing this, I’d be damned if I let Greyson win.

In my room, I rummaged around in my closet, searching for my best outfit. I couldn’t remember if I owned a good suit, let alone the last time I’d had call to wear it. I was a goddamn werewolf mercenary, after all. Finally, I found a suit in the back and pulled it out. Damn. The last time I’d worn this thing had been years ago, when I’d taken Ava up to Seattle for a date. It felt like a lifetime ago.

*Oh well, here goes nothing.*

I put the suit on and checked myself out in the mirror. Not bad. Though admittedly a little snug in the shoulders and arms. It felt like I was the Incredible Hulk. If I made the wrong move, I’d burst through the seams. Still, it would have to do. This was far and away the stupidest thing I’d ever been asked to do. And that was saying something.

I headed out of my room to go downstairs when I saw Ava lounging in the hall. I stopped dead. I’d almost forgotten she was here.

She twisted a long black strand of hair around her finger and leaned nonchalantly against the wall.

“Nice suit.” A slow smile played across her lips.

“Not now, Ava.” I rolled my eyes and tried to move past her, but she blocked my way.

“It used to fit you better, though. I remember undoing those pants in the bathroom at that little Italian restaurant.” She paused and stared into my eyes. “Do you remember that?”

I swallowed roughly. I did remember, and her proximity brought it all back even more vividly.

That night at the restaurant, Ava had looked so beautiful. She had excused herself first, and I’d followed soon after. We’d been so damn obvious, but it didn’t matter. We didn’t care. We hadn’t been able to stop ourselves. Furtively, I’d headed into the women’s bathroom after her. Thank god there’d been no one else there.

I remembered the way the flimsy stall door had swung back and forth, the cheap lock about to give. But I’d known that if I didn’t have her, I would die. The sheer golden fabric of Ava’s slip, the way it had whispered over her smooth thighs… We hadn’t kissed—we’d devoured each other. Ava pressing her soft, perfect body against mine in that crammed space, the way she’d run her hands down my chest, her long, slim fingers unhooking my belt, my pants falling down in a rustle of fabric, Ava reaching down and under to grasp and release me, squeezing, the illicitness of the moment making it even hotter, even sweeter… I’d gasped, muttering that we should stop, but she’d grinned—she’d always loved turning me on, driving me completely crazy, smiling that wicked smile and looking up at me as she gracefully bent her knees, lowering her deep red mouth, her lips parting, and then…

I brought myself back to the present with a start. Ava stood smirking at me. She ran a finger lightly down the front of my suit.

“I thought you might remember.”

She stepped back to let me pass

*What was that?*

I got down the stairs as fast as possible, determined not to look up.

*I should never have brought her back here.*

No time to worry about that now—I’d have to take care of it later.

Torin had rearranged the furniture in the lounge so that the couch was now facing two armchairs. Tom was sitting in one and Cali was sitting in the other. She was looking as breathtaking as always in a soft lilac gown. My eyes traveled over to Greyson, who was sitting awkwardly on the couch.

He was wearing the most suave motherfucking suit I’d ever laid eyes on. Of course the bastard had a bespoke Tom Ford suit.

Could this night be over already?

“Xavier. Sit.” Torin gestured elegantly toward the couch. I sat, trying to put as much room between Greyson and myself as possible.

“To kick things off on *Werewolf Bachelorette*, Tom is going to ask the suitors some questions.”

I looked over at Tom, who seemed as surprised as the rest of us. He looked pleased though, like he’d won the lottery. Made sense—he was finally getting some control over his daughter’s situation.

“Both of you must answer honestly,” Torin said. “After hearing your answers, Tom will choose one of you to go on the first date with Cali.”

I couldn’t believe I was doing this. Maybe it wasn’t too late to leave? I glanced at Cali, who was wringing her hands in her lap and looking totally stressed out.

No way in hell was I going to abandon her.

I didn’t hear anyone else complaining, so I clenched my jaw, nodded, and waited for the questions.

Tom turned to Greyson. “Why do you love my daughter?”

Greyson was expressionless for a moment. Would that be my question too? I leaned forward to hear his answer. Greyson cleared his throat.

“She’s perfect to me,” he said. “She sees through my flaws and makes me want to become a better person. She’s strong and passionate about helping people. She’s brave and beautiful and kind.” He tilted his head and gave Cali a small smile. “Does that answer your question?”

Clearly he had come to win and so far, it seemed like he was doing a pretty good job. Cali was blushing furiously. My answer had to be way better than that.

“All right, I see.” Tom was nodding gravely. “Thank you, Greyson.” He turned to me. “Xavier, it’s your turn.”

Now was my chance. What could I say that would top Greyson’s speech? It had to sound original, yet also meaningful and from the heart.

*Come on Xavier, you’ve got this.*

I’d opened my mouth to reply when Tom raised his hand. “Ah, I haven’t asked you your question yet.”

*Wait! What?*

From the corner of my eye, I saw Torin step forward. He leaned in and whispered something in Tom’s ear. I didn’t like the look of this.

Tom’s forehead scrunched up, and he seemed confused. Then he turned to me.

“Is it true you left Greyson to die in the Kollector’s zoo in the Fae world?”

**Episode 1085**

Well, I hadn’t been expecting that.

It was certainly a very… specific question. I knew that my mom had probably told my dad about the Fae world, but she probably hadn’t given him a full rundown of everything I’d done there. Just thinking about the Kollector made me shudder. I looked to Xavier, who hadn’t answered yet. His face was expressionless. In fact, both Xavier’s and Greyson’s faces were pretty blank. Greyson had given such a beautiful answer, but I could tell he was still upset with me. Right now, he looked totally furious.

*Maybe I should have called off this game? Then again, they both look so hot in their suits…*

Torin piped up. “Xavier? Did you need the question repeated?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand how that’s relevant?” I interrupted. What the hell was going on?

Torin turned to me. “Rules are rules. Ask a question, get an answer.”

Xavier just sat there, silent. I didn’t understand why he hadn’t said anything yet. Of *course* he hadn’t left Greyson to die in the Fae world. He hadn’t even *seen* Greyson in the Kollector’s zoo until we’d all met up after he’d escaped. I was so confused.

“Yes,” Xavier finally said. “I left him in a cage with the Loch Ness Monster.” His voice was flat.

I felt a shiver race down my spine as ice filled my veins at Xavier’s words.

“*What?*” I demanded. I looked at Greyson, whose arms were crossed. “Greyson, is this true? Why didn’t you tell me? How did I not know about this?”

Part of me kept waiting for Greyson to say that it was all some kind of misunderstanding. But he just gave a half-shrug. Which confirmed everything.

*It must be true.*

I couldn’t even begin to process what this meant. Who even *was* Xavier? I didn’t know. I thought I was going to throw up. The betrayal felt physical, like someone had punched me right in the stomach. I stood. From somewhere far away I could hear my dad asking something about the Loch Ness Monster being real. He sounded amazed, but I couldn’t have cared less. I was so angry with Xavier it was making me see red.

I burst through the back door and heard Xavier calling my name.

I whirled about, feeling my anger barely contain itself. This was supposed to all be a bit of fun and games to reduce the tension. So much for that idea. I jabbed a finger into his chest as I tried to muster enough willpower to talk coherently and not just shriek in his face.

“How could you do that to your own brother?” I screamed. “How could you leave him caged like an animal?”

“Cali,” Xavier said, his voice low and pleading. “Could we please have this conversation a little more quietly?”

“No!” I yelled “I’m not dealing with any more secrets!” I was so upset, I could hardly think straight. White-hot rage was coursing through me. “What the hell were you thinking? I mean, were you planning to just leave Greyson in the Fae world forever? Without even telling me? He’s your brother, for god’s sake! Your *brother!*”

Xavier’s body seemed to go rigid.

“Oh!” I looked at him, genuinely disgusted as another idea dawned. “Or was that your idea, to get Greyson out of the picture so you could have me for yourself?”

“Cali, that’s not… It’s not that simple…” His words were clipped, terse.

“Oh no?” I could barely get the words out. “Well, I know you left him to die! That’s what I know!”

“Could we talk privately, at least?” He was trying to keep himself under control. Somehow, that made me madder than ever.

I glanced back at the house and saw Torin and my dad staring at us through the window. Whatever. Let them stare.

I looked at Xavier again.

“I feel like I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

Xavier flinched, but I continued.

“The person I loved wouldn’t ever do something like that. I saw that zoo. I know what it was like. It wasn’t even fit for animals! They were all prisoners!”

“I’m… I’m sorry…” Now Xavier was pleading. “Cali, I… I never meant for you to find out.”

“Find out this way, or find out at all?” I shot back.

To my surprise, a fire sprang to life in Xavier’s eyes.

“I was doing what I thought I had to do to protect you. And there’s no point in rehashing this. We’re all out of the Fae world now, aren’t we, and your precious Greyson is still alive and in one piece.” He folded his arms like he was done with the conversation.

I opened my mouth to let him know that a simple apology definitely wasn’t going to cut it, but Greyson had come to join us outside.

“Enough,” he said, his voice flat and cold.

Xavier laughed. “Here he comes now to the rescue. Of *course* you get to decide when it’s enough, don’t you, you dick?”

Nevertheless, we all headed back into the house. Xavier deliberately shoulder-checked Greyson on our way inside.

I was speechless, my mind still reeling. Even Torin looked uncomfortable. That had to be a first.

“Um, well, now that that’s out in the open, maybe we should call it a day?” he said. “Let everybody work things out?”

A bit of color drained from Torin’s dark features. Good. Let him be a little scared of me. I felt scary. I felt angry enough to even spit fire. I wondered if smoke was steaming off the top of my head. I rounded on him.

“No!” I spat. “We are not going to ‘call it a day’. We are going to keep going.” I tried to smile, but it felt weird. “Who knows what the hell else might come out now?”

Both Greyson and Xavier opened their mouths to reason with me, to talk me down. Brothers united in a common cause for once.

“EVERYBODY SIT THE FUCK DOWN!” I screamed.

Everybody sat. Finally, people were listening without any back-talk.

I abruptly sat down too, still shaking with anger. I couldn’t understand it, couldn’t get my head around it. If things had gone differently, Greyson might still have been stuck in that hellhole zoo. My head was still spinning. All of this felt like a terrible dream. But it couldn’t be.

Torin was speaking again. He seemed to have taken over the role of interviewer from my dad. That was good. I didn’t want my dad to have to deal with more than he needed to.

“Then… ah… I’ll go ahead with my next question for Greyson,” Torin said. “Greyson. Since you found out that Cali was your mate, have you been loyal?” Torin asked.

I glanced over at Greyson. I couldn’t believe he’d been through all of that without telling me. I felt truly horrible for him.

Greyson, meanwhile, looked like he wanted to be anywhere but on that couch. He was staring woodenly ahead, a pulse visibly throbbing in his temple.

“Uh…” Torin sounded nervous. “I just want to remind you that this is all about honesty.” He cleared his throat. “After all, that’s what matters most in relationships.”

Greyson took a deep breath and looked up. “Well, as long as we’re getting things out in the open…”

That did not fill me with confidence.

“Yes?” Torin pressed him.

“I’ve kissed Joss, Artemis, and Maren.”

I was going to break something. I’d been gut-punched—again. I couldn’t believe it. I’d known about Artemis, but Joss? When the hell had that happened? Yes, Joss was dead, but it still hurt. A lot. And *Maren*? As in Maren, his supermodel gorgeous ex, who was toting around a kid who looked like a mini Greyson? That Maren? When had THAT happened?

Torin’s voice cut through my rather murderous thoughts. “Thank you, Greyson. I appreciated that you told us the truth.”

I had about five million more questions that I needed to ask.

*When had he kissed Joss? When had he kissed Maren? Was it just kissing? Why did he do it? Is he still in love with Maren? Was he ever going to let me know? About either of them? Were there others?*

Torin, however, had other plans. He turned to Xavier, who sat there silently.

“I’m now going to ask you the question that Tom asked Greyson first.”

Xavier nodded slowly.

“Xavier,” Torin said. “Why do you love Cali?”

I felt sick to my stomach. I couldn’t believe that any of this was happening, but the last thing I wanted was to hear some cute little speech about how Xavier loved me.

Xavier turned to me. “When we first met I was a wreck. There are a million reasons why you should hate me,” he shifted in his seat uncomfortably at that last remark, no doubt seeing the anger in my eyes. “And yet you’re still here. None of us are perfect, and you never expect me to be. You just want me to keep trying. I’ve never actually *wanted* to be a good man before, not in the way most people mean it. That’s been different since I met you, Cali. That doesn’t mean I don’t make mistakes, but it does mean I’ll still be here through the fallout of each of them.”

*Oh, Jesus.* I thought I was going to puke.

I rolled my eyes and looked away, not wanting to admit that his words, even though I was still so angry, had an effect on me.

Torin cheerfully clapped his hands. Like my world hadn’t been completely destroyed. Like nothing had happened. “Okay then! Round one is over. The winner gets to take Caliana to dinner.”

I coughed and muttered, “Uh Torin?”

He beamed at me. “Yes, Cali?”

“That’s all great and everything, but the fact of the matter is that due to the spell, I can’t actually go anywhere.”

I had never felt more pleased about being trapped in my life. I didn’t want to go anywhere with these men.

“Don’t worry about it!” Torin grinned. “I got you covered! Covered—is that how you say it? Yes, because I already set up a romantic candlelit table down by the lake.”

“Oh… Well, thanks.” I forced a smile.

Having a candlelit dinner with either Xavier or Greyson was absolutely the last thing in the world I wanted to do.

God, Torin was completely oblivious. He turned to my dad.

“So Tom, who’s the winner?”

**Episode 1086**

VIOLET

I howled with anguish and terror. Charlie was about to die, and there was no way I could get there in time to help him. I was moving as quickly as I could, running, leaping, twisting in midair, and still it wasn’t enough. It was like that nightmare where you’re running in slow motion, the air has turned solid around you, and you know you’ll never make it.

But suddenly, to my surprise, Charlie shifted back into his human form and sprang into action. He grabbed a chair and smashed it on the ground. With a crash of wood and splinters, the chair came apart in his bare hands. He gathered up the four jagged legs, wielding them so expertly and moving so quickly that I could barely keep up with him.

In seconds, he’d staked the four vampires who’d cornered him. It took no time at all. I gasped in amazement. His hunter instincts had saved us. But there were so many more vampires, and now they seemed to be coming from everywhere. They closed in from all sides and blocked my path to my mate, but just like before, Charlie was holding his own.

He flung one vampire against a mahogany table and staked him. He smashed more delicately carved wooden chairs against the floor, kicking aside their velvet cushioned seats and turning their gleaming legs into crude weapons. He skated over the slippery scraps of Persian rugs in double time to where a great oak cabinet held china plates and ornate figurines. Then he threw open the doors and flung them at the creatures one by one. There were screams and wails as the porcelain and china met with their targets, knocking them backward. Even the plates became weapons in Charlie’s hands, slicing through the air.

Charlie almost defied gravity as he jumped up to grasp onto a low-hanging chandelier. He lifted his legs, then with a great tinkling crash of glass, he wheeled around in a circle, swung his feet out, and kicked a vampire into the marble fireplace. He leapt off, grabbed an iron poker, smashed it over the vampire’s head, and then staked it with a gleaming chair leg. He ran another vampire into an enormous grandfather clock, which toppled over and crushed the creature. As it lay trapped and wriggling, Charlie wasted no time before staking it through the heart.

The fight went on for a while, and before I knew it I was exhausted. I didn’t know how long I could keep going, but Charlie was like a man possessed, dodging and ducking and staking right and left. He was a dancer, an athlete, an artist, making the bloodshed almost beautiful. I stood stock still, panting and enthralled with this version of Charlie that I’d never known before.

Suddenly, I was grabbed from behind. A vampire threw me into a corner and loomed over me, his lips stretching into a wide grin, the points of his canines visibly sharpening. Oh god. I had to make it through this.

I fought hard with all my remaining strength, but I was bone tired and the vampire soon got the upper hand. He leaned forward. I could smell his rotting breath. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, waiting for the bite—but then the vampire let out a piercing scream. My eyes flew open just in time to see the stake burst out from his chest—straight through his heart. His scream was cut short as he exploded into dust. Charlie stood behind him, his face streaked with ash, his gaze hard.

With the last of my strength, I shifted back to human. I gasped and gazed around the room, incredulous. There was nothing but piles of dust. All the vampires had been dispatched by Charlie, who pulled me into his arms. For a long moment, we just held each other, shaking with adrenaline.

Finally, I pulled back. Now that the vampire stench was gone, I realized that the house was actually pretty spectacular. I turned to Charlie. “You were amazing.”

Charlie nodded grimly. “It happened again—it was like I was acting completely instinctively.” His lips tightened to a thin white line, and his voice was flat, his expression colder, distant. I could sense that the darkness was beginning to take over, that he would succumb to it if I didn’t step in fast.

I kissed him. “Good thing you did what you did. You saved my life.”

He was blushing as I pulled away. It was only then I realized my state of undress. “Oh, uh… hazards of shifting…” I quickly gathered up my clothes. They were a little worse for wear from the sudden shift, but they’d still cover the important bits. I slipped them back on as fast as I could, feeling Charlie staring.

“Let’s explore the place now,” I said. “Make sure it’s empty.”

Only then did I get a smile. He was coming back to me. “Good idea,” he said.

We walked slowly from room to room, taking in the majestic surroundings. There was a library with huge wooden bookshelves rising floor to ceiling, filled with leather-bound tomes. A music room with a golden harp, a gleaming grand piano, and an array of gilt chairs with embroidered cushioned seats set out for performances. There was a dining room with sparkling chandeliers and a long, elegant table that seemed to stretch on for miles, lined with gleaming silverware and candlesticks.

Lavish medieval tapestries and elaborate framed oil paintings hung on the walls, their golden threads and brushstrokes competing for the gleam of the candlelight. The whole place, in fact, was lit with a multitude of candles, emanating a warm, creamy glow that glinted off the somber wooden furniture. Everything was dreamily draped with rich, red velvet curtains to keep out the light.

One thing was for sure—these vampires had style.

Eventually, we found ourselves in a bedroom with the most opulent four-poster bed that I’d ever seen. I glanced around and saw a candelabra filled with flickering candles. I grabbed Charlie’s hand and pulled him onto the bed.

“This is the most romantic room we’ve ever been in together,” I said. “I feel like a total goth princess!”

Charlie laughed but stopped when he saw how I was stretched out on the bed. Something in his eyes turned serious. He propped himself up on one elbow and stared at me for a long moment, as if he was trying to see deep into my heart. Then, with infinite tenderness, he leaned forward and rested his lips on my forehead before softly kissing my cheeks. Each kiss felt like he was bestowing a gift. I closed my eyes and shivered—it was like his kisses were conveying something that he wasn’t quite ready to say yet.

Charlie’s eyes were bright with unshed tears—of happiness or sadness, I couldn’t say. We gazed at each other, too full of emotion to speak. Then he slowly and deliberately kissed my mouth. He lingered there, his warm, soft lips pressed lightly against mine. I could feel the restrained passion just behind the kiss, but it was all tenderness and sweetness, like he was savoring the moment. I knew that no matter what happened or what the future held, I would always remember how he kissed me. As if I were the most precious thing in the world.

Then, just as suddenly, everything was back to normal and Charlie was flopping back onto the bed next to me. We lay there for a long moment, staring up at the canopy stretched out above us.

Charlie half-turned to me. “So, what are we going to do now?” His voice was quiet in the large, lavish room.

I sighed, but he had a point—we needed to think things through. I sat up. “Uh, remember our plan? We’re going to try and convince your parents that werewolves aren’t evil, of course. Can’t be too hard, right? I mean once they really get to know me, I’m sure they’ll see that I’m clearly the best, obviously.”

I was babbling, trying to sound lighthearted and laid back, but it was hard going.

Charlie didn’t make it any easier for me. He didn’t laugh or even crack a smile. Instead, his expression darkened again, turning grave. “Yeah, I’d like to hope so, but…”

“But?” I pressed, even though a large part of me didn’t want to know the answer.

“*But* you don’t know my parents.” He sighed heavily. “They aren’t really the type to change their minds, and I can’t see them just letting us go.” Now, he looked positively grim again as he worked through all the implications and scenarios. “We would never be safe, and neither would the pack.” He glanced over, and the expression on his face frightened me. “We might be on the run forever. And then what would we do?”

I swallowed roughly. I’d just thought of a solution, but I didn’t like it one bit. In fact, I truly hated it, and I knew that Charlie would never accept it—not in a million years.

Still it, seemed so obvious—the only thing we could do.

We had to kill Charlie’s parents.

**Episode 1087**

I stood in the living room and looked back and forth between Greyson and Xavier. Torin’s little drumroll faded into the background as I studied them both.

There was Greyson, looking astonishingly handsome in his elegant Tom Ford suit, his dirty-blond hair swept back from his face and his slate grey eyes staring fixedly into mine. My gaze traveled to Xavier. He’d clearly packed on the muscle since he’d last worn his suit, since it was bursting at the seams. Xavier ran a hand through his brown hair, his dark blue eyes filled with emotion. Both men insanely attractive in such different ways, and they’d both professed their love for me. My mates. The incredible Evers brothers. I felt sick to my stomach. Looking at both of them in the silent room, I only knew one thing for sure.

There was no way in hell I wanted to go on a date with either one of these assholes right now.

Torin had finished his drumroll when I leapt up.

“That’s enough!”

Everyone stared at me, but I couldn’t have cared less. It was time to speak out. It was time to be honest—a concept that clearly no one here was very familiar with.

That was about to change.

“There aren’t any winners here, don’t you understand?” I said. “I’m not going on a date with *anyone*—not after everything I’ve just found out!”

I rounded on Xavier. I was so pissed with him that I was shaking. Tears of rage prickled in my eyes. Screw it. No way in hell would I be crying in front of them. I furiously blinked them back.

“You!” I pointed. My finger was trembling. Xavier stared down at the floor, looking like he wanted it to swallow him up, but I continued. “I can’t believe you. I can hardly even look at you right now.”

Then I whipped around to face Greyson.

“And Greyson—why wouldn’t you tell me about something so important?”

Greyson looked tense; his mouth was set and his eyes unhappy. “It was between me and my brother,” he muttered.

I laughed sarcastically. “Oh, *sure*.”

“It’s true!” Greyson protested. “I didn’t want to add any more stress to your life, Cali.”

“So how did Torin know?” I snapped.

Greyson opened his mouth to respond, but I didn’t let him continue. Screw him if he thought he was going to mansplain himself of this one.

“You know what?” I said. “I don’t want to know right now.”

“Can’t we move past this? Greyson clearly has, and it’s not like we’re still in the Fae world. What does it matter?” It seemed that Xavier also couldn’t resist opening his big mouth to save the day.

*Bad move.* I turned to him, my eyes narrowed. He winced but tried to hold my gaze.

“Oh yeah?” I said. “That’s right, is it?”

He nodded, waiting for the hammer to fall.

I let it come crashing down.

“And how am I supposed to believe that when you clearly never planned on telling me that it happened in the first place—even though you know that I wouldn’t have been able to forgive you for something like that? How can I ever trust you again?” My heart was jackhammering, and I felt like my head was going to explode with rage. But then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Greyson begin to sway in his chair.

*If this is some weird bid for my sympathy…*

But Greyson said nothing, didn’t get up to reach for me, or storm out like I had been thinking. Instead, he simply crashed over to one side on the floor, stopping my tirade cold.

Everything froze as we stood there staring at his unconscious body. Wild thoughts zigzagged through my brain*. Is he all right? Why does this keep happening? Is it the curse?* I tried to go to him, but before I could move, I was plunged into the most powerful vision I had ever experienced.

I was looking at… Wait, I was looking at *myself*, talking to Xavier. What the hell? What on earth was going on? Then it came to me. Somehow, I was in Greyson’s head, and I was seeing what he was seeing, feeling what he was feeling. Seeing myself when I wasn’t standing in front of a mirror was so screwed up, I didn’t know if I could handle it. This was the weirdest thing to have happened tonight.

*The shadowy depths stirred memories, and I realized that we were all in the weird underwater forest—the one where the Lupo Finale had been held. Cali and Xavier were having a conversation. They were standing very close together, gazing into each other’s eyes. Xavier took another step toward Cali and grasped her hands. His voice wasn’t loud, but it carried in the gloom.*

*“Cali.” He was staring down at her like she was the most precious thing on earth. “Cali, you have to understand—even though you’re Greyson’s mate, you’re my mate too.” It was clear from Cali’s expression that something within her was melting. Xavier gathered her into his arms, and they kissed passionately, clinging to each other as though they were drowning.*

*I was distracted by a movement. I looked past the vision of Cali and Xavier, still caught in their embrace. Someone or something was out there—hidden in the forest’s depths. I concentrated, focusing my senses. Finally, I saw them. Three young women were standing there, watching the scene. Silent witnesses. I didn’t recognize any of them. I took a step forward to get a better look and I… I… I…*

I was lying on my back, flat on the ground, staring up at the ceiling of the living room. *What the hell was that?*

What was going on? It felt like I was and was not myself. I turned my neck gingerly—just in case I had a concussion or something—but nothing felt broken. Slowly and with care, I pushed myself up into a sitting position. I looked down and saw Greyson. He’d been on the ground like me, flat on his back. And, like me, he was looking extremely confused. My head felt groggy, like it was stuffed with cotton wool. My dad and Xavier were standing over us, looking concerned if not downright freaked out, both talking a mile a minute.

“Cali!”

I was still Cali, right?

“Cali, are you all right?”

Yeah, I had to be.

“Greyson are you okay?”

“What’s going on? Greyson! What the hell is happening?”

I bit my lip and glanced over at Greyson, trying to work out what to say. Greyson was staring back at me with an expression I couldn’t really read. I looked away.

“I’m… I’m fine.” My words came out slowly, as if I’d forgotten how to speak.

*That’s not true*,I told myself. *You’re not fine. In fact, you’re about as far from fine as you’ve been in a long, long time. You might never be “fine” again.*

It was true. I was completely thrown. I’d never experienced anything even remotely like that before.

I was desperate to ask Greyson a million questions.

*Did he experience the same thing I did? What the hell just happened? Was I really in his head? What did that feel like for him?*

Greyson was looking down, his jaw tight, and his fingers were clenching and unclenching like they did when he was really worried and distracted. No matter what I wanted to ask him or what I needed to know, I just didn’t have the heart to get into it in front of my dad and Xavier.

But I was terrified. I had a really bad feeling that whatever had just happened to both of us was somehow related to the curse. The vision, whatever else it stood for, was clearly related to our mate situation. But what the hell did it mean? And what the hell could I do about it? I had never felt so frustrated, helpless, scared, and angry before. A low groan rose from somewhere deep within me. I couldn’t help it. Clearly the drama was never going to end. My shoulders slumped and I shut my eyes for a moment, trying to gather my strength.

“Hey Cali?” It was Torin’s voice. He sounded uncharacteristically anxious.

“Still here, Torin, what is it?” I said without opening my eyes.

He cleared his throat. I could tell he was freaked out—not remotely like himself: an endlessly enthusiastic, cheerful, easygoing Fae. But I guessed we were all really unnerved by what had just happened. “Maybe you should lie down?” he suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea.” I opened my eyes and tried to give him a warm smile. There were only so many people I could be pissed with at the same time, and Torin had done his best to keep things calm. I slowly got to my feet. I was about to head out of the room when a sudden movement through the window drew my attention.

*No freaking way…*

I turned to the window, peering into the darkness of the woods.

There they were—the three same women from whatever the hell that vision had been. They were standing on the other side of the force field, watching us.

**Episode 1088**

GREYSON

It was getting harder and harder for me to dismiss the visions. They were happening more frequently, and I had no idea how the fuck to deal with them. Gently, I pushed myself up off the floor, in time to see Cali bringing herself to the couch. She was staring at me with a weird expression. She did not look amused. Or intrigued, or even worried. Just… odd. Confused.

It was plain as day that she wanted to talk to me, but she couldn’t do that in front of the group of people hovering over us.

*Are you feeling okay?* I asked through our mind link.

Cali’s left eyebrow twitched. *We need to discuss what just happened. Alone.*

“I should take you upstairs to your bed. You have to rest,” Tom said seriously, fussing over Cali. “It must have been the excitement of the day. Have you eaten anything? I should bring you some fruit and a granola bar. Maybe a juice? How’s your blood sugar?”

Tom kept rambling as he gently pulled Cali up by the arm and escorted her out of the living room and upstairs. I stared at her the entire time, my heart feeling heavy. I had no idea why Cali had passed out as well. It worried me more than anything else, and I made a mental note to go check on her once Tom left her alone.

Torin had wandered off, probably trying to figure out more ridiculous games for this *Bachelorette* madness. Suddenly, only Xavier and I were left in the living room. He sat across from me, leaning back into the chair, his expression dead serious.

I stared at him.

He stared at me.

I kept staring at him.

He kept staring at me.

This was a fucking staring competition, like we were kids.

“Well?” I asked, pinching the bridge of my nose. “You got something to say? Say it.”

Xavier’s expression turned bitter. “I know exactly what you were trying to do when you told Torin about what happened back at the zoo.”

I arched my eyebrows. It was amazing to see the way that Xavier, the little brother, always wanted to have his cake and to eat it too. “That’s not my problem,” I said. “I didn’t lie. And I wasn’t the one who left his brother to rot in a cage.”

Xavier’s face twisted into a grimace. “Fair enough. But I thought you were a different person back then. I thought you were working with Silas.” He paused, scrutinizing my expression. “Obviously I know differently, now. If the situation arose today, I’d never leave you anywhere to die. I might kill you myself eventually in a fit of rage, but I wouldn’t want anyone else to do it.”

I snorted. “*Wow*. Nice apology.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Since when did you become so fucking sensitive? You know I’m telling the truth. Can’t you see that and just let it go?”

“This apology keeps getting better and better,” I grumbled, and Xavier flipped me off.

Brotherly love. Truly the one and only medicine for all problems.

Xavier gave me a little side-eye then. “So. Joss and Maren and Artemis, huh? You’ve been busy.”

This dickhead was really pushing his luck. “I’m not talking about that with you. I don’t owe you any explanations.”

Xavier scoffed. “Right, of course. But are you going to talk about it with Cali?”

I pointed at him. “You’ve got some nerve to comment on my shit when you’re the one who decided that it was fine to bring Ava back to the pack house—you know, the woman who trickedus both into sleeping with her, because that’s so fucking normal.”

Xavier grimaced again. “I know this isn’t an ideal situation, but she didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

This kid made no sense. He acted all tough and mean, and yet *this* was where he decided to have a soft spot? His psychopathic ex didn’t deserve his sympathy.

“That sounds like a problem that’s none of our business. Ava could jump off a cliff and I wouldn’t give a shit, but I think the weirdest part here is that you *do*. She killed your mother and manipulated your brother into fucking her, and yet here you are, protecting her.”

Xavier glared at me. “I’m not fucking protecting her. I never—”

“I don’t care. The point is, I’m still the Alpha in this house, and if she so much as blinks the wrong way, I will hold you personally responsible.”

Xavier gave me sarcastic look. “I love that you only remember that you’re the Alpha when it suits you. Not like I’ve done your job numerous times in the past while you were running off wherever.”

I ignored the twitch of guilt that hit me at Xavier’s words. “And you did a good job. But that doesn’t change the fact that Ava is a liability. We have to watch ourselves around her. It puts *Cali* in danger.”

Xavier fell silent. He looked away from me, and I knew that that last part had gotten to him. A long beat of silence passed between us, until I couldn’t help myself. I had to ask. “So, are you really going to go through with Torin’s ridiculous *Bachelorette* game?”

If Cali’s dad weren’t here, there was absolutely no chance in hell I would have agreed to go along with this silly nonsense. As if a moronic game show could solve something as serious as *due destini*. However, it seemed like for whatever reason, the game was important to Tom, and I had to stay on his good side. I needed to prove to him that I really did care about his daughter.

I cared enough that I would let myself go through this shit.

It seemed like Xavier was thinking along those same lines. “Cali’s dad wants it done. So I’ll do it.” He stared at me, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “I’d only back out if you did first.”

I laughed. “Are you seriously insinuating that I should be the one to tell Cali’s dad that the idea is ridiculous?”

Xavier shrugged. “Sounds like a responsibility for an Alpha.”

The little fucker sure knew how to twist things around. I pointed at him. “I’m not falling for that. You want to tell Tom anything, you do it yourself.”

Xavier stared at me.

I stared back.

We kept staring at each other, a competition between dumbasses. Even though we were no longer kids, we were still brothers.

I snorted, shaking my head. “Guess we’re *Bachelorette*-ing then.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Guess we are.”

If someone had told me a year ago that I’d be willing to parade around in a game show for a Fae with my brother as competition, I would have told them they were insane. But here we were.

I gave Xavier a tight smile. “May the best man win.”

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I hovered outside Cali’s room. I could hear Tom whistling in the kitchen, doing whatever with Torin, so I knew that Cali had to be alone now. I was burning with curiosity to hear what she’d wanted to talk about earlier. Could it be something about my visions?

Could she know something about them?

It was so strange that we’d both passed out.

I knocked lightly on the door, and then pushed it open. Cali sat up on the bed.

“Come in and shut the door,” she whispered.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “How are you feeling?”

Cali stared at me. At least she didn’t look pale anymore. “Greyson, those blackouts you’ve been having…” She paused. “Do you… *See* things while you’re out?”

I swallowed nervously. “You mean like dreams?”

Cali nodded.

“Yes,” I said slowly. “I do.”

Cali’s gaze was intense. “What did you see this time?”

I wasn’t about to tell her that I’d seen her and Xavier kissing at the Lupo Finale.

Instead, I said, “That’s not important. It’s just my brain making things up.”

Cali shook her head. “The thing you saw… Did it happen in the forest where the Lupo Finale took place?”

I felt my eyes widen in shock. “How did you know that?”

Cali’s hands were trembling. “Because I saw it too. I was there, but like, in your head. Looking through your eyes,” she whispered.

I couldn’t believe my fucking ears. “What?”

Cali pointed between us, her hands waving around. “It was like, I was—*you!* I saw… myself, kissing Xavier.”

Holy shit. How was this possible? And *why*?

“That’s what I saw, too,” I told her, fighting to wrap my head around this. “What the hell does that mean?”

Cali was flailing again. “How am I supposed to know? They’re *your* visions!”

“Cali,” I said, resting my hands on her shoulders. “It’s okay.”

Cali looked up at me. “There’s something else, too…”

“What?”

“Greyson, who are the three women?”

I took a step back. “You mean… the three women from the vision?”

Cali nodded. It was alarming to see her like this. She seemed so spooked, I didn’t want to explain the witches right now. I didn’t want to scare her even more. “I’m not sure.”

Cali narrowed her eyes at me. “Really? So you have no idea why they’re casually hanging out outside the pack house?”

I choked. “Wait, you saw them? Here, in the real world?”

Cali nodded again. I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

What the hell could those witches possibly want with my mate?

**Episode 1089**

The moment I mentioned the three women, Greyson’s face twisted into a grimace. It was obvious that he was worried about the fact that I’d seen them outside the freaking pack house. It was obvious that he was upset, too, and that freaked me out. Because if the Alpha was worried, what was I supposed to do? He was a titan and I was a tiny little bird that needed protection—

Okay, I was clearly losing my mind from all the stress. Smothering my internal awkward laughter, I turned to Greyson. “Seriously, who are they and what do you know about them?”

Greyson shook his head. But before he could evade again, I kept talking.

“Are they the ones who are causing these visions?” I asked.

Greyson looked away from me, which was a telltale sign that he was about to lie. “I don’t know, Cali. I can’t be sure about anything.”

I scoffed. “You can’t be sure? Well, I can’t either!” I marched toward the window and pointed outside. “I’m not sure about anything apart from the fact that that they’re out there! I saw them earlier!”

Greyson rushed up to the window. “Where?”

“Well, they’re gone now. But they were out there, standing just beyond the force field!” I huffed, crossing my arms.

Greyson took in my expression, his features softening. He really was so annoyingly attractive that sometimes it was hard to focus on anything other than that. But I needed to focus, because this whole thing was getting messier by the day.

In a low voice, Greyson said, “Cali, you need to rest right now. Those visions are disorienting. They’re disorienting for me too, and I’m not the one experiencing them in someone else’s head.”

I squinted at him. I could tell that he was holding something back. He was cryptic all the time, but now he was being EXTRA cryptic.

“I know what I saw, Greyson,” I said. “They were there. And since we’re on this topic, what else have you been seeing in those visions?”

Greyson blinked at me, clearly alarmed.

*Ha!* I thought. *Gotcha!*

“I don’t…”

“Why didn’t you tell me that you’ve been seeing these things, Greyson?” I demanded, before he could lie—because I could feel that was where this was going. “Do you have any idea how much how much all of this worries me?”

Greyson looked away, shaking his head. “Worrying you was exactly what I wanted to avoid, love. The visions aren’t important.”

I could feel it in my bones that Greyson was trying to protect me from something by not offering me every piece of information he had. Didn’t he trust me? I was starting to get angry.

“Are you serious right now?” I snapped. “You’re having insane visions that involve *me*, and you’re saying that’s not important? What else have you seen? What have you been keeping from me?”

Greyson’s expression changed from anxious to completely blank. His jaw clenched. “I’m not keeping anything from you, Cali. I just don’t want to talk about it.”

I couldn’t believe him. “That is literally the definition of keeping things from me, Greyson!” I grabbed the lapel of his jacket, tugging him closer. “After all the things that we’ve been through, do you really think that keeping secrets is the way to go?”

I winced, thinking about all the fucking kisses that he’d given to other people while we’d been apart. Other people who were not his fated mate—like Xavier was mine. At least I had an excuse for my extracurricular kissing, okay? *UGH!*

*Greyson and I really need to discuss the kissing other people part at some point*, I thought bitterly.

“I don’t want you to obsess over this,” Greyson said.

I scoffed, throwing my hands up. “TOO LATE!”

Greyson stayed silent. Softly, he took both my hands in his. “I don’t want you to worry. I have everything under control. What I need you to do right now is rest.” He raised my hands toward his mouth, about to brush his lips over them, but then I pulled away.

“Oh no, you’re not gonna butter me up with hand kisses,” I declared. “You’re gonna stay here and talk to me.”

Greyson sighed. “I’m sure your dad will be here to check on you soon, Cali. It’ll be better if I’m not here when that happens.”

*God dammit!* I thought, irritated. *I HATE IT WHEN HE MAKES SENSE!*

Before I could say anything else, Greyson walked out of the room, leaving me agitated and frustrated. But what else was new? The man could drive anyone up the wall.

I paced the room, glancing out the window every now and then. I was certain that the three women had really been out there. Had Greyson seen them too? Who could they possibly be? What did they want? I hadn’t felt afraid when I’d first seen them, exactly, but still.

*It’s freaking creepy to have people staring at you through windows, post-vision!*

I really wished that my mom were here. Maybe she would know something. Tonight had just been too much. Between the bombshells that had come out with Xavier and Greyson, the vision, and my worries about Mom and Artemis, I hardly knew where to start when it came to following Greyson’s genius advice. *Don’t worry, Cali*, he’d said. *Calm down.*

Right! AS IF THAT WAS EASY!

“Stupid Alpha with his stupid pretty face,” I grumbled, picking up my phone from my nightstand. I dialed my mom. Hopefully she’d have some good news. Pacing again, I waited anxiously for her to pick up.

“Hi, sweetie!” Mom said, the moment she answered. Her tone sounded fine, and I perked up immediately.

“How are things going?” I asked.

“Rishika and I are with Artemis, and the immediate danger has passed.”

I exhaled in relief. *Jesus*, at least I didn’t have to bite my nails off while stressing over my older sister. But then I paused. “Wait, does that mean the Orb has been destroyed? Hidden?”

I couldn’t believe it had happened so quickly—it would be the first lucky break we’d had in ages.

“Well…” Mom chuckled awkwardly. “Something like that. I’ll explain things once we’re back. We’ll be there as soon as we can—don’t worry about us.”

Why the hell did people keep telling me that?

“I have to go now,” Mom told me in that sweet tone of hers. “But please, keep your father from freaking out too much about everything, and try to stay safe.”

I scoffed. Did I even have a choice?

*I HAVE to stay safe, since I can’t even leave this freaking house!*

I was stuck here, with one mate who kissed other people, and another who had left his brother to die in a Fae zoo. And somehow, it felt like I was unable to stop myself from forgiving them both. Was that part of the curse? Not having the ability to resent your mates?

“I love you, sweetheart,” Mom said. Her soft words made something in me ease, finally.

“Love you too,” I said, before hanging up.

I plopped down onto the bed, but then there was another light knock on the door. Before I could get too excited that it was either of my gorgeous asshole mates—both of whom I was still mad at—my dad poked his head in.

“Are you feeling any better?” he asked anxiously.

“A little bit.” I nodded. “I just talked to Mom, and she said that she and Artemis are on their way back.”

Dad brightened, offering me a massive smile. “That’s great. I knew your mother would take care of business without putting anyone in danger.” He sat down next to me before looking around the room.

I frowned. “What?”

Dad kept looking. “Just, speaking of danger… I don’t feel that you’re safe in this pack house.”

I shook my head. “Actually, a house full of werewolves is definitely the safest place to be right now. It has built-in guards for me.”

Dad sighed, rubbing his face. “I’m not surprised you feel that way. Those two boys are supposed to be your mates, and you’re caught up in a dramatic love affair with both of them—of course you’d assume that they’d do anything to protect you.”

I stared at my dad. “I don’t just *assume* or *feel* that. I *know* that. I’m certain about them both, despite everything.”

Dad pressed his lips together. “You need to look at this objectively. You don’t belong in a werewolf pack house. It might be for the best if you just leave it all behind and start over somewhere without all this dangerous baggage.”

Just the idea of leaving my mates behind made me start shaking. “Dad, you don’t understand. You’re new to this world. But after all that I’ve been through, I know that I do belong here. There’s nowhere else I could even imagine myself wanting to be.”

Dad’s brow furrowed. “I wish you could see things from my perspective. This attitude is only going to make it worse.”

I scowled, confused. “What are you talking about? Make *what* worse?”

“When your mom gets back and we take care of everything with your sister, we’re getting you out of this house,” he explained. “You’re coming back to Minnesota with us.”

**Episode 1090**

VIOLET

I stared into Charlie’s eyes. The possibility that I might have to kill his parents was making me feel sick. Could I ever do that? Would I do it if it was the only way for me and Charlie to be together? To safely return to the pack house?

Staying away from my own home felt unbearable. A nightmare, almost. As much of a nightmare as it would be for me to hurt someone Charlie loved. We’d turn into Xavier and Ava. Things had turned disastrous between them after Ava had killed Xavier’s mother. Xavier had started hating her, and he still despised her now.

I was suddenly certain that no matter who Charlie’s parents were, no matter how horrible they could become, they were still his parents. They were his flesh and blood, and Charlie would definitely resent me if I ever did anything to harm them. I’d feel the same if Charlie was ever forced to hurt Xavier, or anyone I viewed as family.

But that left me and my mate stuck in an impossible situation.

The sickness in my stomach withdrew, only for anxiety to tighten inside my chest. My throat constricted, and tears threatened to escape my eyes when Charlie and I locked gazes.

He sighed, reaching out to touch my cheek. “Hey,” he said softly. “Everything’s going to be okay. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

I sniffled, swallowing down the tears as Charlie continued.

“I know how important it is to you for us to join in with the pack,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll be able to convince my parents to leave us be. Nothing bad is going to happen.”

The pressure behind my eyes kept multiplying, but I tried not to cry. I tried to be brave and put on a good face for my mate. I told myself to get a grip. My biggest concern right now was losing my pack, losing the only family I’d ever known—but at the moment, Charlie had it worse. He was dealing with the fact that his parents had literally tried to kill him.

How could you even start to cope with that kind of trauma?

Werewolf or not, it was horrifying.

“I’m sorry,” I said, taking his hands in mine. “I’m so sorry, Charlie, I’m fine, but—but are you? Are you going to be okay?”

Charlie nodded, pulling me into his arms. “As long as I have you, I can deal with anything.”

He started rubbing my back, and I closed my eyes, wishing I could exist in this moment forever, safe in his arms.

“We’re safe here,” he murmured in my ear. “We’re going to figure everything out. Together, we can take on anything.”

I looked up at his sweet face. His words were filling me with comfort. Somehow, he was making me feel like everything really was going to be fine. Like anything was possible, just because we loved each other. But by now, I knew that love couldn’t fix everything. Charlie had to know that I was there to support him, as well.

“This whole situation is a mess,” I whispered, “and you’re… you’re allowed to feel it all. You’re allowed to tell me everything that you’re thinking. I don’t want you to suppress yourself while thinking about my well-being when I know that things are hard for you.”

Charlie sighed. “Violet…”

I stroked his cheek, his soft skin. “No, let me say this. We’re a team. We’re together as one, and we’re going to work as a team to solve all the problems that we’re about to face.”

Charlie nodded. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too.”

We locked eyes for a long moment, and I felt so full of tenderness and desire for him. Charlie leaned down and kissed me, softly at first, but then he deepened the kiss with more passion, more intent. I wanted nothing more than to touch him all over, feel him against me, on top of me.

His hand was firm at my waist, kneading at my bare skin before he started tracing circles there. I couldn’t help but make an embarrassing sound, pulling him closer to me. We lay down on our sides, never breaking the kiss. I loved how he felt; I loved how amazing he made me feel with every little touch.

It was just the two of us in this luxurious room, on this opulent bed, with candles flickering all around us. It was all so wonderful that it felt like a dream. It was all so wonderful that I needed more.

“You’re incredible,” Charlie whispered, kissing down my neck. I arched up toward his lips as he mouthed at my collarbones, my breasts, my stomach and belly button…

When he gently spread my legs and looked up at me with sweetness and mischief in his eyes, I started trembling. I was certain that this couldn’t be real life. But then Charlie brushed his lips over my inner thigh, and I was achingly aware that this was one hundred percent real.

“Does that feel good?” Charlie asked, resting his palm on my pubic bone. “Do you want me to keep going?”

The noise I made was followed by a breathless,“Yes please.”

Charlie chuckled, trailing his mouth and fingertips between my legs. He did it gently, softly, making me feel like I was on fire. I’d never experienced anything like this—this perfect feeling of being worshipped, of being cherished by the one you loved. My toes curled and my hips bucked toward him as he kept whispering how lovely I was, how crazy my scent drove him.

He kept going until I was quivering and writhing, unable to stop myself, and then my legs started twitching. I grabbed the sheets tightly, crying out his name. It felt like I was floating on air. The feeling grew more intense than ever, and when he looked up at me again with a satisfied smile, I breathlessly smiled back.

I was still panting when he crawled up to me and wrapped his arms around me.

“Did you like that?” he asked, grinning.

I chuckled. This cocky side of him was really growing on me. “I think you know the answer to that.”

He laughed and kissed my cheek. I clung onto him, taking in his heady fragrance. He smelled like me, and I loved it. We cuddled for a moment, his soft palm moving up and down my arm. His eyes were closed, and I just stared at him, drinking in his gorgeous face.

Blushing, I realized that I didn’t want to stop here.

I wanted to make him feel good, just like he’d made me feel good. I wanted us to keep going until we were utterly and completely spent. I glanced down and saw that Charlie had been aroused this entire time, and I felt my heart start to race again. There were so many amazing things that we could explore together.

“What if…” I started speaking, and he lazily opened his eyes. His gaze heated up everything around me. “What if I returned the favor?” I asked.

If Charlie had been flushed before, now he went tomato red. “You don’t have to—”

“Oh, but I want to,” I said, offering him the most playful smile I could muster. “I mean, if you can tell me what feels good…”

“Definitely!” Charlie blurted out. Still blushing, he cleared his throat and said, “I mean, if you’re okay with that.”

I sat up, caressing his bare chest. “I’m okay with that,” I breathed, reaching forward to brush my lips over his. I started from there, then kissed down his throat, then his chest and abs, feeling his skin tremble under my mouth. I did everything in the same way he’d done it to me, and then I paused at the, uh… main attraction.

Charlie really was beautiful all over.

“I should probably touch it,” I murmured, my gaze fixated on him as I moved my hand.

He sucked in his breath. “You can—you can be a little firmer if you want.”

His raspy tone sent a thrill through me, and I did it the way he’d requested. His reaction was instant; his hips bucked upward, a groan coming out of his mouth. It was amazing to see him like this, just because of me.

“Should I do that again?” I asked, teasing a little.

He laughed breathlessly. “*God*, yes.”

I grinned, continuing even though I didn’t really know what I was doing, Charlie seemed to be having the time of his life. He was looking down at me like I’d hung the moon and the stars.

“Should I… Should I use my mouth?” I asked Charlie, unsure.

His nod was so enthusiastic that I had to grin.

But just as I was about to move forward, there was abang from downstairs. *What on earth?*

I jumped back, and Charlie choked, alarmed. His expression went cloudy, then dark.

“We’re not alone,” he said.

**Episode 1091**

XAVIER

I still could not fucking *believe* Greyson had told Torin that I’d left him in the Kollector’s zoo. I was pissed off at Greyson, but also myself. I should have known that something like that would come back to bite me in the ass at a time like this.

Even though I’d explained to Greyson that things were different between us now, and I’d had every reason to suspect him of treason in the past, Greyson hadn’t seemed to give a shit. The man clearly didn’t care to understand where I was coming from.

But that wasn’t even my biggest problem at the moment.

My *biggest* issue was that I’d looked like a total asshole to Cali. My mate got mad when I didn’t help random people we’d never met, so I couldn’t even imagine how annoyed she was that I’d done something like that to my own brother. Who also happened to be her fucking mate.

Great.

I could have de-escalated this situation if things had been different, but now I had to deal with this whole werewolf *Bachelorette* thing. It couldn’t have been any more absurd or messed up. I should have told that meddling Fae to go back where he belonged ages ago, but I’d been tricked into tolerating him. Torin had always been so useful with his healing magic, but now he had become an enormous pain in the ass.

Meanwhile, Cali’s dad thought that all this was fine and dandy, effectively forcing us to take part in this charade. And since Greyson had decided to go along with Torin’s stupid little game, I’d basically been trapped into it as well. There was no way in hell that I would forfeit at this point. I couldn’t afford to mess up and disappoint Cali’s dad—especially now that Cali was already so furious at me.

I was stewing over everything, pacing up and down the lawn, when the back door opened. Torin grandly ushered Cali, Greyson, and Tom out into the yard. I stifled a groan of frustration and walked over to meet them.

Torin clapped his hands in excitement, grinning from ear to ear. “Everybody’s here now! How fun!”

Greyson and I exchanged a look. I was pretty sure we both wanted to bite the Fae.

“Now,” Torin continued, “this morning’s showdown was dramatic—great television!”

I glanced at Greyson. *Where the fuck is the television?* I asked via mind link. Sometimes having Alpha blood was a real perk. There wasn’t any other scenario than this that I’d talk to my brother this way, but desperate times.

Greyson raised his eyebrows. *Probably inside Torin’s crazy little head.*

“But now it’s time for the show to go on!” Torin continued. “We have a winner.”

Cali, looking beautiful as ever, opened her mouth to argue, but Torin held up a hand, cutting her off. “I know you’re upset with both your suitors, Caliana, but this is the perfect opportunity for them to speak their truths. You’ll never be able to focus on your connection with them and continue your journey if you don’t do some soul-searching and confront all the issues that exist between you, together and separately.”

Greyson’s expression was blank. *I feel like I’m lost in some sort of parallel universe where Torin is a life coach and a shrink*,he told me. *Did you understand any of that?*

Frowning, I replied, *I’m still trying to figure out what “speaking my truth” means. The truth usually brings nothing but trouble.*

Greyson pressed his lips together while Cali rolled her eyes at Torin’s words. I was glad to see that she was hating everything as well. Surprisingly, though, she remained silent. Torin looked pleased.

“To that end,” he continued, “Cali’s first date will be a moonlight lakeside picnic with our winner of the first round, as decided by Cali’s father, Tom… Greyson!”

Greyson side-eyed me with the smallest smirk*.*

I scoffed.

Torin clapped excitedly, and I wanted to shove him to the ground. Why was this whole thing fucking bothering me so much? How ridiculous. This dumb *Bachelorette* game didn’t mean anything real, but the thought of Greyson and Cali on a romantic moonlight picnic was the last thing I wanted to consider.

I wasn’t even surprised that Tom had picked Greyson. My older brother, the manipulative dipshit, had clearly gone out of his way to butter up both Torin and Tom. None of this was fair, but I was certain arguing was pointless. Not that I’d ever get a chance to speak, of course, even if I wanted to—not with Torin prattling on about how wonderful love was.

“… and now, it’s time for Cali and Greyson to move down to the lake,” Torin said, “where I will personally serve you a homemade dinner designed to spark both the stomach and the heart!”

Sounded like diarrhea waiting to happen.

“Here are your little dating cards.” Torin handed Greyson and Cali cards that looked sparkly and extremely ornate in general. Astrid had probably glamoured them up.

*Good luck talking with Cali about all the women you kissed while you were away*,I told Greyson. *Bet that’ll make for a really wonderful date.*

Greyson glared at me. *You’re just fucking jealous, little brother. It doesn’t look good on you.*

As Greyson and Cali read their cards, I watched, feeling more than a little envious—and irritated at myself for letting Torin get to me. He pushed me away, wrinkling his nose.

“Xavier, we won’t be needing you for this part,” Torin said. “But if you go back to the house, you’ll see that I’ve set up a glass of whiskey for you. You can have another one in an hour.”

I forced a tight smile. Torin was really fucking lucky that I needed to stay on his good side. “Gee, thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Torin replied, completely unironically.

Before leaving, I stared at Cali. *I love you, baby. Don’t forget that*, I told her through our mind link.

Cali glanced at me and gave a soft nod. My chest tightened.

*See you later, brother*, Greyson told me*. Have fun all alone*.

I smiled and, when I was certain that nobody was looking, flipped the jerk off.

“Enjoy your date!” Tom told Cali and Greyson before following me back into the house. I dreaded the idea of him starting small talk with me, but thankfully he just vanished into the kitchen. As I was passing by, I noticed a sweating glass of whiskey sitting out on the coffee table in the living room. My blood started boiling.

Where did that little man get off, setting *drink limits?*

Still fuming, I went back upstairs to my room, angrily taking off the suit I’d put on. I’d gotten all dressed up just to be accosted and have my worst decisions thrown back in my face—in front of Cali and her father.

I wished I could turn back time to a point before Tom and Orla had shown up and made everything so complicated. I also wished that I could smack around the little Fae who thought he could do whatever he wanted with my love life—and the love of my life. Torin was way too enthusiastic about all this, and also way too obviously into Greyson and his bullshit.

Gritting my teeth, I started to pace the room, but then I realized that going on a run would probably help clear my head and diffuse my anger. Otherwise, I’d just sit here and think about Cali and Greyson on their romantic date, and how Greyson was probably playing the victim card, looking all wounded. Cali would fall right into that kind of shit. She felt sorry for everyone and everything. Her empathy levels were ludicrous.

And of course, Greyson would exploit that, because even though he wasn’t the monster I used to think he was, he still was a tricky motherfucker. He would probably tell Cali that I was cruel, a bad brother. And okay, maybe I hadn’t been the *best* brother, but that didn’t mean that he had to call me out like that in front of our mate. I’d made one mistake, and everybody was making such a big deal out of it, when I clearly—

*Anyway*.

Running.

I needed to go on a goddamn run before I lost my mind.

I opened the door to head downstairs, and was immediately faced with Ava. Her hand was raised to knock. I scowled.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, staring at her pointedly.

“Hello to you too,” Ava said casually, slipping into my room.

I shook my head. I really didn’t have the patience for her shit right now. “What do you want, Ava? Now is not a good time.”

I was about to walk out when, in that same casual tone, she replied, “Oh. I was just coming over to let you know that I met Maren and Greyson’s son today.”

My bad mood was getting worse and worse. “He’s not Greyson’s son, and the resemblance isn’t breaking news. We’ve been over this.”

Ava raised her eyebrows. “Really, he’s not? That’s not what Maren told me…”

**Episode 1092**

The setting for my potentially disastrous date with Greyson was… *something*,all right.

Torin had deployed Astrid to glamour up a beautiful glittering table by the lake, set under a massive canopy woven with roses and lilies. The scene was gorgeous, with sparkling orbs hanging in the sky while the soft smell of flowers filled the air. It was the perfect romantic picture.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t feeling romantic at all.

All I wanted was for my dear, sweet friend Torin to leave us the fuck alone, so I could talk to Greyson. We still hadn’t been able to get to the bottom of the whole crazy magical visions thing—not to mention that other thing, where Greyson had kissed Maren, Joss, and Artemis while he’d been away from me. I thought it was ridiculous and kind of insane that my mate could just go around kissing other people.

*Shouldn’t he have been in pain or something while kissing anyone other than me? How come the curse doesn’t work that way?* I thought to myself, frowning.

Then again, I had kissed Xavier all the time while Greyson had been away… But that was different! Wasn’t it a little bit? Xavier was my fated mate. One of them. The women Greyson had kissed had nothing to do with fate.

*I’m not going to go through this again and explain it!* I declared inside my head.

We sat down awkwardly.

“Please be sure to cherish this moment,” Torin said grandly. “This one-on-one date is your chance to really connect as a couple.”

This was, overall, a super surreal experience. The man across from me had saved my life multiple times, more than I could count, so I was pretty sure that we were already plenty connected. Also, what was with the midnight dinner? I wouldn’t be able to sleep if I ate right now—I’d get too bloated!

Greyson cleared his throat from across the table, interrupting my musings. His voice was soft when he spoke. “Are you doing okay?”

We both sat there, stiff and awkward. I raised my eyebrows at him. “What do you think?”

“I think that everything is perfect!” Torin enthused. “I will be your server for tonight. Tom made the dinner!”

Forget the bloating—I would have to eat if my dad’s delicious food was on the table. I had missed it so much. I made sure not to start shouting at Greyson, because I was pretty sure that my dad was eyeing us from the kitchen. He was a pacifist and all that nonsense.

“I’ll be right back with the spread!” Torin exclaimed, and then marched back to the house.

Greyson and I were finally alone.

I peered at him, trying not to focus on how absurdly handsome he looked in his suit under the soft glowing light. I had to stay firm with him. Even when he looked at me softly and whispered, “Cali…”

Ignoring the way my heartbeat spiked at the sound of his gruff yet gentle tone, I spoke up. “I know you’re hiding something from me. I want you to tell me everything about the visions, and about the women who were watching us through the window earlier.”

“I don’t—”

“The women who are *here*,Greyson. On this property. I know what I saw.”

Greyson looked away, which meant that he was about to lie. “It’s nothing, Cali. I told you I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Not talking to me about things has not helped either of us in the past,” I said, pushing my luck. “I’m afraid for you, and just passing out like this… It’s *dangerous*, Greyson!”

Greyson took a deep breath. He looked so long-suffering and tortured and beautiful.

“I’d never put you in danger, don’t you know that?”

“Of course I know that,” I said. And it’s true, I did know that. “But I’m talking about putting *yourself* in danger. And what I *don’t* know is why you refuse to tell me what’s going on with these visions… We can’t keep doing this.

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“*This*, Greyson! You being cryptic with me instead of honest while you keep throwing our communication down the gutter.” I eyed him sharply. Why did the Evers brothers insist on being like this? “How am I supposed to help you if you keep not telling me things?”

I thought back to the reveal about Joss and Maren and the reminder of Artemis and felt a thick, potent ball of jealousy rolling in my stomach. “Like, I could’ve handled knowing about the kisses, Greyson. What hurts right now is that you kept it from me. Do I give a shit that you kissed other women? Of course I do, but I know none of this *due destini* shit is easy.”

Greyson’s expression was surprisingly petulant. “So you mean how you’ve been with Xavier?”

“Xavier is my mate,” I said, fighting to remain calm. “Last I checked, those women are not your mates.”

Greyson pressed his lips together. “So you *are* jealous?” he asked slowly.

I glared at him. “Ya *think?*”

He sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I don’t have feelings for any of them, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

But what did that mean? The jealous little monster inside of me was building up steam. “Can I ask something?”

He shrugged, so I proceeded. “Why did you really bring Maren back here? To parade her in front of me? To make me jealous? Or maybe you wanted to prove that you don’t need me,” I said, my anxiety taking over. “We’re mates, sure, but do you even like me as a person? Do you just feel bad that you’re stuck with me in this situation? Is that why you keep running away?”

I started to feel tears prickle in my eyes. Greyson leaned forward, grabbing my hands. “Cali, hey,” he said as my tears started to fall. “Oh, love, don’t cry.”

I sniffled. “I’m sorry. All of this just *fucking sucks* and it’s getting to me.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” he said. “And hey, of *course* I like you as a person. Of course I want to be with you. I admire you, and I love you—I always have. I wasn’t with Joss, she was my Luna. We had a connection that maybe was confusing sometimes, but it wasn’t anything more.” I nodded. “Kissing your sister was a complete mistake; I would’ve much preferred you.”

This made me laugh a little. “Really?” I sniffled.

“Really.” He squeezed my hand. “Maren and I were together once, a long time ago, and with the way it ended it left a lot of unresolved feelings I didn’t realize I had.”

I understood that, as much as maybe I didn’t like it. “But you still kissed her,” I mumbled.

“Look at me,” he said, lightly touching my chin. “I stopped things before they could go any further with her.”

*He’d stopped it.* “Really?” My voice sounded so small.

“You’re my mate,” he said.

“But didn’t you find her… attractive?” I hated that it came out of my mouth. How had he been able to kiss her if they weren’t mates? I understood old feelings, but Lola had told me long ago that mates weren’t supposed to be able to even kiss anyone else.

“Cali, you’re telling me that since you’ve been mated to me and my brother, you haven’t found anyone else attractive?” He gave me a skeptical look, chuckling.

“Maybe, like, Zac Efron,” I mumbled.

“The mate bond will always lead us home,” he said, pushing my hair behind my ear. “You know how difficult this is for me, too. You can’t officially pick either of us, I know that, and it’s not like I want my brother to die…”

I shrugged. *Seems like Xavier doesn’t care about you dying, though,* I thought to myself. *Not if the zoo incident is anything to go by…*

“What you could actually do right now is choose neither of us, or choose one of us unofficially,” Greyson went on. “But what you’re doing instead is leaving both of us hanging here in limbo.”

My head had started pounding. I knew that on some level, Greyson was very much right. It wasn’t exactly fair of me to insist that both of the men I loved put their lives on indefinite hold while I tried to figure out what to do.

But what was I supposed to do? Just walk away from the entire situation?

I thought back to what Mrs. Smith had told me—to leave—but I still didn’t think that was possible. Like Greyson had just said, the mate bond would lead me home. Always back to them. Leaving Greyson and Xavier was unthinkable… I remembered what my dad had said earlier: He wanted me to go back to Minnesota with him and my mom when my mom got back.

I shook the thought away, dismissing it from my mind as quickly as I’d dismissed it to my dad earlier. There was no way that I could just walk away. The pack was my family now. I’d never abandon them.

But still, the question remained…

*What the hell am I supposed to do?*

“Cali, listen to me.”

I looked up at Greyson. He had been scrutinizing my expression.

“We both know that this isn’t going to be decided just because Torin’s into *The* *Bachelorette*,” he said in a softer tone.

“It’s a ridiculous idea, but at least all three of us will have some fun. *Maybe*,” I mumbled.

Greyson snorted, shaking his head. “That’s a really big maybe.”

I sighed, fiddling with the napkin in front of me. “What are you trying to say?”

Greyson looked into my eyes, and all the emotion I saw in there made my breath catch. “I know that I’ve tried to avoid the way I feel about you in the past,” he said. “I once told you to choose Xavier, because I used to think that that would be the easiest thing for all three of us. And that you would be safe. But things have changed, and now…”

I blinked. “Now what?”

“Now that I’m back here with you, I know I love you, Cali.” He smiled softly. “I’m going along with this whole charade, but that’s only because I’m all in. So when it’s possible for you to do it, I want you to pick me.” He paused, his tone firm but breaking as he whispered, “*Choose me*, Cali.”

**Episode 1093**

CHARLIE

I was happily exploring the love of my life when a sudden crash echoed throughout the huge house. I really couldn’t catch a break. After my parents trying to murder me, this was just the cherry on top of a truly stupendous day.

Our mood was broken for good, even if my hard-on thought otherwise.

I had to make sure Violet was safe.

“We need to figure out what that was,” I told her quietly. “Clearly the house isn’t as empty as we thought.” I hated the idea of more vampires being in here somewhere, but it seemed like a real possibility.

Wide-eyed, Violet whispered, “We should try to be as quiet as possible. If we can sneak up on whoever this is, we’ll have the advantage.”

I nodded, and we both got out of bed. Before she could walk out the door, I stopped her, turning to look at her with my index finger over my mouth. *Stay put for a second*,I told her through our mind link. *Let me go first.*

Violet looked like she was about to protest, but then she nodded. I couldn’t explain the intense instinct I felt: the instinct to protect my mate, but there was something else too. This feeling that I could handle whatever was on the other side and I was the right person to take the lead.

I creeped to the door and slowly cracked it open. I stepped halfway out into the hallway and saw that it appeared to be completely empty. I eased back into the room, closing the door behind me. When I turned to face Violet, I saw that she was rummaging through an ornate wardrobe next to the bed. She was being quiet, but her tense, quick movements still worried me a little.

“What the hell are you doing right now?” I whisper-hissed.

She looked at me over her shoulder, eyebrows raised. “I don’t particularly like the idea of creeping around after monsters while naked.”

I glanced down at her soft, gorgeous body. I’d learned that werewolves regularly got naked, but seeing Violet… Let’s just say given the option, I was *very* interested in going back to what we’d been doing moments ago rather than chasing down other intruders.

“Come and see!” she whispered and excitedly waved me over.

I came next to her, intrigued. The wardrobe was full of very fancy, old-timey clothing.

“Oh my gosh!” Violet quietly enthused. She showed me a red dress—a gown really—that made me think of princesses and tea parties. She grinned. “Help me put this on!”

Even though we were probably in mortal danger, I couldn’t help but enjoy myself as I laced up the corset contraption that was supposed to go around Violet’s waist and cleavage. I had kissed her skin just moments ago. *Fuck*. And Violet looked so goddamn good in that dress… Violet poked my arm. “Hey, don’t get distracted,” she whispered. “Come on! You have to get dressed too.”

In a flash, I was in a penguin-esque kind of tux, with suspenders and all.

Violet blinked, looking at me up and down appreciatively. “Wow.”

I smirked, nudging her. “Now who’s distracted?”

Blushing, Violet waved me off. “Let’s go see what’s happening.”

I stopped messing around and we both moved stealthily through the door and out into the hallway.

“It sounded like the noise came from downstairs,” Violet whispered, “but everything seemed totally empty before. Unless there’s a basement…”

I nodded. “There’s always a basement in these kinds of places.”

Without making any noise, Violet and I made our way back downstairs, both straining to hear any more noises. But the mansion remained eerily quiet, and I was filled with a tense energy that was making me all jittery.

I made sure to keep myself in front of Violet at all times, in case anything leapt out at us. I didn’t trust this place. I didn’t like this place. I contemplated shifting, but we’d probably make a lot more noise as werewolves than as people.

We made it to the first floor with no issue.

*Let’s check and see if there are any doors that lead downstair*s, I suggested.

Violet nodded. *That’s a good—*

Before she could finish her sentence, there was another massive crash from downstairs. I forced myself not to move. Violet’s eyes were wide. Stunned. I detected a hint of fear in her scent, and I hated it. I hated it when my mate felt threatened.

I would always do everything in my power to protect her.

*Over there!* Violet said, pointing at a door down the hallway.

*Stay behind me*, I said. *I’m going in.*

Violet stared at me, her jaw set. *No. WE’RE going in. We can’t split up right now!*

I realized that she was right. *Either way, stay back*,I said. *I’m not letting you take the lead and get hurt.*

Violet sighed heavily, looking up the ceiling in a way that reminded me of her friend Cali—even though Violet usually didn’t have a sassy bone in her body. *Fine. If that makes you feel better.*

*It does make me feel better.*

*Oh my god, stop fussing over me.* Violet gestured toward the door. *Let’s get going!*

I stopped myself from snorting. The seriousness of the situation had sunk in. I moved forward, creeping toward the door. This was like every single bad horror movie I’d ever seen. I always used to scream at the protagonists for being stupid enough to follow the creepy noises and wander into obvious danger. But now that I was actually in the same situation, I got it. What was I supposed to do? Just stay upstairs and hope for the best? Or call the police and be like, *“Hello, my werewolf mate and I trespassed into a previously vampire-riddled, abandoned building, and there’s a sound in here that might be another supernatural thing that wants to eat us… Come on over and join the fun!”* That didn’t sound like a good idea.

As quietly as possible, I cracked the door open and stepped onto the first stair that led down to the basement…

Which, of course, creaked loudly.

*God dammit!*

I froze. At the same time, Violet grabbed my arm. I counted to five internally, and there was nothing but silence from the basement. After a few agonizing moments where we just stared at each other and freaked the fuck out, Violet mind linked with me.

*We should keep going, Charlie. Are you ready?*

I was probably going to die in a few seconds, but at least I would be with Violet. And since death was inevitable, I couldn’t help but feel pretty frustrated over the fact that our fun times had been interrupted earlier. Extremely bad timing.

*Sure*, I replied indulgently. God, this whole situation was completely absurd… *As ready as can be.*

We had no choice but to keep going, anyway.

Taking a deep breath, I took another step into the darkness—

There was a sudden blast of cold air, and a pair of ice-cold hands grabbed my shoulders. Before I could even scream, I was pushed down the stairs.

I tumbled down while Violet cried out my name, and a second later…

The basement door crashed shut behind us, leaving me and Violet in complete darkness. *Shit*. At least she was here with me.

“Charlie!” she called. I could see her, even through the dark, carefully making her way down the stairs. She walked over to me as I sat up slowly. Nothing felt broken—probably because I was a freaking werewolf now.

“Are you okay?” she asked anxiously. “What was that?” She looked around. “We need to get out of here!”

No kidding.

“I will—” I stopped talking.

The click of a lock echoed through the basement, and a cold sweat broke out all over me.

We were trapped down here, in the basement of a vampire nest. I should have been much more careful and thorough when we’d swept the place. How much of a dumbass was I? And now Violet was in danger, and it was all my fault.

Sniffling, Violet said, “Can you stand up? Are you hurt?” She dropped to her knees next to me, patting me down. I tested out my limbs. I felt a bit sore from the tumble, but I told Violet that I was fine. I stood up gingerly, with her supporting me.

“Do you have any idea who pushed you?” she asked quietly.

I knew I sounded insane, but I still told her the truth. “It felt like the wind, and then it turned into a set of hands.”

Violet blinked at me, incredulous. “Are you serious right now?”

I nodded slowly. “I think so. Not sure if it was magic or something else.” I looked around in the dark. “Doesn’t seem like anyone is down here, though.”

Violet shook her head, swallowing roughly. “Let’s go.” Her voice was shaky.

With her arms still around me, like an anchor, we started to climb the stairs together…

And then booming, ominous laughter filled the basement.

**Episode 1094**

ARTEMIS

Big Mac, Rishika, Orla, and I were walking down a desolate road, our backs to Haystack Rock. I couldn’t believe that the portal had just vanished like that. I’d felt it—my hand had been through it—and then nothing.

“Is that even normal?” Rishika asked me.

I frowned. “What?”

“Like, do portals just fade away out of nowhere?” she wondered. “I’m only asking because I have literally no knowledge of any of this. I’ve never had to use a portal for anything.”

I had used a portal before, but I also had no knowledge of them beyond that they existed. They were portals, there with a purpose to join two worlds. I opened my mouth. Closed it. I didn’t like the idea of looking ignorant in front of a very pretty girl, but here we were. Thankfully my mother stepped in, probably noticing my discomfort.

“As far as I know,” Orla told Rishika, “it’s not normal for portals to behave like that. They don’t open or close. They just exist. This portal in particular has always been here, since the beginning of forever. So there’s definitely something going on—I just don’t know what.”

“Weird,” Rishika said. “What do you think, Artemis?”

I nodded in agreement and shot my mom a grateful look for pulling me out of that awkward situation. As Rishika asked Orla more questions, I rushed to catch up with Big Mac, who was a few feet ahead of us.

“So? What’s the plan now?” I asked the witch. “Are we going to go back to the pack house? Should we just hope for the best when it comes to the Orb and move on with our lives?”

Big Mac glanced at me, shaking her head. “We can’t risk that. We need to get to the bottom of where it is. If the Orb falls into the wrong hands, it could spell disaster for the Fae world—and for the rest of us.”

I scowled. Adventures used to be fun when I was in the Fae world and didn’t have anyone to worry about. Now, I was anxious about my mother’s safety, about Cali’s, even about Rishika’s. I didn’t want to go out there looking for danger if it meant any of them would get hurt. Still, there was a part of me that wished we could just leave the Orb behind, since the thing was gone now anyway.

But at the same time, I had to admit that Big Mac was right.

“I suppose you have a point,” I told her. “The Orb is too dangerous to ignore.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Thank you, Captain Obvious.”

I frowned. “Captain? I’ve never been at sea.”

Big Mac took a deep breath, like I was testing her patience. Why was this witch always so irritable?

“What’s the plan now, anyway?” I asked her again. “Where are we even going?”

Big Mac stared at me, her expression serious. “We’re going to find answers.”

Well, that was even more vague than usual. Could this woman ever be upfront? Were all witches this maddening, or was it just her? Having Big Mac as a companion on a quest was terrible. Even Cali had been better to deal with, despite the fact that she loved saving random people for no reason at all.

“You don’t seem happy with my answer,” Big Mac told me, eyebrows raised.

I’d tried to swallow my frustration, but apparently I hadn’t done a very good job. Just to maintain the balance here—especially considering my mother would not appreciate me being mean to anyone— I made sure not to yell at her.

“Can you blame me?” I asked. “You need to be a little more specific when I ask you something. I don’t do well with not knowing things.”

Big Mac snorted. “Fine. We’re going to go see Nneka.”

I huffed impatiently. “Okay, and who’s Nneka?”

Big Mac looked off into the distance. “Someone who might be able to help.”

This was ridiculous. “Well, that clears things right up.” I scoffed. “I’ve never felt more informed in my entire life.”

Big Mac gave me a little smile; it was either mocking or amused—I could never be sure with her. She didn’t say anything, so I considered the conversation over. I let Big Mac continue in the lead and slowed down to walk with Rishika. With all the drama that was going on, I hadn’t really had the time to think about why she was here in the first place.

But now, as I watched Rishika talk animatedly with my mom, I couldn’t help but wonder if she had insisted on accompanying Orla just to look out for me. My stomach fluttered at the thought. It was so weird—normally, the notion of anyone wanting to look after me would’ve been infuriating. Especially since I’d spent my entire life looking after myself, thank you very much.

But with Rishika, things felt different.

Something about the prospect of her being protective of me made me feel warm and fuzzy inside, like a—

*Wait. Warm and fuzzy?*

I stared at Rishika as my mother fell back a little. Rishika’s profile was immaculate. It was a little hard to focus on anything else other than the fact that I wanted to kiss her. But I powered through, because being dazed was not my style.

“So,” I said.

She shot me a look, snorting. “*So*.”

“How come you’re here?” I asked, cutting right to the chase.

Rishika shot me another sideways look. “Greyson wanted me to come, to keep an eye on Orla. Since she’s Cali’s mom and everything.”

I ignored the twitch of disappointment in my stomach. Of course Greyson had made her come. Of course Rishika wasn’t out here just because she’d been worried about me. That wasn’t a thing that happened for people like me. Why would it?

Why would I ever deserve something like that?

Rishika quickened her pace, and I fell back to walk with Orla. At least I had my mom now. And I had Cali—Cali cared about me.

“What are you thinking?” my mom asked, raising an eyebrow.

I thought of the way that Orla had fought so fiercely back at the beach. “You were pretty impressive back there. Excellent fighting.”

She grinned. “You didn’t think I had it in me, did you?”

I laughed. “To be honest, no. The first I ever heard about you was when Cali described you during your time in the hospital. And then I met you and found out that your power was glowing plants…”

Mom snorted, giving me a look. “Let me guess, you weren’t impressed?”

I chuckled. “I just thought that sounded, you know… Cute. *Nice*.” I gestured behind me. “But what you did back there? That was ‘badass’, as Cali would say.”

Orla kept grinning. “The Wrenthorns come from a long line of warriors,” she said. But as we kept walking, her smile faded. She turned to me. “I specifically told you and Cali to leave the Orb alone. Do you remember that, Artemis?”

I nodded curtly.

She continued. “I know that me being your mother is still new, but I *am* your mother, and I’m not some old fool. I have more experience than either you or Cali, and I hope that you’ll listen to me from now on.”

I had no idea how to what to say to that. Nobody had ever talked to me like this before.

“Do you understand, Artemis?” Orla asked seriously. “All I want is for my girls to be safe. I need you both to take this seriously, because you’re the most important people in the world to me, and you—you could have been seriously hurt, or worse.” Orla shook her head, her voice breaking. “What would I have done without you?”

I was still struck by Orla’s expression and the concern in her voice. And even though she was chastising me right now, it somehow felt good. Like someone had my back unconditionally. Like someone would always look out for me, even when I didn’t look out for myself.

“I’m sorry,” I told her quietly. “From now on, I’ll try to listen a bit more.”

My mom took a deep breath and squeezed my shoulder. “That’s what I needed to hear. Because, I… There’s actually something else I need to tell you.”

Orla looked upset. I’d only seen her like this a handful of times. “What’s wrong?”

“You have to make a Fae promise not to tell Cali or Tom.”

“But why? What’s happening?” I asked, alarmed. Asking for a Fae promise meant that things were pretty serious. Concern and fear started to make my heart beat faster—especially because my mother’s expression was becoming more and more intense and emotional. Her eyes watered.

“Just promise me, Artemis,” she said throatily. She was holding back tears, now.

I nodded. “Fine,” I said. She was my mother; if she wanted me to promise, I would. “If it’s important to you, I promise. Now, what is it?”

My mom looked away from me, and her voice trembled when she spoke. “I don’t think your father is dead, after all.”

**Episode 1095**

GREYSON

I stared at Cali. My heart was beating fast as I waited to hear what she had to say about my confession. I’d spent time away from her, but it was almost like that time had made how much I loved her clearer than ever. No matter my self-sacrificing bullshit and grandiose determination to take the high road, it was obvious now that I couldn’t live without her.

I wouldn’t be able to exist without her.

I hoped that she could see the truth in my words, in my face—even though everything was so messed up and confusing with Maren being here, and this *Bachelorette* nonsense.

Cali stared at me intensely but remained silent.

I just wished that she would say something—before I lost my mind and my patience. It was funny to think about, considering all the times I’d vanished on Cali and played with *her* patience.

The quiet stretched for too long. I was about to beg her to talk to me when she finally let out a big sigh. “Greyson, you just said that you’re all in, but a few weeks ago you told me to choose Xavier—”

“That was when I thought that choosing him would keep you safe—”

“—and you left me here, and now I know that you’ve got complicated feelings about—”

“Cali, please, listen to me. Those kisses meant nothing. They were just dumb mistakes that I made without thinking, but I understand how they hurt you. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too. But you can’t deny that the timing sucks, Greyson. It’s making it pretty hard for me to process and move forward.” She pressed her lips together, her voice lowering. “Even if I badly want to.”

I shook my head. “You’re right. Especially about the shitty timing thing, but shitty timing seems to always be going around when—”

“I’m *back!*” Torin popped up out of nowhere, now decked out in an enormous chef’s hat.

I stared at Cali. *The bad timing I was talking about*, I told her though our mind link.

Cali ignored me. I scowled as she stared at Torin. He beamed at both of us and placed two domed platters on the table with flourish.

“Suitor Number One,” Torin said to me, then turned to Cali, “and our beautiful lady of the hour! Are both of you ready to experience this gastronomic masterpiece?”

Did we have to, though?

“Observe, the meat of your romantic dreams, and I’m not just talking about Greyson shirtless!” Torin announced, whipping the covers from the platters to reveal two plates of meatloaf.

“Meatloaf,” Cali said flatly. “Meatloaf at midnight.”

“Isn’t it just incredible?” said an ecstatic Torin, producing a bottle of wine out of nowhere. He poured a little bit into my glass and stared at me with very wide eyes.

I frowned. “What?”

Scandalized, Torin looked at Cali and then leaned forward to whisper in my ear. “You’re a gentleman, you’re supposed to test the wine! I saw them do it on *MasterChef*!”

Why did bad things happen to good people? That was my question. I had killed the most fearsome werewolf in all the land. I had saved an actual child from the fairy mafia. I had *not* killed my younger brother, who had repeatedly tried to kill me in the past, and who had also been sleeping with my mate because she was also his mate. And *this* was how the universe repaid me?

“Come along now,” Torin told me happily. “Don’t be shy!”

I realized, with growing dread, that Torin would not get the hell out of here unless I did what he wanted. I tried a sip of the wine, moving it around in my mouth after Torin encouraged me to, quote unquote,“digest all the notes in the superb liquid”.

And then I swallowed.

“It’s fine,” I told Torin flatly.

“YAY!” Torin clapped his hands again.

If I was lucky, Xavier would snap first and attack him, and then we wouldn’t have to keep doing any of this. He bowed absurdly deeply to both Cali and me. “Enjoy!” he exclaimed and then dashed away.

Finally.

Cali didn’t even pick up her fork. “I can’t believe Dad made meatloaf so late,” she said, clearly irritated. “I want to eat it, but I’ll get so bloated, I won’t be able to sleep all night.”

I was glad to see that our heart-to-heart was really affecting my mate, and that she wasn’t thinking about her stomach.

“As I was saying,” I said, as if this whole Torin debacle hadn’t just happened, “I know that my actions have been confusing. I don’t blame you for not trusting me…”

Cali arched an eyebrow at me. “But?”

“But you know that I only left you in the first place because I wanted to make things easier for you. Though now that I’m back with you, I’m more certain than ever that we’re meant to be. I can’t just let you go.”

“You mean like the way you let me go all those other times?” Cali asked.

Her tone was sarcastic, but I ignored it. “You are the only thing I thought about while I was away. You were in my head, day and night, even when—”

“Then why didn’t you come back?” Cali asked.

A wave of guilt hit me. *Because, apparently, I’d needed time apart from you to really show me how broken I was without you.* I’d been thinking about Cali practically the whole time, even while I’d been doing everything I could to forget her.

“Spending time away from you made me realize that just putting space between us won’t destroy our bond,” I said. “It won’t make my feelings go away. It won’t make you automatically choose Xavier. I’m never going to be free of you, and I don’t want to be. I want to be with you, every day, every night, every moment for the rest of our lives.”

Cali fell silent again. At least this time, her angry and disappointed expression had softened.

“I feel the same way,” she said softly. “Even when you frustrate me so much that I want to blow everything apart, something always pulls me back to you.”

“What a great love confession, Cali.” I laughed. “Thanks.”

She snorted before shaking her head. Her expression darkened. “After all this… Greyson, you know that I can’t just choose you. It’s not that simple. If I choose anyone, someone dies. I can’t do that to you or Xavier. I can’t have that hanging over my head.”

I looked away, letting out a deep breath. “I know. Trust me, I understand the concept perfectly. I’ve been mulling over the dangers of it for days.” I met Cali’s eyes, hoping that she could see all the love in mine. “But we can’t just sit around and hope that this situation resolves itself. We need to take action, to figure out how to break this curse.”

Cali smiled bitterly. “That’s not going to be easy. You know that. Especially after all the things we’ve been through. This curse isn’t messing around. I’m *scared*.”

“I know that it won’t be easy,” I said. “But in the meantime, can’t you just be with me? End this whole charade?” I gestured at the ridiculously romantic date set-up. “Please, Cali.”

Cali shook her head. “I can’t do that. Xavier was there for me the entire time you were off gallivanting and soul-searching or whatever. I could never stop loving him.”

Her words cut deep, but I couldn’t fault her for telling me the truth. Xavier was her mate too, even when I was furious at him for touching her. Even when we were at each other’s throats, he was still my brother too. I couldn’t fault Cali for doing something that I hadn’t been able to do for so long when it came to her.

“We still don’t really know what actually counts as choosing,” she said. “And I’m not willing to risk either of your lives.” Cali’s harsh expression had melted to one that broke my heart. She was nearly in tears, the anguish clear as day on her face.

“Everything is complicated right now…” She swallowed roughly. “None of this played out the way I would have wanted. Do you think I wanted to feel like I’m leading you both on? That it doesn’t cross my mind how much this *sucks*? How I wish I could just split myself in half for you both? I wish that everything had been different, that we could go back to the beginning and start this all over, do it right. Do it in a way that wouldn’t hurt either you or Xavier.”

*Changing the past to change the future*—that was what the witch sisters had said.

I stared at Cali. Since she had been in my head during that last vision, she was clearly part of whatever those three witches were doing whenever they messed with my mind.

Cali was right—she did have the right to know what was going on with them.

“Maybe we can’t change the present,” I said. “But what if I told you there might be a way to change the past?”

**Episode 1096**

VIOLET

I was frozen in fear in the pitch-black basement.

Booming laughter echoed all around the space. The sound was too loud, unnaturally so. Whoever made that noise didn’t feel like a normal human. There was a whiff of vampire in the air, but the scent was old—clearly the house had served as a vampire nest for a very long time.

Right now, there was no vampire down here.

I would have been able to smell it the moment that door had cracked open. But if it wasn’t a vampire that was cackling right now, making the space vibrate, then what on earth was it?

Trying not to hyperventilate, I clutched at Charlie, pulling him close. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed the top of my head. His comforting movements eased something inside me, but still, the sinister laughter remained in the room as an echo.

Then, in a loud, imposing voice, Charlie shouted, “Who’s there?”

I was impressed by how unafraid he sounded. A surge of pride overcame me. My mate was here to protect me. My mate was fearless. My mate was strong.

So was I.

The voice didn’t respond, though, and the laughter continued to boom around the enclosed space.

I winced. The sheer volume made it hard for me to even think.

Then, suddenly, just as quickly as it began, the laughter stopped short.

The eerie silence in the aftermath made things oddly more frightening. Charlie’s grip around me tightened, and then he spoke up again. “I said, who’s there?” he shouted. “Let us out of here!”

Again, there was no response.

But then, out of the blue, lights began to flicker all around us.

It was like flickering candlelight, and it allowed me to see the space clearly for the first time. The fading light illuminated everything in fits and bursts, but the room didn’t look like anything special. It was the standard creepy old house basement, kind of dark and abandoned but fairly small. I could see into every corner, and it looked like we were all alone…

Which only made everything a million times more freaking spooky!

*What the hell is going on here?*

“I have no idea,” Charlie breathed in response, and I realized that I’d asked that question out loud. The second Charlie spoke, the light stabilized, keeping the entire basement illuminated.

I gasped when a faint, shimmering outline appeared just a few feet in front of us.

“Stay back,” Charlie said sharply. He pulled me behind him as we scrambled backward until we fetched up against the wall. But then the outline suddenly solidified.

It was now a person.

An incredibly short, plump, white man wearing old-timey clothes.

*What the freaking—*

“Gotcha!” He pointed at us, laughing.

I gave him a wide-eyed look, my chest heaving with shock.

I could barely wrap my head around what was happening right now—seriously, what the hell? Was the round little man a ghost? He didn’t look quite the same as the ghosts I’d seen before—he was too… *healthy* looking. And I could talk about ghosts—I’d certainly had quite a few experiences with them.

The plump little man didn’t seem to be threatening us anymore, thank god. Charlie kept me close, but he no longer looked like he was ready to attack and tear apart an imaginary threat. Feeding off my mate’s energy and feeling bolder, I took a step forward. Charlie’s hand stayed on the small of my back as I spoke to the man directly.

“Are you a ghost?” I asked in a serious tone.

The man tilted his head, a contemplative expression on his face. “Sort of. Sort of not.”

Charlie stepped up next to me. “What does that even mean?”

The man snickered. “I’m a poltergeist. A ghost with a smattering of fun.”

With growing dread, I realized that the only other poltergeist I’d ever encountered was Tony. I didn’t recall him being any fun whatsoever. In fact, he had been a horrible, murderous nightmare, with a streak of entitlement a mile wide.

*What are you thinking?* Charlie asked me.

I didn’t know what to tell my mate without freaking him the hell out.

The poltergeist walk-glided over to us, his smiling face suddenly turning petulant. “You killed all my friends. All of them, all at once!”

*Oh bo*y, Charlie said.

*Let’s see what he wants. I guess we should probably stand by, or… I have no idea!* I was internally dry heaving, and Charlie squeezed my hand.

*It’s going to be okay. I’ve got you*, he told me. *As long as we have each other, we’ll be fine.*

Charlie’s encouraging words made me feel so much better. Or at least as good as I *could* feel right now, trapped in a freaky mansion with a ghost on steroids.

The poltergeist was now almost too close to us. Before either of us could shift and try to swat him away like a fly, he spoke.

“Granted, they *were* a pretty poor excuse for friends. The smell, whew!” He waved his hand over his nose. “And the occasional growling? That was pretty startling as well. They were also not very polite, and they didn’t care about table manners. But at least they were entertaining, and I could have a good laugh.” He pointed at us, frowning. “But now all I have is you two!”

“I mean…” Charlie cringed. “We didn’t *mean* to hurt them. It just kind of happened.”

“Sorry, I guess?” I quickly added.

The man ignored us and got pouty again. “You can’t imagine how long I’ve been stuck here, all alone!”

I checked out his clothes, and I suddenly had a pretty good idea.

His face brightened. “I wish you could have seen me back in the day! I was the talk of the town!”

Charlie cleared his throat. I could tell that he was about to play along with the madness here. Sure enough, Charlie said, “I’ll bet. Your clothes are wonderfully made. And they look expensive.”

I was glad that Charlie could read the room. We needed to make nice with this creature.

The poltergeist preened at Charlie’s comment. “You think so, handsome young man? Because I brought the fabrics for this suit in particular from China, and my seamstress worked on it day and night for weeks to deliver this perfect result for my manly frame!”

I was still a little scared, but now I felt kind of sorry for the guy.

I mean, it wasn’t his fault that he was a ghost, was it? I’d have to ask Orla or Big Mac about how that worked.

“It’s definitely a great suit, and we’d be happy to hang out with you,” I said. “But can we maybe do it upstairs? It’s a little cold down here.”

The poltergeist clapped his hands together excitedly. “But of course! Why didn’t you ask before?”

I wanted to tell the man that Charlie had, in fact, asked him to let us out, but decided it probably wasn’t a good idea to start a “friendship” like that. The poltergeist glided up the stairs and unlocked the basement door, standing aside to let me and Charlie pass.

*I can’t believe this is happening*, Charlie told me.

I let out a sigh of relief. *The first chance we get, we need to bolt. I don’t trust poltergeists.*

*Ditto.*

But finding an opportunity to get out proved to be quite tricky. The poltergeist kept a close eye on us as he guided us into the living room. He waved his arms and conjured a crackling fire in the fireplace.

“There!” He turned to us, a wide smile on his face. “Isn’t that better?”

Both Charlie and I murmured our agreement very awkwardly. The poltergeist eyed me up and down. “You’re wearing Lady Herrington’s favorite dinner gown. What a beautiful garment! It deserves a proper meal!”

He clapped his hands once, and then the table in the room was suddenly groaning with food. The dishes’ delicious aroma was accompanied by the sound of an invisible violin.

I felt like I was in a thriller movie set in the 1500s.

“This looks lovely,” I told the poltergeist. “We’d be happy to stay for dinner.”

*Though we should definitely* not *eat any of this food*, I told Charlie.

“But after that, we really should be going!” I finished.

Awkwardly, Charlie added, “Yeah! Busy day ahead and all.”

The poltergeist frowned at us, his expression darkening. “Oh, is that what you plan to do? Just leave me here, all alone?”

Charlie cleared his throat. “It’s nothing personal. You’ve done a great job with the dinner. It’s just that things are a little intense in our lives right now, and we need to deal with a few problems.”

The man’s eye twitched. “And you think that I don’t have problems? You think you can leave me like that? No, you won’t be going anywhere!”

Before either Charlie or I could react, the poltergeist waved his hands.

The sound of slamming doors and locking windows echoed through the house.

Gasping, Charlie turned to look at me.

We were trapped.

**Episode 1097**

ARTEMIS

I stared at my mother. I couldn’t believe what had just come out of her mouth. She looked haunted, almost, and I couldn’t help but stammer in shock.

“What do—you just said…” I blinked. Then I whisper-hissed, “What do you mean my father’s not dead?”

Mom shushed me, glancing at Big Mac and Rishika, still a few paces ahead of us.

I made my voice lower, just to make sure that the werewolf wouldn’t hear me. “You told me that he’s been dead since before I was born, killed in the war! And now you’re telling me he’s *alive?*”

Mom sighed, nodding gravely. “That’s what I told you, because that’s what I thought was true. I thought he’d been murdered. But now I’m not so sure.”

This woman was so frustrating. I could see where Cali had gotten her sparkling personality. “Oh my gods, can you just spit it out?” I asked. “Where did you hear this piece of information? What are your sources? Who told you?”

There was no way that Orla was still in contact with people in the Fae world. Of that, I was certain.

“No real person actually told me,” Mom trailed off. “But there’s a tree in my garden…”

“A *tree*,” I said, eyebrows raised.

“Don’t use that tone with me,” Mom said. “It’s a tree that Cali used to build little fairy houses underneath when she was a little girl. It’s actually connected through to the Fae world and, now that I have my magic back, I can speak to it again, just like I used to.”

My head was spinning. My mother was full of secrets. Perhaps that was where I had gotten my own cryptic-ness, but I wasn’t about engage in any self-reflection right now. There were much more serious matters at hand.

“Wait wait *wait!* But what would my father being back mean for you and Tom? For you and Cali? For all three of us?”

Mom sniffled. “I know. I—”

Something else hit me then. “Also, you’re telling me that you’ve always been able to just chat with the Fae world any time you want?” I asked. “If that’s the case, why didn’t you do that back when Cali was stuck there? Why didn’t the tree warn you then? Why didn’t you send us a message through the trees? Because I’m pretty sure those leafy suckers are the biggest gossips in the entire Fae world!”

I had fired one question after another, and Mom shook her head. “No, Artemis, you misunderstood. I didn’t have the ability to speak to the tree while Cali was in the Fae world. When I got sick, I lost my ability to control all my Fae powers, speaking to trees included.” Mom looked ahead, a distant expression on her face.

I frowned. “That must have been rough.”

Mom offered a bitter smile. “The first time I realized I couldn’t hear the tree anymore, I was devastated…” She shook her head, as if trying to clear it. “Anyway, the point is, now that I’m healthy, I can speak to the tree again. And right before Tom and I came to Oregon, the tree told me that there have been rumors—credible rumors—of sightings of Kadmos.”

Well, then. That sounded absolutely outrageous. I’d just gotten used to having a mom, and now there was a chance that I’d end up with a dad, too? One who was probably of debatable ethics and character? When had my life become as messed up as *Cali’s*?

Before I could question my mother any further about all the madness that she was spouting, Big Mac called to us from where she and Rishika had been walking up ahead.

“We’re here!” she said, waving for us to come closer.

I looked around, realizing that I’d been so engrossed in talking to my mother that I hadn’t noticed my surroundings. I recognized this place. I *knew* this place. I had been here before, very recently.

I looked ahead and saw the shack that I’d stopped at on the way to Haystack Rock, and I grumbled in annoyance. I couldn’t believe this—we were going to see that cranky old woman? Seriously? She’d been horrible, and a little scary.

“I don’t like this,” I told my mom.

“I’m sorry,” she said, oblivious.

It was *great* to see that we could communicate *so well*. That was sarcasm. Cali had been teaching it to me.

As Mom and I caught up to Big Mac and Rishika, I turned to the witch. “I don’t think that this old lady is going to help us out. I talked to her on the way here, and she was less than helpful.”

Big Mac’s eyebrows shot up. “You, a Fae, talked to Nneka and lived?”

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “I’m pretty hard to kill.”

“Yeah,” Big Mac said with a heavy sigh that almost sounded disappointed. “Both you and Cali are positively immortal, not to mention incredibly annoying.” She turned to my mom. “Great job on that, by the way.”

Mom did not seem upset. She just shrugged. “As long as they’re alive, my kids can be as annoying as they want.”

It was good to see where my mother’s priorities lay.

Before I could say anything else, the door to the shack swung open with a bang and Nneka appeared in the doorway. She was brandishing the same long thing she had last time. What was it with her and human weapons? Wasn’t she a witch?

The lady glanced between all four of us before settling on Big Mac and me. She rolled her eyes and then growled, “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me!” She swung at me first. “I told you to stay away, and instead you bring me *MacKenzie?* Of all the people I didn’t want darkening my door…”

Big Mac walked right up to her, as if the woman *wasn’t* potentially a supernatural serial killer. Her expression was blank, almost casual. “The portal at Haystack Rock has closed,” she told Nneka bluntly. “What do you know about that?”

Nneka glared at Big Mac. She didn’t lower the weapon. Narrowing her eyes, she said, “This is exactly what I was talking about. Every time you show up here, you only bring trouble.”

“It’s not my fault that trouble follows me,” Big Mac told her, her face still expressionless. “Also, I just asked you a question.”

Nneka huffed. “It’s not possible for that portal to be closed. It’s been there since before anyone can remember. It’s even older than I am.”

“Well,” Big Mac said evenly, “it is truly closed. Why would we lie to you?”

Nneka snorted. “You probably did something wrong. The very idea of Haystack Rock being closed is absurd. It’s not just some ‘portal’—it’s the front door. If that door were to close, it would mean that the Fae world is completely inaccessible.”

Big Mac and Orla exchanged a look. This was not good.

“Now,” Nneka said, pointing the weapon at the witch, “you better get the hell out of my yard with your nonsense. I’m getting ready for dinner, and the last thing I want to see is your faces.”

She slammed the door shut unceremoniously.

Big Mac, Orla, Rishika, and I were left staring at each other in utter disbelief.

“Can that be true?” I asked Big Mac, my hands shaking from the tension. “Is that portal the front door to the Fae world?”

I tried to hide it, but I was starting to panic on the inside. I’d wanted to stay in the human world for the time being, to find more adventures and spend time with my family, but the idea of NEVER being able to go home? I hadn’t signed up for that. I’d liked having it as an option for *when*ever, not *never*.

Rishika stared at my mother. “What should we do now?”

Mom looked among all three of us and then she spoke decisively. “Rishika and Big Mac should go back and tell the pack everything that’s happened. Artemis and I need to go to Minnesota.”

She shot me a look, and I realized that she wanted to talk to that gossipy Fae tree to figure out what the hell was happening. That was a good idea, actually. But weren’t there trees here too?

Big Mac, of course, was about to argue. But before she could start ranting, I caught some movement out of the corner of my eye. Adrenaline rose in my bloodstream.

When I turned around, I saw a vampire.

But not any vampire.

It was Iñigo. His eyes were gleaming with hatred, and the worst part was that he wasn’t alone. He was flanked by a crew of rough-looking fighters who licked their lips. They looked among all four of us as if we were tasty bags of blood.

“*Shit*,” Rishika whispered, moving to stand closer to me.

The entire group of fighters that loomed behind him immediately bared their teeth, hissing.

The second Iñigo caught sight of me, he narrowed his eyes. “*You*.”

**Episode 1098**

I stared at Greyson. “What the hell are you talking about?” I stammered out. “You can’t change the past.”

He looked at me for a moment, then leaned across the table, his grey eyes dark with intensity. “It’s these visions, Cali. I thought they were just dreams or something—hallucinations, maybe. But I’m starting to think they’re something more. Something… real, maybe.”

“What—”

“Like they’re visions of the past. Different versions.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“What if we could rewind and start things over, make different decisions, and get a different outcome?”

My brain felt like it was a step behind the conversation. “But, they’re just dreams, right?” I got a sudden flash of the vision I’d had when I’d blacked out, and I looked keenly at him. “Tell me about the three women I saw.” The weird feeling I had about them only kept growing, like they were the key to all of this, somehow.

Greyson’s eyes darkened even further. “They’re sisters.”

I raised my eyebrows. There was something else he wasn’t telling me. “*And?*”

“And… witches,” he finally admitted.

“*Shit*,” I breathed, leaning back in my chair. I looked out at the dark lake, which glittered in the faint moonlight. “How do you know them?”

“I just met them.”

I looked at him quickly. “When you were in Portland?”

He nodded. “Maren brought me to them. They talked to me about the *due destini*.”

“What*?*” I asked. “Why?”

“They said there might be a way for me to change my past.”

I stared at him, stunned into silence for a moment. Then I shook my head. “That’s not possible.”

“I didn’t think so either, Cali,” he said fervently, “but then I *saw* it.”

I frowned. “Are you talking about the dreams? Greyson, there’s no way to know if those are real—”

“No,” he interrupted. “I *saw* them change time. I *felt* it. I *lived* through it.”

My breath caught in my throat. “What are you saying?”

He took a deep breath. “There’s this guy, Hans. I ran into him once, years ago—he’s bad news. He’d taken Fenrir and was threatening Maren. That’s how we ended up back here. I had to throw a fight, and I messed up. Instead of losing, I won it on accident, and Hans took Fenrir. He was *gone*, Cali. I shifted, I was trying to get to him, but the whole thing was going to hell faster than I could do anything about it. I thought I was going to be killed.”

I drew in a ragged breath. “What happened?”

Greyson’s jaw flexed. His whole body was coiled tight. “Then I blinked, and I was walking out to start the fight again. From the *beginning*. As if the twenty minutes beforehand had never happened. I was able to fix my mistakes, lose the fight, and save Fenrir.”

I shook my head. “That’s not possible. None of this is possible.”

*Right?*

“I’m telling you, Cali,” Greyson said, his voice thin, “that’s what happened. I *swear* it.”

“Those witches—they’re the ones who did it?” I asked, biting my lip.

He nodded. “They must have been. Who the hell else could have done something like that?”

I dropped my forehead into my hand. “So… what? What are you saying?”

“I don’t understand it myself,” Greyson said. “I’m just telling you what I experienced.”

I thought back to the vision I’d seen. It had felt so *real*.

“What else have you seen in these visions?” I asked. “You still haven’t exactly elaborated.”

“I’ve seen us together, Cali,” Greyson said, his voice thick with emotion. “I saw myself coming to meet your parents. I brought dinner.”

I glanced up with a small smile, my heart warming at the thought.

“It was nothing extravagant, Cali, but it was so special, because we were happy. We were together. We were living our lives, and we were just happy. There was no *due destini*, there was no curse. We were just living our lives, without threats and without deadlines. In one of the visions, we were living together in a house near the ocean. I woke up next to you.” He reached across the table and wrapped his hand around mine. “And then our children came running in. They snuggled into bed between us. A boy and a little girl.”

My breath caught, and I felt tears prickling at the corners of my eyes.

His eyes were bright too as he looked at me. “If you could see what I saw, Cali… Could you imagine what it would be like, for us to just *be?* To just live? We’ve never had that. We’ve never even had a time when it was just the two of us. The closest we’ve ever come was in the Fae world, and we were still constantly with Torin and Astrid, constantly pursued by Artemis—”

I laughed. “Don’t remind me.”

His other hand caught mine, so both our hands were clasped in the middle of the table. “We were so happy, Cali. We were together, and peaceful, and so, so happy.”

It was hard to imagine—not the being happy part, that was easy. But everything else had always been complicated where Greyson was concerned—there had never been a time when Xavier hadn’t been a presence in my thoughts, complicating my feelings about Greyson. There had never been a time when I hadn’t felt torn between the two brothers. And just trying to imagine loving Greyson *alone* was enough to make me feel unbalanced. Almost dizzy.

I pulled my hands away from his. “I think I need—”

“Cali?” he asked, frowning.

“I’m sorry, I just need a little fresh air.”

Greyson looked around, at the wide, open lawn around us.

I shook my head. “I just need some space. I need to think.” I pushed my chair back and got unsteadily to my feet. Greyson called after me, but I ignored him and made my way up the lawn toward the house.

Torin looked up as I came into the warm kitchen, and his face stretched into a grin. “Ah, the bachelorette returneth. Our viewers have some questions about how the date with the charming Greyson went—”

“Not now, Torin,” I snapped, blowing past him and heading toward the stairs. I went straight up to my room and dropped onto my bed, my head still swimming.

A clean slate. Was it really possible?

No death curses, no heartbreak—just me and Greyson. Happy.

I looked up at the dark ceiling above me and tried to picture it—the beautiful house he’d described, facing the beach. We’d sit outside and watch the waves as the sun set over the water. He’d grill and I’d make jokes, and he’d roll his eyes and laugh his deep, rolling laugh. It was the most ordinary of pictures, but it filled my heart with such happiness, it nearly took my breath away.

There was a quiet knock on the door, and Greyson pushed it open. “I know you said you wanted some space, and I’m willing to give it to you, but I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

My heart ached at the sight of him, standing framed by the doorway. He’d taken off his suit jacket and tie, and undone the top button of his shirt.

“I’m okay,” I said, though my voice cracked.

He raised his eyebrows. “You sure about that?”

I nodded. “I’m just glad to see you.”

He hesitated for a moment, then walked into the room, closing the door behind him. He sat on the edge of the bed, but that wasn’t quite close enough for me, so I tugged on his arm until he lay down, stretching out next to me.

I snuggled against him, my body relaxing as it fitted into his. It really would be amazing, if it were just the two of us.

There was the quiet thump of Greyson’s shoes hitting the floor as he kicked them off, then he pulled the quilt down and settled us beneath it. He pulled me closer, so I was tucked just beneath his arm, and, with a sigh of contentment, I felt his body relax.

I relaxed, too, simply happy to be near him, happy to feel safe and loved. My mind unwound for what felt like the first time in ages, spinning happy fantasies of building forts with two children with Greyson’s eyes and my silly laugh.

But just as I’d almost crossed the boundary between drowsiness and sleep, a thought hit me and jolted me awake. My eyes flew open and I stared into the darkness.

A clean slate where I was happy with just Greyson meant that I wouldn’t know Xavier Evers. Or, if I did know him, I would only be *acquainted* with him. I would know him only as Greyson’s brother. I wouldn’t feel the same connection with him.

Would I be able to live that way?

Was that what I *wanted?*

**Episode 1099**

ARTEMIS

I braced my feet on the ground as Iñigo and his cadre of vampires descended on us. Next to me, Rishika was already shifting with a fierce, ear-splitting roar.

What was he doing here? After the Orb no doubt.

Well he was shit out of luck.

Their backs to the old shack, Orla and Big Mac both had their hands up, and Big Mac was muttering furiously under her breath as the vampires advanced, their black eyes pulsing with fury. Whatever the two women were doing was creating a force field that repelled the first wave of vampires, but there were so many of them—where had Iñigo gathered so many?—and I could see that keeping the barrier up was draining both Orla and Big Mac of their powers quickly.

*Shit.*

Rishika bounded toward the first bloodsucker who breached the barrier and made quick work of ripping out his throat. I ran forward as another vampire came running toward Rishika, but I drew back with a gasp. Because running alongside the vampires was something I had *never* seen before: a giant lynx. It was *enormous*—at least as big as Rishika’s wolf, maybe even bigger—with bright, intelligent yellow eyes. It had snow-white fur spotted with brown, and high, pointed ears, and when it opened its mouth, I could see the gleam of razor-sharp teeth.

“What the hell?” I cried. I’d seen werewolves—along with plenty of other weird shit in this world and the Fae world—but this creature was something altogether different. But I didn’t have time to dwell.

Rishika had dispatched the second vampire and was turning her attention to the giant lynx. Another vampire, a woman, was advancing on me with a menacing smile, and I held up my hands, blasting her backward with the force of a rocket. She was impaled on a sharp pine tree branch, then exploded into a million little pieces of ash. I turned to the next and made use of the same handy branch. Vampires were bloodthirsty and mean, but none too smart.

It was cold under the grey sky, but I was sweating with the effort of keeping the vampires at bay. When I had a moment to breathe, I glanced over to see my mom sweeping her hands, and in a split second, the pine trees that towered high above our heads moved forward, reaching. The branches impaled a group of three vampires directly in their hearts.

Big Mac was facing down a particularly ugly vampire with an eye patch. He would have looked like a pirate, if it wasn’t for the sallow skin and the velvet cape. I almost laughed, thinking about how Cali would roll her eyes at that cape. The caped vampire was advancing on Big Mac, who was looking irritated, though not worried. She flicked her hand and he was swept off his feet, landing hard in the dirt. She waved her hand again and he was blown back, taking out the two vampires just behind him, who had been advancing to attack.

In the distance, I saw Iñigo trying to make his way toward me. His eyes were on me, and they were dark with fury. “You!” he screamed, trying to move toward me. But Rishika and Big Mac and my mother were causing so much chaos, he was finding it difficult to get any closer. The bodies of his companions kept getting thrown across his path, but he kept batting them away, his anger clearly growing.

Suddenly, Big Mac let out a scream of frustration. “*Enough*!” She closed her eyes and held up her hands, like she was pressing them against an invisible wall. For a moment, the world got quiet—even the birds were silenced. Then, with a whirring sound, a massive bolt of magical energy shot from her hands, blasting all the vampires—and the mysterious lynx—back with a blast like a hurricane wind. I watched as she created a magical barrier of sorts, but one that was much more effective than the one she’d initially tried to conjure as they’d approached.

Iñigo approached the barrier, his fangs bared, but couldn’t move through it. It was like what she’d done outside of the pack house. It was solid, and he was furious. He leaned as close as he could and pointed at me, his eyes dark as coals. “Where is it?”

“What?” I asked, knowing full well what he was asking about.

He narrowed his eyes. “Where is it, girl? The *Orb*?”

I smiled, tipping my head to the side. “Oh, that? Unfortunately, you’re too late.”  
 This stopped him for a moment. “What does that mean?”

I laughed, leaning closer to the barrier. “It means I don’t have the Orb, man. And now you can never get it. So you and your horde of vampires can go on back to the diner you came from.”

Iñigo lowered his gaze, and I couldn’t say that it sent a pleasant feeling through me. He growled and pounded at the barrier. “Where is it?”

“It’s gone,” I said.

“Gone *where?* What the hell does that mean?” Iñigo asked.

“It means,” I said slowly, like he was a small child with a tenuous grasp on language, “that it’s *gone*. It’s not in this world anymore.”

He looked at me for a moment, then he scoffed, though I could see the worry in his eyes. “I don’t believe you. Why should I? You’re a Fae. Your entire kind is built off of tricks.”

I shrugged. “I don’t care, man. Believe me or don’t. I don’t have it, and that’s the truth.” I turned out the pockets of my jeans, then pulled the empty bag from my back pocket and turned it inside out. “See? No Orb.” I shrugged. “I’m sure you had a lot of very evil plans for the Orb, and I’m very sorry to have foiled them or whatever—”

“My plan,” Iñigo said slowly. “Is to *kill* you.”

I looked at him steadily, getting tired of this dance. He thought Fae were built off of tricks? Well he was going to love this one. “I don’t have what you’re looking for.”

Iñigo looked back at me. After a moment, his body relaxed and his gaze went hazy as my magic took effect. “You don’t have what I’m looking for,” he repeated.

Orla shot me a look out of the corner of her eye.

I grinned back at her, then I looked at Iñigo again. “That’s right. Sorry about it.”

Orla nudged me. She tipped her chin toward the other vampires, who were glancing between Iñigo and me, their eyes narrowed. They looked a little suspicious.

“You need to keep that secret power a little more secret,” Orla murmured.

I tried to swallow my irritation. Wasn’t I allowed to be a badass, too? I was in the process of saving us, here, so maybe now wasn’t the time for criticism, but I kept my mouth shut. I turned back to Iñigo. “You might as well get out of here. You can look as much as you want, but you’re never going to find the Orb.”

Iñigo gave his head a hazy shake.

“It’s simply not here anymore,” I added. “It’s in another world.”

Orla gave me another nudge—harder this time—and I winced. She was right. I shouldn’t have said that. But it was fine. It wasn’t like these bloodsuckers could get into the Fae world right now, even if they’d wanted to, so what was the harm?

Iñigo looked at me for a moment longer, then took a step back to speak to another vampire—a woman with long, black hair. After a moment, another woman walked over—this one had wild curly hair and the watchful black eyes of a shark. They spoke for a long moment, then Iñigo looked up and motioned for his crew to follow him. They all walked quickly away, heading toward Haystack Rock.

We watched them leave in silence.

“Do you think we should follow them?” Rishika asked, shifting back to human. She glanced between my mom, Big Mac, and me. “They’re heading right toward the portal.”

“I know,” my mom murmured, her eyes still on their retreating forms.

“We can’t let those people—or anyone—get their hands on it,” Rishika said, passing a hand nervously through her mussed hair.

“Well,” Big Mac said briskly, “as that’s currently impossible, those vampires are just going to find that the portal’s closed.”

“But shouldn’t we—” Rishika started.

“No!” Big Mac snapped. “The portal is closed. Going after them would be a waste of our time. We can’t afford to get distracted by any side quests right now.”

Rishika shot a look at me.

Orla looked like she was on the verge of saying something, but then there was a creaking noise behind us and we all looked over at the dilapidated shack. The door was swinging open, seemingly of its own accord. I heard my mother’s breath hitch slightly.

Then, out of nowhere, Nneka poked her bony face through the door. She peered at us all for a long, silent moment. “Well, if you’re all finished, then…” She took a step back and swung the door open wide. “You’d better come on in.”

**Episode 1100**

ARTEMIS

Without so much as a pause, Big Mac started toward the old shack, but I just stared at the creaky swinging door. While I wasn’t interested in being out here when Iñigo and the rest of his gang figured out they couldn’t get through to portal and came hurrying back, I also didn’t want to have anything to do with the cranky witch inside the shack, either.

But everyone else was heading inside, so I reluctantly followed Orla’s retreating figure up the rickety steps toward the door.

“So,” Nneka said in her reedy voice, once we were all inside. She peered around at everyone through her rheumy eyes. “I heard you talking about the Orb with those vampires. Were you talking about what I think you were talking about?” She stared beadily at Big Mac. “Ancient weapon? Unlimited power? Corrupts absolutely?”  
 Big Mac’s jaw flexed, and she nodded.

Nneka’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that’s interesting. *Very* interesting. And were you telling the truth? Do you really have it?”

“I did have it, but I wasn’t lying. I don’t have it anymore. It’s not even in this world anymore,” I said.

Nneka turned to look at me, taking me in before she spoke again. “*You* had it? Where on earth did you get it, girl?”

“Demeter,” Big Mac said heavily, the set of her mouth grim.

“*Demeter?*” Nneka repeated, her eyes flashing with shock. “*You* stole something from Demeter?” She looked at me again, as though seeing me for the first time. “I find that hard to believe.”

I rolled my eyes. “You shouldn’t. We killed her, too.”

“*What?*” Nneka gasped, whirling around to look at Big Mac for confirmation.

“Demeter was working with Silas,” Big Mac said, crossing her arms. “She tried to help him marshal an army of the dead, and went against three packs of angry werewolves.” She gave a small shrug. “The witch picked the wrong side.”

Nneka was quiet for a moment. “So she’s really dead, then?”  
 Big Mac nodded. “Saw it myself.”

Nneka gave a sigh of relief and stepped behind her counter. “I have to admit, I’m glad to hear that. I’ve been hiding from Demeter for years.” She shook her head. “That witch had it in for me.” She looked up at us, and her eyes were brighter and just a *tiny* bit less hostile. “Well, in that case, you’ve all saved me some trouble. I guess I owe you.”

Big Mac’s eyebrows went up. “That’s true—you *do* owe us, and we’d like to cash it in. Help us figure out a way back into the Fae world now that the portal has closed.”

Nneka looked at Big Mac for a moment, then out her grimy shop windows at the darkening sky. “No, MacKenzie. No.”

“Nneka—” Big Mac started, her voice a growl.

“Not tonight,” Nneka cut in. “It’s been a long day, and I’m tired.” She looked it, too, as she sagged against her dusty counter. “I can offer you all rest, and you will be safe here tonight. Let’s sleep on it, and we will discuss everything in the morning.”

I looked at Big Mac, wondering how she was going to take this—the Big Mac I knew didn’t like to be told no—but to my surprise, she just nodded at the old witch.

“Fine,” she said shortly.

Orla was looking around the shop, apparently particularly interested in a wall filled with jars of herbs and odd-colored liquids.

But I was not the least bit interested in staying the night in this dusty shack. I sidled up to Rishika, who wasn’t looking particularly thrilled by this outcome either. “Not how I thought this night was going to end,” I said, taking off my sweatshirt and handing it to her.

Rishika snorted as she pulled on the sweater. “Yeah, that makes two of us.” She looked around, her lip curling with distaste at the warped floorboards and hanging cobwebs. “I guess it’s sheltered, if it rains. Either raindrops or vampires.”

Big Mac was hauling a heavy chair from the corner near the front door. “I’ll stay here for the night.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Standing guard,” Big Mac said, narrowing her eyes at me. “In case Iñigo and the rest of his crew decide to come back.”

“There’s a couch,” Orla said, peering into a small side room. She looked back at Rishika and me. “Any takers?”

I glanced at Rishika, and found her looking at me. “Um, we’ll guard the back door,” I said quickly.

Rishika nodded in confirmation.

“Hang on,” Nneka said, shuffling into the side room. She banged around for a moment, then re-emerged, carrying a bundle in her arms, which she threw at me. “I’ve only got the one.”

The bundle turned out to be a slightly musty sleeping bag. “That’s fine,” I said, though my cheeks felt hot. “Thanks.”

Nneka nodded and pointed a gnarled finger. “Through there.”

Rishika and I headed toward the back door, and I laid out the sleeping bag as Rishika checked that the door was locked.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here,” I said, as Rishika sat down on the sleeping bag next to me. “Even if Greyson did *force* you to come.” I didn’t know why that was still bothering me.

Rishika rolled her eyes and elbowed my ribs. The movement brought her an inch or so closer to me. “Trust me, he didn’t have to force me.”

“No?” This perked me up a bit.

She shook her head. “Once he told me what it was for, I was practically begging him to go.”

“Why?”

“I was worried about you, for one.” She looked at me, and her dark eyes looked liquid in the darkness. “And I wanted to see you.”

My stomach tightened, then did a strange little flip. There was almost no space between us now. Our shoulders touched, our hips touched. The space that separated us felt alive with energy, so even that felt connected, somehow. Without thinking or wondering or even asking myself why, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to hers.

My kiss started gently, but Rishika’s response was immediate. She curved her hand around the back of my head and pulled me closer, slipping her tongue between my lips. Her whole body was warm from the fight, and I leaned into the heat of her. My body was practically shaking, remembering her touch on my skin. Remembering how she tasted.

Needing both again.

“Can we—”

“*Yes*,” she said.

Before I knew it, we were lying down, and her hand was at my waist, slipping beneath my shirt, sliding along my skin. I groaned with the pleasure of her touch. Why had we bothered with anything to do with the Orb? Why had we been fighting vampires when I could’ve just felt her touch the entire time?

“Get this out of here,” I said, pulling at the sweatshirt I’d just given her.

“*Shh*,” she hissed, laughing.

Which made me laugh, too.

That is until she took the shirt off.

Feverishly, I removed my own clothes—they couldn’t get off me fast enough. I was thankful to sink back into her with a kiss. I pressed myself against her, biting down on her lip to keep quiet as heat started building in my body, pooling between my legs. When I slid my hand down her stomach to her clit, she sucked in her breath.

“I thought we were being quiet?” I pulled with a wicked grin, my fingers still stroking her. “Are you going to be quiet?”

She nodded. But then she reached up, taking my nipple in her hot mouth. The pleasure struck me so intensely that everything went hazy for a moment, a moan escaping me.

“Hey,” she said, and I whimpered at the loss of contact. “I thought we were being quiet?”

Then her mouth was on me again, and it was hard to focus on anything else. I continued to circle her clit, teasing her with my fingers. The haze came back when Rishika dropped her hand between us, matching me swirl for stroke.

Hungrily, my mouth covered hers while she made my toes curl. I kissed my way down her neck, biting on her ear as we moved together. I couldn’t stand it anymore; I needed to taste her perfect breasts with my tongue. I felt her start to shake against my touch. Her soft gasps were starting to make me see stars, too.

“*Come*,” I begged, unsure whether I was talking to myself or to her.

She had to bite down on her lip to keep quiet as I brought her to climax. It was such a beautiful sight to behold that I strung it out, making it last as long as I could before I couldn’t contain myself. My orgasm hit so strongly that I had to bite down on her shoulder to keep from screaming. When we both finally started to catch our breath, I pressed my lips to hers, drinking her in.

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The light streaming in through the window woke me, and I threw my arms across my eyes, trying to block it out. With a low groan, I unwound myself from Rishika and sat up. She hummed to herself and rolled over, still asleep. It was a good thing no one had tried to break through the back door, as Rishika and I had done a shit job on guard duty.

For a moment, I let myself look at her as she slept, letting my eyes follow the bronzed curve of her cheek and the graceful sweep of her nose. Then I put my hand to her arm and gave it a little shake. “Wake up.”

She was on her feet in a moment, and I rolled up the sleeping bag. Rishika tugged it from my arms and, smiling like idiots, we walked into the front room to find Nneka, Big Mac, and my mother all waiting for us.

They were gathered around a scrubbed wooden table and all looked up at us as we walked in.

I felt my cheeks heat up, but I tried to look natural. I was pretty certain that Rishika and I had been quiet, but I’d never had the added stress of a parent in a nearby room before. “Good morning,” I said.

“Morning,” my mother said, eyeing me closely. She glanced at Rishika.

“Well,” Nneka said briskly, when Rishika had replaced the sleeping bag in the side room and we had joined them at the table, “now that we’re all here, it’s time we got back to your little problem—”

Big Mac snorted. “It’s no *little* problem, Nneka. The portal to the Fae world has closed. It’s never done that before. This could be a disaster of epic proportions—”

“What I think we need to do,” Nneka said, speaking over Big Mac, “is go see the Keeper of all Nature.”

I held up a hand. “I’m sorry, the *what?*”

**Episode 1101**

XAVIER

The morning light filtered into my bedroom, grey and dull, and I blinked into it. I wasn’t waking up to it, though, because I hadn’t fallen asleep. Not really. I’d dozed off a few times, but even that sleep had been fitful and filled with stress dreams, and I’d woken from each spell feeling more exhausted than ever. Out of habit, I reached over to the other side of the bed for Cali, but the sheets were cold and empty.

I groaned as I pulled myself upright. My whole body ached like I’d been hit by a truck in my sleep. My eyes felt like sandpaper, and I ran a hand over my face, feeling the sharp rasp of a beard along my jaw.

Sighing, I glanced out the window. As soon as I’d heard that Cali and Greyson were going on some bullshit date in my own goddamn back yard, I’d known last night was going to suck, and I’d been absolutely right. It had been *agony* knowing they were out there, having a romantic evening together. And then I’d run into Ava, and what she’d told me…

It had been eating me up inside ever since.

Suddenly restless, I stood and strode to the bathroom. I dropped my boxers, flipped on the shower, and stepped in. My mind was spinning in a million directions, but it always came back to the same place:

*Cali.*

As soon as Ava had told me what Maren had said to her about Fenrir being Greyson’s son, it had been all I could do to not sprint down to the lake. To interrupt that fucking date and tell Cali that Greyson had been lying to her—to *all* of us—this whole time.

But I hadn’t. It had taken all the self-control I possessed, but I hadn’t done it. I was on slippery ground with Cali, and I needed to do this carefully. I needed to find the exact right time to tell her what I knew, so that it didn’t sound like I was lying, or trying to make Greyson look bad, or just trying to manipulate her. Or like I was trying to get back at Greyson for letting slip about what had happened at the Kollector’s zoo.

I scrubbed my hands through my hair with more force than was necessary. The thought that Greyson was keeping something like that—something that *big*—from Cali filled me with anger. I knew I had made mistakes with Cali, but I would never lie to her like that.

And he’d had the nerve to bring Maren and Fenrir here—to the pack house, to live—right under all our noses. I didn’t know why I’d believed him when he’d said Fenrir wasn’t his—the kid looked *just* like him. The hair, the eyes… I’d been an idiot for being willing to believe Greyson’s bullshit. *Again*. But no more.

The water sluicing down my body had turned cold without my noticing, so I flipped it off and stepped out, grabbed a towel, and ran it savagely over my hair. What the hell was Greyson thinking? Had he really thought he was going to get away with this?

I tossed my towel to the ground in disgust. That asshole was a mystery to me, and I wasn’t going to spend another second of my life trying to figure out why he did what he did.

As I turned to leave the bathroom, I caught sight of myself in the foggy mirror and stopped for a moment. I stepped closer and wiped a streak clear, so I could see my reflection. I reached up a hand to my chest and ran a finger softly down the veins that swirled darkly across my sternum. They always ached a little, but the pain was low-grade, so it was easy to forget about. Sometimes I forgot about the veins altogether. It had been easy while Greyson had been gone. But they *were* still there, a reminder that we were still under the curse’s thumb. They hadn’t gotten any worse, but they never faded now.

I dropped my hand and strode from the bathroom.

Dry and dressed in fresh clothes, I felt slightly better than I had when I’d woken up—more human, anyway—but I was still going to need coffee before I was able to deal with the day, so I headed out of my room to get some. But I froze as I stepped into the hallway. Greyson, wearing the same suit he’d been wearing last night, was stepping quietly out of Cali’s room, his shoes in his hand. As I watched, he closed the door carefully behind him and moved away, down the hall toward his room. The hallway was dark, and he didn’t see me, but I stared after him, a wave of jealousy and anger washing over me.

He and Cali had *slept* *together* after their date? Feet away from where I’d been tossing and turning all night, agonizing over how to break the news to Cali about Greyson’s fucking lovechild?

And—I realized with another flash of anger as I gazed down the hallway—feet away from where that actual child slept with his mother?

Did Greyson have no shame?

I shook my head, answering my own question. Clearly not.

I took a deep breath, trying to force myself to stay calm. Abandoning the idea of coffee—I didn’t need it now, with the adrenaline pumping through my veins—I started down the hall toward Greyson’s room. I needed to talk to my brother, *now*. This couldn’t wait.

Without bothering to knock, I kicked open Greyson’s door.

He was unbuttoning his shirt and looked up as I walked in. “Xavier.” His gaze ranged over my face, no doubt taking in the anger in my eyes, and he shook his head. “Nothing happened between Cali and me last night.” He looked back down. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I sneered, feeling sick to my stomach. “You were probably up all night braiding each other’s hair and making daisy chains.”

A muscle in Greyson’s jaw twitched as he looked back up at me. “I’m not lying to you. But even if I were”—he took a step toward me—“it’d still be none of your goddamn business, Xavier.”

So I took a step toward him. We were close, nearly nose to nose. “Of course it’s my business, Greyson. What you do with my mate is always going to be my business.” I was too tired and too angry to put up with his bullshit, so I shoved at his chest.

Greyson stumbled back a step, looking surprised, then anger overtook his face and he shoved me back. “She’s my mate, too, *brother*, and I’m not going anywhere,” he growled. He raised his chin, angling his head so he was looking slightly down at me, though we were the same height. “You should know that I’ve told Cali I’m all in. I know that I’m meant to be with her, and I intend to see that happen.”

A bolt of fury forked through me, and I shoved Greyson again, using all my strength. Greyson was expecting it this time, but I saw the effort it took him not to go flying. “I’m not going anywhere either, and once Cali knows the truth about you, she’s not going to want to have anything to do with you.”

Greyson’s eyes clouded, looking puzzled, but his anger overshadowed his confusion, and he shoved me back again. “And what the fuck’s that supposed to mean?” he snarled.

I laughed, shaking my head at the balls on this guy. “Oh, I just thought she’d be interested to hear that you didn’t bother letting her know—or wait…” I pretended to be confused for a moment. “That’s right, you fucking flat-out *lied* to her—and the rest of us—about Fenrir being your son.”

I shoved Greyson again. Greyson, apparently not ready this time, stumbled back, looking stunned.

“What the hell are you talking about, Xavier?” he asked, looking baffled. “Fenrir’s not my son. Where the fuck did you get that idea?”

His confusion seemed so genuine that it threw me for a moment, but then I remembered that Greyson was a lying bastard. “You can stop with the act, man. Maren told Ava. Your secret’s out.”

His half-buttoned shirt forgotten, Greyson just stared at me. Well, not at me, *through* me, like he wasn’t seeing me at all. I stared back at him, and the penny dropped.

*Shit*. What was this look that he was giving me? He seemed out of it. Was it possible that Greyson hadn’t been lying? Not to Cali, and not to the rest of us? I searched his dazed face.

*Dammit*. No one was that good an actor. He really hadn’t known anything about this.

I thought about Maren and her blond-haired, grey-eyed son. What kind of game was that Fae playing?

**Episode 1102**

GREYSON

Shocked into stillness, I couldn’t do anything but stare at Xavier’s angry face. But even as I stood there, some of the anger drained from his eyes and confusion took its place.

“What’s up with you, man?” he asked, a bite to his voice.

“What did Ava say to you?” I asked, my mouth bone dry. “Tell me *exactly* what she said.”

Xavier frowned. “She said that Maren told her Fenrir was your son.”

Shaking my head, I looked up at Xavier, who was looking back at me, a mix of confusion and disbelief etched onto his face.

“What?” he asked, for once the air of condescension gone from his tone. “Did you really not know?”

I shook my head. “I had no idea about this.”

“How, though?” Xavier asked slowly. “The kid looks just like you.”

“I know that.” I ran a hand distractedly through my hair. “That’s why I asked Maren the second I saw him, but she told me no. In no uncertain terms. *Fuck*,” I breathed, turning to look out my window at the grey morning. It would be an absolute *fiasco* if this rumor got back to Cali before I got to the bottom of it. She was already feeling uncomfortable with Maren here as it was. I turned back to Xavier. “Listen, Xavier, I know things are weird right now, but I am asking you to keep this to yourself until I can figure out what the hell is going on here.”

Xavier looked at me for a moment. “Why would I do that? Cali would murder me if she found out I knew about it and didn’t tell her. She *deserves* to know—”

“Yeah, she does,” I agreed hotly, “*if* it’s true. But I met Fenrir’s father back in Portland. He was at Maren’s house. I had a little… *conversation* with the guy.” I thought about Fenrir’s grey eyes, so much like my own. His blond hair, and there was something about his wolf—

But no. It couldn’t be.

“Listen,” I said, looking at Xavier. “Let’s consider the source of your information. Ava is a liar and a manipulator. Who knows what kind of game she’s trying to play here?” Xavier darted his gaze away, clearly thinking about this, but not denying it. I knew he understood. “I’m asking you as my brother—please, just wait to tell Cali until I find out the truth.”

He was quiet for a moment, clearly thinking it over. “Fine,” he finally said. “I’ll stay quiet. For now. But you have to do something for me.”

“What?” I asked warily.

“If Torin gives you the next date, you have to step back.”

“Are you serious?” I snorted. I couldn’t believe we were talking about this. “I’m sure he was going to give you the next date anyway.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Yeah, like anyone knows what’s going on in that Fae’s mind.”

“Yeah, fine,” I said, distractedly. Torin’s dumbass *Werewolf* *Bachelorette* wasn’t exactly at the top of my list of concerns at the moment. “I’ll bow out if I get the next date. Excuse me.” I pushed past Xavier and out of the room. I had to find Maren.

What the hell was going on? *Had* Maren told Ava something, or was Ava just being Ava?

But before I could find Maren and ask her, Sabine stepped out of her room.

She looked up at me, her eyes widening, and reached for my arm. “I’m so glad I ran into you, Greyson. I’ve been hoping to get the chance to talk to you—”

I shook my arm free. I really didn’t have time for this. “I really don’t have time for this. Not right now—”

“*Greyson*,” she said, and her voice was a plea.

I sighed and tried to calm my racing heart. “Fine, all right. What is it?” I asked, trying to not sound as irritated as I felt. Sabine was my mother after all, and she was making an effort.

“Come in,” she said, putting her hand back on my arm and tugging me into her room. She pushed me into the wingback chair near the window and looked at me carefully as she sat down on the bed. “How are you?”  
 “Terrific,” I snapped.

She didn’t blink. “I only ask because you seemed so certain when you left the pack house after the battle.”

“Did I?” I asked, rubbing my head. *Had* I been certain? It was all a blur now.

She nodded. “You were. Certain that leaving was the right thing for Cali, and the pack. And now you’re back, with a beautiful Fae and a half-werewolf child, no less.” She raised an eyebrow. “Can you blame me for being worried about you?”

I raked both hands through my hair, dragging my fingers along my scalp. I wanted to scream. No, I didn’t blame her. I was worried about me, too. But I dragged in a breath and tried to look less harassed than I felt when I looked back up at her. “I’m fine,” I said, with an attempt at a reassuring smile.

Sabine looked at me for a long moment. Then she leaned forward, so that we were practically nose to nose. “You say you’re fine, but I don’t think you are.”

I swallowed hard. It felt like she was looking right through me.

“What’s your plan, dear?” she asked. “What are you going to do about Cali? And how will that work with Xavier?”

Her voice was kind, but her questions hit me like blows, because they were all the questions I didn’t have any answers to, and just hearing them out loud made me feel like the walls of the room were closing in.

I stood, breathing hard. “Listen,” I started, my voice sharp, “I don’t have to explain anything to you. You may be my mother, but you’ve never been my mom.”

Pain flashed across her eyes, and I immediately regretted my words.

*You’re a fucking asshole.*

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head, “I didn’t—I *know* you’re only trying to help, but I really can’t talk about this right now. I’ve got to go.”

And before Sabine could say another word, I strode out of the room. I headed to the end of the hall toward the spare room where Maren was staying. I knocked and waited for her soft, “Come in.”

Maren was sitting on the bed, holding a handful of Legos in her hands, and Fenrir was sitting cross-legged, carefully constructing what he must have thought was a rocket ship. She smiled at me as I walked in, but the smile slid away as she saw the expression on my face. “Hi,” she said cautiously.

“We need to talk,” I said tersely. I glanced at Fenrir. “Alone.”

Her brows pulled down, clearly sensing my tone. “Okay.” She dropped her pile of blocks onto the bed. “Fenrir, baby, I’m going to take a little walk. Do you want to hang out with Astrid for a bit?”

The little boy nodded his blond head without looking up, and Maren dropped a kiss onto it.

“Just let me ask Astrid to keep an eye on him,” she said.

A moment later she met me at the bottom of the stairs, and we walked silently out of the house and down to the lake.

When we reached the edge of the water, I cast a glance around, making sure we were truly alone, then turned to Maren, who looked confused.

“What’s going on, Greyson? Is everything okay?”

I gave her an even stare. “Why don’t you tell me, Maren.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Excuse me?”

I could feel a muscle twitching in my jaw with every rapid beat of my heart. “Is Fenrir my son?”

“What?” she gasped out. “Greyson, why are you asking me this? You know the answer—”

“*Is he my son?*” I demanded.

“Where is this coming from? You’ve *met* Fenrir’s father, Aiden. We’ve had this conversation already.”

I was losing my temper. Why wasn’t she answering my question? I took a step closer to her, closing the space between us. “Then why is Ava telling people that he’s my kid?”

Maren’s dark eyes went wide. “She’s saying *what?*” she gasped. “I never told her that!”

I searched Maren’s face, looking for evidence of a lie. I wasn’t sure if I believed her or not.

She shook her head, her expression earnest. “Greyson, *believe me*, it must have been a misunderstanding. I *did* talk to Ava, and she *was* asking about Fenrir, but I’d never say anything like that to her. It’s simply not the truth.”

A cool wind blew from the lake, skimming across my face. I felt uneasy, unsure what to believe. I shook my head. “I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, Maren, but I deserve to know the truth.”

“I know that.” She gave me a long look. “And you *do* know the truth. I know you have your reasons for not trusting me, but I would never keep something as important as a son from you, Greyson.”

There was a rustling in the trees just behind us, and I whipped around, just in time to see Cali’s dad, Tom, emerging from a stand of trees. He was holding a basket of mushrooms in his arms and was looking at me with a very strange expression on his face.

My stomach dropped. *Holy shit*. Had he heard all of that?

**Episode 1103**

I stared out at the chilly grey morning outside and drummed my fingers against the sheets. I was thinking about Greyson and the night we’d spent together. Nothing had happened between us—and that was the most interesting part. Because it had felt amazing just to sleep next to him. I’d woken up in his arms before dawn, and it had felt incredible to just be near him, to just snuggle back into him and close my eyes again and drift off to sleep.

My mind was still reeling about the idea he’d brought up—the possibility of changing the past in order to change the future. I’d thought about it all night—my dreams had been strange and filled with confused ideas—but I still didn’t fully understand what would mean, exactly.

What I did understand perfectly was the idea of a life with Greyson, and I closed my eyes, picturing it for the hundredth time. The house on the beach with the wide windows, the gentle sounds of the waves in the distance, the warm, comfortable presence of Greyson in my life—free of conflict and drama. But…

There it was.

My eyes flew open. Every time I let myself indulge in this little fantasy, I hit a roadblock. And that roadblock had stormy blue eyes, brown hair, a jaw sharp enough to cut glass, and a smirk that made my knees weak.

*Xavier*.

And in this drama-free life I imagined with Greyson, what would Xavier be to me? Would he come over for holidays? Would he and Colton stop by for Thanksgiving, or drop gifts off at Christmas? And he’d be… what? Just Uncle Xavier to those two blonde-headed kids?

I bit my lip as I stared up the ceiling. It just *wasn’t* possible. No matter what reality I envisioned, I couldn’t imagine not feeling that connection I’d always felt with Xavier. The connection I’d felt from the moment I’d first laid eyes on him. I didn’t want to live in a world where I didn’t feel that.

Even in the vision I’d shared with Greyson when I’d blacked out, I’d been with Greyson, but I’d kissed Xavier in the woods. He had found me, and whispered in my ear…

I shook my head. Wasn’t that proof, then? That no matter what—whatever the reality—*due destini* would find me?

Despair filled my heart at the thought, and tears pricked my eyes. I truly didn’t see any way out of this.

“How am I going to do this?” I whispered to myself. How was I going to be able to break the curse that still rested on Xavier and Greyson so we could all move forward?

No answers came to my mind as I lay there. So, when there was a knock on my door and Lola poked her head in, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Come in, come in,” I said, wiping the tears from my cheeks, grateful for the distraction.

Lola shut the door and threw herself onto the foot of my bed with a theatrical sigh.

It was dramatic enough to make me smile, which felt good. It felt like old times, somehow. Like Lola and I were back in our shitty little apartment in Minnesota, with its low ceilings and leaky faucet. How many mornings had begun just like this, with Lola coming into my room to bitch about her boy problems and school issues and how her dads were too overbearing?

Lola looked up at me. “I think I might be transforming into a vampire.”

But, yeah, Lola probably never would have said *those* words to me back in Minnesota.

I rolled my eyes. “What are you talking about?”

Lola stared at me. “Cali. I think I might be—you know—*changing*.”

I threw my arm over my eyes. “Do you *really* think you’ve been turned, Lola?”  
 “I don’t know!” she cried. “That’s what I want to talk to you about!” She pulled my arm off my face and stuck her own arm out, so that it was inches away from my nose. “Does my skin look paler to you?”

“I don’t know,” I said, batting her arm away from my face. “You’re always pale. And it’s fall. In Oregon. No one’s exactly sun-kissed around here.”

“That’s true,” Lola muttered. “Okay, how to I smell?” she asked, throwing herself down next to me on the bed.

“Lola!” I cried, trying to roll away from her.

“Be honest!” she said, making a grab for me and trying to hold me in place. “I asked Jay, but he refused to answer—”

“Because he’s smart,” I said, struggling to free myself from my twisted sheets.

“Anyway, he’s not a reliable source. He wouldn’t tell me the truth if he thought I stank. How do I smell?”

With a sigh, I gave in and gave Lola a sniff. “Ugh, not great.”

“*Really?*” she shrieked. “I put on extra perfume this morning!”

“I know,” I said, wrinkling my nose. “That’s what I’m talking about. You smell like a Macy’s makeup floor exploded.”

The scared look on Lola’s face disappeared and she gave my shoulder a shove. “Not funny, Cali. Be serious. This is a big deal to me.”

I finally managed to untangle myself from my sheets and sat up. “I *am* being serious, Lola. And I think your imagination is getting the best of you.”

With a frustrated huff, Lola sat up, too. She leaned against the headboard and folded her arms across her chest, looking irritated. “You are no help, Cali.”

“I’m not trying to make this harder,” I pointed out, “I want to help you. How about this: yesterday, I saw you eating pizza.”

Lola looked over at me. “So? How does that help me?”

“So,” I said, “as far as I know, the Meat Lover’s Supreme is not blood, which means you’re still hungry for human food. Which is good. One point for human, zero points for vampire, right?”

Lola thought this over for a minute. “I guess so,” she admitted. “It *was* good pizza.”

We both looked down as her stomach rumbled loudly.

“Now, do you want blood, or waffles?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Real funny.”

“Let’s go,” I said, climbing out of bed. I pulled off the dress I was still wearing and grabbed a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. “Maybe someone’s made some breakfast.”

The smell of something cooking drew us downstairs, and we found my dad in the kitchen. He had been staying in Ravi’s old room, and he smiled as we walked in.

“Waffles!” he announced cheerfully.

“Dad,” I said, grinning. “How long have you been up?”  
 He shrugged. “A while. I guess I’m still on Minnesota time. I also made an egg scramble with freshly foraged mushrooms.”

I eyed the platters of food on the kitchen island with a light heart. I was hoping my dad’s enthusiasm meant he was starting to get comfortable here, and starting to get on-board with the whole idea of the pack house.

But, then again, waffles were my favorite, so maybe he had another motive in mind.

As I poured syrup over a tall stack of golden waffles, I glanced up at him. He had his back to me, and was busy at the waffle iron. Was he trying to butter me up, so I’d be more agreeable when he tried to get me to leave Oregon again?

Well, he could try all he wanted, but I was never going to agree to that. The pack house was full of drama, but it was the only life for me.

I cut a large bite of waffle and swirled it around in syrup. “Have you heard from Mom? Or Artemis?”

Dad shook his head. “Not recently. Last I heard, they were heading back,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at me.

“How’s your finger feeling?” I asked through my bite of buttery waffleness. I tried to look at his hands as he flipped another steaming waffle onto a plate.

“Fine, fine,” he said breezily. He flexed his fingers to demonstrate. Torin had done a great job. Then he half-turned and gave me a strained smile. “And how was your date last night?”

I swallowed the large bite before I’d finished chewing. “Fine,” I said shortly. I really didn’t want to get into it with my dad.

But at that moment, Torin bounded into the kitchen like some fleet-footed Fae/deer hybrid. “Hark! Did I hear someone talking about *dates?*”

“Oh my god,” I groaned, turning back to my waffles.

“That’s not the exit interview we’re looking for,” Torin chided, shaking his head.

“Listen to me,” I said, waving my sticky fork at him. “It is way too early for your pep, okay? I love you Torin, but I am not in the mood for any more of this *Bachelorette* stuff right now.”

But I might as well not have said anything, because Torin’s smile only grew wider. “That’s great, Cali, because”—he stepped to the table and did a drumroll with his hands that nearly knocked Lola’s glass of orange juice onto the floor—“it’s time for the *Flower* *Ceremony*!”

**Episode 1104**

VIOLET

Charlie and I had gone to sleep in the opulent bedroom again. The poltergeist—his name was Bert, as it turned out—had insisted, of course, and we’d done it, because, well, what choice did we have? He’d locked the doors and windows, and we were trapped, prisoners in the house. We’d spent the night in the over-heated parlor, dressed to the nines and playing what Bert had described as a “rousing” game of bridge, and then—when he’d found out we didn’t know how—had insisted on teaching us to play pinochle.

We liked the card games, and once he’d let us drink the brandy, the night had actually turned out to be pretty fun—if you ignored the fact that Charlie and I were basically hostages and Bert was our charming but intractable captor.

When the clock had struck midnight, Bert had led us upstairs and—with a flourish—pulled a long, snowy white nightgown out of the wardrobe for me. For Charlie, he had produced a white nightshirt and a nightcap. Charlie had initially refused the cap, but Burt had insisted and, finally left alone, Charlie and I had fallen asleep whispering escape plans to each other.

But when my eyes fluttered open into the grey light of morning, my mind felt muddled—as foggy as it looked outside the wide bay windows of the bedroom. I stretched long in the bed and tapped my fingers lightly to my lips as I yawned. Then I looked around, wondering where in the world the bell pull had gotten to. I needed to ring for the butler if I was going to get my tea. I simply *couldn’t* start my day without tea.

I turned to Charlie, who was still asleep beside me, his mouth slightly open, his nightcap askew on his black hair.

“Dear,” I whispered, tapping his shoulder. He didn’t move. I gave him another tap. “*Dear*,” I repeated, a little louder.

“Hmm?” he said, jolting a little in his sleep. “Yes?”

“You had better get up, dear, if you’re going to ride all the way to Beaverton before sundown.”

Charlie opened his eyes at this and gave me a strange look.

The look made my head clear, and I frowned. What the hell had I just said? Why would Charlie *ride* anywhere? And where the hell was *Beaverton?* I’d never even heard of the place.

But then Charlie’s expression cleared, and he turned over again. “Do stop nagging me, dear. I’ve got plenty of time to head out before it gets too late, and I’ll even be able to check on the workers on the new rail line on my way. I want to make sure we’re staying on schedule.”

I frowned. “Charlie—”

“Oh, all right,” he snapped. He stretched long for a moment, then threw the bedcovers off and got to his feet. “I’ll be in the washroom if you need me, dear.”

I stared after his retreating form as he left the room.

“What the hell is going on?” I murmured, putting a hand to my spinning head. But maybe it wasn’t my head. It felt as though the whole room was spinning. I sat up and swung my legs out of bed. I needed to move, to take a deep breath. To piece together what had come over me—what had come over both of us.

The nightgown’s lacy hem swirled around my ankles, and I glared down at it. There was something… *strange* about the way it felt against my skin. Something sinister, almost. I snatched at the snowy nightgown with the lacy cuffs and yanked it off over my head. I balled it up and tossed it into the corner. There. That felt better. I felt like I could finally breathe, and for the first time, the room felt stable. But I couldn’t stand around all day with nothing on. I was dying for something normal to put on—what I wouldn’t *give* for a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt—but my only options were the antiquated dresses in the room’s wardrobe. I pawed through it until I found a blue dress with only a small amount of lace, and I pulled it over my head. At least it buttoned up the front, so I could do it myself, but it was so tight at the waist I could barely breathe. I walked to the mirror in the corner of the room.

My waist looked tiny in the periwinkle dress, and my hips curved gracefully out beneath it. The sleeves were long and snug, and the collar buttoned all the way up to the base of my throat. A black ribbon wrapped around the neck of the dress, and—hating to leave things undone—I tied it neatly into a bow. Then I surveyed myself from head to foot. I’d always thought these kinds of clothes looked bulky and uncomfortable in movies, and now I had living proof that they really were.

And I looked just like those women in those old period movies, except for one thing: the skirt of the dress hung limply down around my legs. I suspected I was supposed to be wearing a series of petticoats beneath it—I had seen them in the closet—and probably a corset, too, but I couldn’t bear the thought of more clothing, so I just left it alone.

Charlie still wasn’t back, and I was trying to pull my hair into something resembling order when Bert glided into the room. I scowled at him. He was a poltergeist, but he could still knock.

He didn’t seem to notice my expression, however, and gave me a little bow. “And how did Lady Herrington sleep?”

For an odd moment, his question felt perfectly natural, and I had actually opened my mouth to answer, but then my head cleared again, and I frowned. “Why do you keep calling me that?”

Bert looked surprised. “Because you’re the lady of the house, of course!”

Then it hit me like a punch in the stomach: Bert was playing some kind of poltergeist mind game with us. Some kind of dress-up, live-action-role-playing game that we had *not* consented to. I looked around, suddenly feeling very afraid. Where had Charlie gone? We had to get out of here. *Now*.

But Bert was still looking at me expectantly, so I forced myself to smile. “Right. Of course. How silly of me. How could I forget? So… tell me more.”

“More?” he asked.

“Yes, about the history of the house.” I walked to one of the locked windows and looked out. “Everything you know.”

This was the right question to ask, because Bert’s eyes took on a dreamy quality, and he gazed out the window as well. “Lady Herrington was the beautiful wife of Daniel Herrington, the railroad tycoon. He was a real self-made man. A true American. Daniel made his fortune when he came out west from Vermont, where he was born.”

So that was what Charlie must have been referring to, when he’d talked about checking on the new rail lines.

“The Herringtons were the best employers a butler could ask for. This house was the pride of this town.” Bert puffed out his transparent chest. “And I ran it with an iron fist. It ran like a military vessel. Everyone who stayed here commented on how smoothly the house ran, how well-behaved all of the servants were, how elegant the dinner parties always were.” He looked at me, happiness beaming from his strange little face. “And now that you’re here, we can finally return the house to its former glory.”

I felt my eyes grow wide, even as my hands went cold with fear. But he was giving me that expectant look again, like he was waiting for me to answer, so I smiled. “Yes,” I choked out. “Yes, back to glory. A well-oiled machine.”

He nodded, smiling. “Just so. And now, I’ll just pop downstairs for your tea. I know your maid usually brings up your breakfast, but it’s a little catch-as-catch-can at the moment, while we get everything running again. I do hope you’ll be forgiving for a spell.”

“Of course,” I said, barely able to breathe now.

He beamed. “Breakfast will be up in a jiffy,” he said, and disappeared.

For a moment, I stood still in the room, frozen with shock. This was worse than I’d thought. It had been one thing when I’d thought Bert was just lonely, but this was so much more complicated. How the hell were we going to get away from this?

“Charlie?” I called, putting my hand to my head as it gave a painful throb. “Charlie? Where are you?”

“I’m coming, dear,” Charlie called. He walked back in, nightcap in hand, a quizzical look on his face.

I opened my mouth, fully prepared to tell him everything I’d just learned from Bert, and that we *had* to make a break for it sooner rather than later, but suddenly, my mind went completely and absolutely blank. Every thought, every fear, every worry disappeared, replaced with a warm buzz of nothingness.

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “Did you want something, dear?’

I looked at him for a moment. “I called for you, didn’t I?”

Charlie nodded.

I wracked my brain, trying to remember why. “Oh! I know!” I looked around, frowning. “Have you seen my embroidery? I’ve been looking for it everywhere!”

Whatever I’d been thinking of before probably wasn’t important. I was the lady of the house after all and had no time for any frivolous pursuits! No, this was my home. Why would I ever want to leave?

**Episode 1105**

GREYSON

Most of the pack members were standing around the kitchen, eating waffles and drinking coffee or just looking on as Torin stood in the center of the room. He had gathered Cali, Xavier, and me for some kind of batshit crazy ceremony. Tom, Lola, and Jay were also standing nearby. Lola—always the wildcard—looked delighted with all this nonsense.

I snuck a peak at Tom, trying to gauge his expression. I still didn’t know what—if anything—he’d heard down by the lake, and that made me incredibly uneasy. He hadn’t said anything to either Maren or me, just given us a strange, confused look before he’d taken his mushrooms up to the house. Here in the kitchen, he was wearing one of Sabine’s aprons and holding a cup of coffee, and his expression was one of slight puzzlement as he watched Torin’s performance.

And then there was Maren. I glanced around, noticing that she wasn’t in the kitchen. She must have gone back upstairs with Fenrir. I still didn’t know if I could trust what she’d told me.

“—and that’s what brings us together for this very special event on this beautiful morning!” Torin was saying.

I tried to force myself to focus on the guy. He was standing on top of the kitchen island, as though it was a stage and he was speaking to his adoring fans.

“Now,” he said, excitedly, “the Flower Ceremony will work as follows: we will go out to the stage, where Cali will choose from one of her eligible and smoking-hot bachelors…”

I swallowed a groan. How had I gotten dragged into this nightmare? I took a deep breath, trying to think back to the episodes I’d half-listened to when people had watched them in the pack house. I hated to admit it, but some reality dating show knowledge *had* seeped into my consciousness. I focused, trying to remember the advice of the stupid dudes on the television. I knew it was important not to play games. The guys on those shows were always talking about that in very earnest voices. And that I had to be here for the “right reasons.” I glanced at Cali, whose pretty face was turned up toward Torin. That part was easy. I was here for her.

“So wait,” Lola interjected, cutting Torin off. “If you’re going to the have a Rose Ceremony now—”

“*Flower* Ceremony,” Torin corrected. “There’s no copyright infringement in my franchise.”

“I taught him about that, sorry,” Jay piped up.

“Then how is that going to work? There are only two guys. Does that mean Cali has to make a final choice already?” Lola shot a nervous glance at Cali, and I could guess at what she was thinking.

Cali couldn’t make a *final* choice, not without killing whomever she didn’t choose. That was the curse we were all working with.

“No, no,” Torin said hastily, smiling widely. “Of course not. Since we only have two contestants, we had to make some adjustments to the format of our show—”

I narrowed my eyes at the Fae. What the hell was he talking about? This wasn’t a *show*, this was my life. And who was this “we” he kept talking about? It was just him. It wasn’t like he was working with a production team.

“—but I didn’t want to miss out on the ceremonies!” Torin explained. “Those are my favorite parts. It’s the point where you know whether the contestants want to continue the relationship together!”

Lola looked confused. “So how are you going to do it?”  
 Torin clasped his hands together. “Well, for our Flower Ceremony this morning, Cali will be giving a flower to whomever she chooses to go on a date with today.”

There was a murmur of interest from the pack at this. I rolled my eyes but thought about the night Cali and I had spent together, sleeping in each other’s arms. It had been sweet and intimate, and we had been so connected… I shot a glance at her, wondering if she was going to pick me.

But—*dammit*—even if she did, I’d promised Xavier that I’d give it up. That was the price of his temporary silence.

Which meant that Xavier and Cali would be going on a romantic date together, under my roof. My stomach lurched at the thought.

Then it tightened again. That must have been exactly how Xavier had felt last night, when Cali and I had strolled down to the lake for dinner.

With a sigh of frustration, I ran a hand through my hair. I needed this absurd spectacle to be over already.

“Everybody this way! The Flower Ceremony starts now!” Torin called, jumping down from the kitchen island and waving everyone out the back doors. He led us down the porch steps and to the yard, where there was an elaborate stage. The base of it stood five feet off the ground, and there were long black drapes hanging from the bottom of the stage to the grass. The back and sides of the stage were lined with tall vases of red roses, and in the center was a tall, slim table with a single red rose.

I stopped, shocked, wondering if maybe Torin *was* working with a large production team that I didn’t know about. Then I caught sight of the pleased look on Astrid’s face and remembered her particular brand of magic, and I realized she must have glamoured the stage into place.

“Nice job,” I murmured to her as I passed.

She flushed with pride.

Torin skipped up the steps to the stage and waved a hand for quiet. “Cali,” he called solemnly, waving her forward. “If you please.”

Cali sighed. “I don’t really feel all that comfortable with this, Torin.”

“Come on, Cali!” Sage called.

“Just do it!” came another voice from the back of the pack.

“Look at the stage! Torin’s waiting!” someone yelled. “It’s the fucking Rose Ceremony!”

“*Flower* Ceremony!” Torin said shrilly.

Cali looked over at Lola. “What do you think?”

“I think you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” Lola said quietly. I couldn’t help but overhear it.

Cali bit her lip, looking unsure for a moment. Then she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “I mean, I’m stuck here. I can’t go help my mom and Astrid. And it’s not like I have any other ideas about what do about this curse.”

“Are you sure?” Lola asked.

Cali shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe this dumb stuff will actually help… *somehow*.”

It felt strangely gratifying to hear Cali admit that she wasn’t into Torin’s little game. But, as she moved toward the stage, I couldn’t help but smile a little at Torin. He was annoying as hell, but I had to give him credit: this Fae had somehow managed to get three very unwilling participants to play along with his little game.

A big part of me still wanted to pull the Alpha card and shut this shit down, but one glance at Tom kept my mouth shut. He was already unsure enough about his daughter’s situation as it was—I didn’t want to make any moves that would make him think I was pushy or controlling. And I certainly wasn’t going to rock the boat with him after what he *might* have overheard this morning.

So I pushed down the frustration growing like a living thing in my chest and looked up at Torin, who had linked arms with Cali on the stage. As long as Xavier was playing this game, so was I.

Cali accepted the flower Torin handed her and, at his insistence, turned toward the gathered crowd.

“Just a few words,” Torin said encouragingly, “and then tell us who you choose.”

Cali cleared her throat, looking uncomfortable. “I’ve learned a lot about both the Evers brothers in the past twenty-four hours—”

I shifted—feeling a little uncomfortable—and I could see Xavier doing the same thing a few feet away.

“—more than I thought I wanted to learn, actually.” Cali looked down at the rose in her hand. “At first I thought this was all a bad idea, but I have to admit, I’m grateful that the truth is coming out.”

I frowned. What the hell did *that* mean?

When Cali didn’t go on, Torin took a half-step toward her. “So, Cali, who is the lucky man going on a date with you going to be?”  
 Cali looked at him, then out into the crowd. Everyone had gone quiet, waiting for her answer. She took a deep breath. “I pick… Xavier.”

My chest went tight. The pain was immediate and intense, like a giant hand had wrapped around my sternum and was squeezing. I fought, but I couldn’t draw a breath, and I felt the panic rising. Distantly I heard someone call my name, and the sound of hurrying footsteps, but everything blurred as the world began to spin around me. The last sensation I felt was the veins in my chest growing and swirling, wrapping tightly around my chest, curling up around my neck.

And then everything went black.

**Episode 1106**

My heart stuttered as I watched Greyson fall to the ground. I dropped the rose and raced down the steps of the stage toward him. He had to be having another one of those visions… But then I stopped, gripped by absolute dread, when I saw the black veins swirling up his neck from beneath his shirt.

“Holy shit,” I breathed. My heart—calm a moment ago—was racing like I’d just sprinted a mile. What the hell was happening? *I pick… Xavier*. I’d just said those words. Out loud. Had I inadvertently made an official choice? Was this the curse acting upon him?

*Was Greyson about to die?*

He was on his back now, his eyes closed, his whole body jerking and his face twisted in pain.

My dad, Astrid, Jay, and Lola were all gathered around him, grasping his hands, trying to keep him from hurting himself, but I shoved them all aside as I dropped down next to him.

“*No no no no no no*,” I muttered, grasping for his hands. They felt icy cold. My head was spinning as I looked into his face. Dimly I could hear people calling my name—Greyson’s name—screaming and running around, but my whole world was Greyson, and all I could hear was his ragged breathing.

Then, suddenly, Mrs. Smith was at my side, shouting my name. I looked up, confused. When had she gotten here? The commotion must have drawn her out of the house. She was saying something to me, so I focused on her, trying to listen.

“Cali! What did you do?” she cried.

I shook my head. “I don’t know.” It felt strange to speak, as though my lips had gone numb. “I don’t know what I did. All I said was that I wanted to go on a date with Xavier. I didn’t mean—” I dragged in a breath. “I didn’t mean to make any kind of real choice!”

Tears were pooling in my eyes. This was such a nightmare—how was I supposed to have known about this? There was no *due destini* curse rulebook that I could refer to. There was no referee pulling out red cards when I did something wrong.

I shook my head as tears started to course down my cheeks. “I didn’t mean to make a choice!” I looked up at the sky. “I didn’t choose! I didn’t choose! Please! *I didn’t choose!*” I looked down at Greyson’s closed eyes. “I’m right here, Greyson. Stay with me. Please, stay with me.”

The veins were swirling up toward his face, black and ominous and somehow alive. I had to prove to whoever the hell was in charge of this curse thing that I hadn’t meant to actually pick Xavier, like, *forever*. My mind reeled. *What could I do?*

Without thinking, I leaned down and pressed my lips to Greyson’s. I loved him. I loved his heart and his mind and his body and his soul. I loved him so much. I wasn’t rejecting him—

Beneath me, Greyson went still. He didn’t kiss me back, but his body went quiet, then relaxed. I pulled back to look at him and saw that the veins were starting to recede.

“Oh my god,” I whispered, my eyes wide with shock. I hadn’t thought it possible—I hadn’t thought about it at all—but the kiss had worked. Like a freaking fairytale, my kiss had brought my prince back to life.

After a moment, Greyson’s eyes fluttered. He opened them, then looked around, confused. He looked at me. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said, nearly crying with relief.

He sat up, looking shaken, but alive. “Are you okay?” he asked, his brow creased with concern.

I nearly laughed. “I’m okay,” I replied shakily. Apart from the fact that I’d thought I’d actually killed the man I loved, I was totally, completely fine. I ran a hand through my hair and tried to take a deep breath, but that was shaky, too. Then I glared up at Torin. “No more *Bachelorette*!”

Torin—still standing on his stage—looked stricken. “Cali—”

“Look what just happened!” I said, gesturing at Greyson.

“I—I’m *so* sorry,” Torin stammered. “I had no idea! I didn’t mean for anything bad to happen. I just thought it would be fun and romantic.” His eyes were wide, and he looked genuinely sorry.

Taking another deep breath, I tried to stop glaring at him. “I know,” I admitted. “I know you didn’t mean for this to happen.” How could he have known something like this was possible? How could any of us?

I glanced up as Xavier pushed through the crowd toward us. His blue eyes were a mix of emotions. He looked a little angry—probably not thrilled at having seen me kiss his brother—but unnerved, too.

Mrs. Smith was still next to Greyson, and she was glaring at me, her expression pure anger. I felt a surge of defensiveness as I remembered her question. *What did you do?*

“I never *meant* for this to happen,” I snapped, before she had a chance to ask. “It’s not fair for you to act like this is my fault.” Tears started to well up in my eyes again, and I could feel the old frustration building in my chest.

No one understood what this was like for me. I opened my mouth to tell her this when my dad stepped forward and put a hand on my shoulder. He looked shocked and, as he looked around at the gathered pack, the confusion was evident on his face.

“Dad?” I whispered, looking up at him. “Are you okay?”

“I didn’t quite believe it,” he said quietly.

“Believe what?” I asked, confused.

“All of this,” he said, gesturing vaguely. “All this stuff about the curse. It just sounded crazy to me. I didn’t believe it before, but, Cali…” He looked down at me. “This is really serious.”

I took a deep breath, trying to keep myself from rolling my eyes. “Yeah, Dad, I know that.”

“And it’s dangerous.”

“I know that, too—”

“And I don’t like any of it,” he said, cutting me off, his voice growing stronger. “This is all too much. You are too young for this, Cali. This is not the life you should be leading. You should be carefree, having fun with your friends. You should be in school, finishing college, thinking about your future—”

“Dad—”

But he wasn’t listening. He had let go of my shoulder and was in full lecture mode, growing more agitated with every word. “You should be meeting new people and traveling and thinking about doing a semester in Italy. You should be getting a little too drunk on your birthdays. You should *not* be trapped in this insane magical world with a bunch of dangerous creatures, having to make life-or-death decisions that no one should have to be thinking about making. This is madness!”

“Dad, I really don’t think you’re looking at this—”

“There’s so much I hate about this, Cali,” he said, ignoring me completely. He started pacing, and everyone backed away from him. “I hate that all your friends are wolves, I hate that you know vampires, I hate that you’re stuck out here in the woods in the middle of nowhere—where are you supposed to go if you need help? What if you decide you want to get away from these people? How are you supposed to do that?” He looked at me accusingly, but it was clear he didn’t expect me to answer. This was obviously a rhetorical question. “I hate that you’re not in school and you’re letting your education slide. You’re a bright girl, Cali, but your mind is a muscle and when you get out of the habit, it’s hard to pick it back up—”

“Dad!” I shouted, getting to my feet so he would at least look at me. “I get what you’re saying, and I know that you’re worried, but you *have* to listen to me!”

“Cali, I have given you a lot of leeway on this—I have trusted you—but having seen it for myself…” He shook his head.

“I know all this scares you, Dad, but these are not your decisions to make!” I cried. My chest felt tight with anxiety. I hadn’t fought with him like this in a long time. “I am a grown woman, and I can make my own decisions—”

“No, Cali!” my dad snapped, rounding on me. He looked wild, and I took a startled step back. His eyes were wide and burning with frustration as he looked at me, then at Greyson and Xavier, who were standing on either side of me. “*No!* I don’t know that you can! Because above all those other things, what I hate more than anything is that you’re in love with one man who tried to *buy* *your* *virginity*, and another who hasn’t even been honest with you about the fact that he has a *son!*”

**Episode 1107**

VIOLET

Without any memory of getting there, I found myself sitting in the living room. Or rather the “parlor”, as Bert called it. It was where we’d played cards the night before. I was sitting on a tufted couch with an embroidery hoop in my hands, but I could not for the life of me remember walking in here from the bedroom.

I looked down at the needlework in my hands. I had just finished pulling the needle through the linen. The embroidery floss was fine blue silk, and the scene I was working on was a seascape with a small cottage overlooking the waves. It was beautiful and intricate and certainly not something I was capable of doing. Or… was it? I frowned at the needle in my hand and the thimble on my finger. I’d never done anything like this before, but looking at the lovely work, it felt familiar—like I had been working on it for a long, long time.

The room was as cozy as I remembered it, and, as I looked around, I saw a tray near my elbow with a fine china teapot decorated with tiny sprays of pink roses. The thin curl of steam issuing from the spout told me that hot tea was waiting for me, and the room was lit and warmed by the fire crackling in the fireplace just before me.

If I’d been watching this from the outside, or seeing this in movie or a photograph, I would have found the whole scene cozy-looking and inviting, but sitting here, the room and the tea and the embroidery and the fire filled me with a feeling of deep, creeping dread. Everything about this room felt menacing, from the cheerfully crackling fire to the small cakes next to the teapot.

I started when the door opened. Charlie walked in, looking like he was cosplaying Mr. Peanut. He was wearing slim fit pants and a slim waistcoat with long tails. He had a tall hat under one arm, and a walking stick swung at his side. He was walking differently, too—like he owned the world.

“Hello, darling,” he said contentedly as he strode into the room. He dropped a kiss onto the top of my head and picked up a cake from the plate on the small table. “The weather’s fine today,” he said, walking to the window to look out.

“Charlie—”

“Should be easy riding,” he went on. He popped the cake into his mouth and pulled open a desk drawer. He extracted a pipe and clamped it between his teeth.

I jumped up, and the embroidery tumbled to the floor. “Charlie, listen to me. Bert is messing with our minds. He’s trying to turn us into Herrington railroad baron zombies so he can relive his glory days as a butler! We’re losing our minds! Can’t you feel it! We have to get out of here before he figures out a way to keep us trapped here forever!”

Charlie sucked on his pipe, his brow puckering in confusion. “Oh no.”

“I know!” I cried, relieved that Charlie understood the dire nature of the situation.

“It looks like you’ve got a touch of the old hysteria again, dear.” He sighed. “I suppose I’ll have to call Dr. Alcroft again. And who’s this *Charlie* you keep talking about?”

Oh, fuck. “Charlie,” I begged, my eyes going wide. “You can’t be serious.”

He stepped forward and gave my head a condescending pat. “Perhaps you should lie down for a while, dear. I’ll have the doctor come ’round.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “I hope it’s not those novels again. I told you not to read them. They’re not good for your nerves, dear.”

“Stop,” I said, batting his hand away. “*Think*, Charlie! Try to think straight!” I grabbed his shoulders and gave them a shake, desperate to break through. “You are *Charlie!* And we’re here because we need to convince your parents that we aren’t monsters, remember? We’re on a *mission!*”

Charlie looked at me, and in his golden eyes I saw some of his smug certainty waver. It was just a flicker of doubt, but it lifted my spirts.

The cloth of his coat was rough beneath my hands, and I looked down at his strange, fussy clothes, then at my own. The most clear-headed I’d felt today had been this morning, when I’d taken off the nightgown. Maybe there was something to that!

“Take your clothes off,” I said urgently, reaching up to the neck of my dress for my own buttons.

Charlie looked confused at my command, but interested, too, and his eyes roved down as I got to work on the buttons down my chest. At least he didn’t argue this time, or spout any shit about how bad novels were for my nerves. But he didn’t move to disrobe, either.

“Off!” I said again, taking the hat from his hands and throwing it onto the couch. I tugged at his jacket and pulled it off, throwing it down on top of the hat.

I got back to work on the buttons of the blue dress and when they were all undone, I let it slide to the floor. But then I had the corset to contend with. I twisted this way and that, trying to figure the thing out. It was a feat of engineering—I had no idea where to even start taking it off. It had straps and loops and about a thousand buttons. And the lacings—the ones holding me tightly in place—were in the back, well out of my reach. How the hell had I gotten into this thing? I knew I hadn’t put it on this morning. Or these petticoats. I couldn’t remember doing it at least…

I shuddered at the thought.

“Violet?”

I looked up to see Charlie blinking at me. *Charlie*, not some shadow of Daniel Herrington, railroad baron. *My Charlie* was looking at me through his golden eyes.

“Yes!” I burst out, nearly crying with relief.

“What’s going on?” he asked, looking around.

I rolled my eyes. “So much. But let’s talk about it in a minute.” I spun around. “Help me get these clothes off, first.”

Charlie snapped into action. He dropped his walking stick and reached for the corset lacings, yanking them loose. He went to work on the buttons and straps next, working methodically through them until the corset released its vice-like hold on me.

I breathed my second sigh of relief as the devil-made contraption dropped to the floor, then I turned my attention to Charlie and went to work unbuttoning his pants while he worked on his shirt. We tossed those aside and a moment later, we stood in the middle of the parlor floor, completely naked.

“So,” Charlie said, looking around uncertainly. “What now?”

“We have to get out of here,” I hissed back.

“What do you think is going on here?” Charlie asked. “Do you think Bert is messing with our minds? Putting some kind of spell on us? Do you know what kinds of powers poltergeists have?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I don’t think it’s a spell, because we can kind of break free if we try hard enough. Or if it is a spell, it’s not on us. Maybe it’s on the house? I don’t know. But I still think it has something to do with the clothes,” I said, glancing down at rich red rug at our feet, which was littered with articles of discarded clothing. “Whatever it is, we just need to get the hell out of here before we’re both zombified into being the Herringtons forever!”

“Yeah,” Charlie agreed, though his eyes still looked a little hazy. “I don’t think I know enough about railroads for this.”

“Let’s just get out of here,” I hissed.

Charlie pointed to the large bay window. “If we break it, we’ll both be able to fit through easily.”

“Good idea.” Looking around, I spotted an ornate candelabra standing near the grand piano. I picked it up and launched it at the window like a javelin. I flinched as it hit the window, not completely sure it was going to go through—but, to my immense relief, the window shattered in a hail of breaking glass. “Let’s go!”

We rushed toward the window. Freedom was so close, I could almost taste it—I could actually feel the cool morning breeze on my face as it sailed through the open space. But then, as we neared the window, the shattered glass on the ground began to quiver. We both stopped, horrified, as it began to move, sucked up as though by an unseen tiny tornado. The glass moved up, moving back toward the window, where it knit itself back together into an unbroken pane.

Charlie and I stared at the perfectly intact window in mute horror. We both swiveled as the door behind us burst open with a crash and Bert flew into the room. He glanced between us, his eyes taking us in hungrily. “Well, well, well—what do we have here?”

**Episode 1108**

ARTEMIS

Nneka scowled at me. “What kind of Fae are you if you don’t know about the Keeper of all Nature?”

My vision went red. Who the hell did this witch think she was? I was a half-Light, half-Dark Fae. I had survived the worst of circumstances, and bounty hunted creatures more terrible than she could possibly imagine. I might not have known every creature in the pantheon, but I wasn’t stupid. I huffed. “Just because I’ve never heard of it, doesn’t mean I’m not capable of blasting you into the afterlife, witch.”

She gripped her human weapon. “Bring it on, Fae.”

That just made me bristle even more. I’d thought Big Mac was bad, but at least she had some kind of moral code—even if it didn’t always land in favor of my sister or the other pack members. Nneka, on the other hand, seemed like a force all her own. Chaotic and selfish and just as likely to stab you in the back as to offer a helping hand. I knew all of this because up until the day I’d met Cali, I’d been the same.

My mother, ever the peacemaker, stepped between us, holding up her hands. “Ladies, please. We’re all in this together—we need to listen and learn. That’s the only way we’ll be able to help each other… as well as ourselves.” She looked from me and let her gaze land on Nneka. “And preferably do so without pointing a rifle at my daughter.”

Just as I’d suspected, the self-serving angle seemed to hit the mark. She didn’t lower her *rifle*, but her expression became slightly less sour. *Slightly*. “The Oread is the keeper of the natural world,” she said. “Born of this earth, before the conception of time itself.”

Orla—or Mom? I was still struggling to know exactly what to call her and when—looked surprised by this information. Her eyebrows rose and a crease appeared between them, as if she was working through something particularly challenging. Whatever information she had about the keeper of the natural world, it didn’t seem to be lining up with the witch’s account.

“There’s one here?” my mother asked. “In this world?”

*How very typical that my mother knows all about this Oread person even though she’s spent over twenty years here in the human world, living a mundane life, while I’ve been in the Fae world my entire life—at least up until recently—and had no idea about any of this.*

I was hit with a pang of shame at the thought, and it echoed back to countless memories of my dark childhood, all the times I’d gone without, all the things I’d had to teach myself because no one had ever bothered to teach me.

*I wonder if Cali knows about this nature keeper thing…* I kind of doubted it, since my sister had only learned about her own Fae ancestry very recently. But now that the doxy was out of the bag, I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that Orla was teaching Cali how to be Fae. They had a very close relationship, my mother and my sister. And even now that I was reunited with my mother and we were even going on an adventure together, I couldn’t wrap my head around what it would be like to have a parent—someone to guide you, teach you, prepare you for the world.

I straightened and tried to avoid digging into those old wounds. So what if I didn’t know about this nature person? Everything that I was, everything I had ever accomplished, I could chalk up to my own tenacity and intelligence. And everything that had slipped through the cracks? That wasn’t my fault, and so I had nothing to be ashamed of.

*If I’d had a proper mother, I would have been unstoppable…*

I belatedly realized Nneka was talking, probably answering my mother’s question. *Focus, Artemis. It’s not safe to be distracted with so many witches around.*

“Although Oread may be known under different names, they exist in all worlds, watching over all to make sure the balance between the forces of nature and its inhabitants remains in a state of equilibrium,” Nneka explained, sounding rather bored. It almost sounded like something she’d read in a book at some point, and she was just reciting it from memory.

Rishika piped up, looking from my mother to Nneka with an adorable look of confusion on her face. “I’m sorry, but what does this have to do with the portal?”

“Everything,” Nneka answered, shifting her gaze from Orla to me. “Something, or some*one*, has caused it to close. Something has disrupted the balance. I wonder if you have anything to say about this, Artemis?” She glared at me, her eyes threatening to incinerate me on the spot. I’d seen servants of the Kollector whom I’d hunted and captured myself give me friendlier looks than this witch.

*What is her deal?*

But she didn’t release me from her look of death, and I began to feel uneasy about my role in this journey so far. I was the one who’d taken the Orb from the relative safety of the pack house and brought it out into the world, where it had immediately triggered countless people who wanted to take its power for themselves. And if that wasn’t enough, in trying to destroy it, I’d accidentally lost it—the Orb of Letifer, the most powerful magic object I had ever seen. It had literally slipped from my hand and presumably into someone else’s. Someone in the Fae world.

It was my fault that we were in this situation. And now everything seemed to be worse than I’d imagined. Obviously, we needed to find the Orb and destroy it before anyone else got their hands on it and used it to wreak great evil, but was the actual natural balance of the two worlds at stake now too?

“Well,” Orla said slowly, “if the Oread can help us, it wouldn’t hurt to seek it out. Where is it?”

Nneka snorted. “You think you can just walk up to it? Let me know how that goes for you.”

My eyes narrowed. Nobody talked to my mother like that. Useful acquaintance or not.

“How about we stick to the facts?” Bic Mac suggested. “For starters, how do we get to it?”

It made me feel oddly better—or at least less picked on—that Nneka didn’t seem to trust Big Mac, another witch, any more than she trusted the rest of us.

“One possible location may be at the summit of Mount Rainier,” she said, “where ancient volcanoes once shaped the earth.”

*Mount… Rainer? These humans need to work on their location names, maybe try something more catchy.* “How far away is it?” I asked.

“Several hours,” Nneka said.

“Okay, great. Let’s go.” I was ready and eager to find the Orb, fix my mistake, and restore the world’s natural order. But nobody moved.

Big Mac eyed the other witch. “Did you mean what you said? Are you really going to help us?”

“Believe it or not, I never go back on my word. If I said it, I meant it.” She walked over to a large desk and started rummaging through the drawers. “I can drive you as close to the summit as possible, but you’ll have to ascend most of it by foot.”

She tugged out a map that looked like it had been folded and unfolded a few too many times and offered it to Big Mac. “Here. This shows the trails you can take.”

While the two witches talked a bit more about the specifics of the journey, Rishika gently caught my wrist and pulled me aside. “Are we sure we can trust this witch? And what if the Oread refuses to help?”

The way I saw it, we didn’t have much of a choice except to trust Nneka. But I also understood Rishika’s concern. All of this had already taken more time—and proven to be more dangerous—than what Rishika had signed up for.

“You don’t have to go,” I said, “but I’m determined to set things right.”

She nodded. “I get it. You’ve made it this far, right? Might as well see it to the end. I’m all in.”

I smiled. “Thank you.”

Then I felt a pair of eyes on me and turned to see Nneka watching us. “Are we gonna sit here and blab nonsense or are we gonna hit the road?” she asked.

“MacKenzie,” my mother said gently. “Artemis and I can do this alone if you’d rather go back to your home.”

The witch waved her off. “Your daughter already screwed things up big time with the Orb. There’s no way you’re going without me.”

Well, that was it then.

We all piled into Nneka’s van, and after everyone had agreed not to let me drive—a travesty—we headed off.

I sat next to Rishika in a row of musty old seats near the back of the vehicle. While I wouldn’t have thought less of her for going home, I was glad that she’d decided to come along. And to think I’d been worried about taking on this task. Between me, Rishika, and my mother, our group had a trio of badass women. And it probably didn’t hurt to have two formidable, if grouchy, witches along, too. This Oread had better cooperate, or it would be very, very sorry.

After what felt like a thousand years in the back of that ramshackle van, a mountain appeared up ahead. Its peak was so tall, it disappeared behind the clouds.

Nneka lifted her hand from the steering wheel to point. “That’s Rainier.”

I was suddenly hit with a twinge of homesickness. That tall, foreboding mountain reminded me of the mountains in the Fae world where I used to go to find escaped miners. I tried not to dwell on *that* specific feeling. If everything went according to plan, I’d be seeing the Fae world again very soon.

Nneka slowed the vehicle to a stop.

“What’s going on?” Big Mac asked.

“There’s a ranger waving us down—you can’t disobey the rangers.” She rolled down her window as a tall, handsome ranger appeared next to the driver’s side window.

“How can I help you ladies?” he asked. Maybe I was imagining it, but I could have sworn his eyes flicked over to me and stayed there for a few extra seconds.

Nneka pointed at the summit. “We don’t need any help. We’re going up there. Hiking, you know.”

The ranger shook his head. “No, you can’t go up there. That’s impossible.”

**Episode 1109**

I stared at my father as his words echoed in my ears. His face was pale with red patches across his cheekbones, a sure sign that he was pissed right off. His chest was heaving, and he kept glancing wildly between Greyson and me. He looked every bit the harried, protective, righteously pissed off father—except I had no idea what the hell he was even talking about.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, looking from my father to my mate, prone on the floor.

“He has a son,” Dad repeated.

*Fenrir.* My mind started racing, trying to fill in the blanks with what I did know about Greyson and the young wolf. I’d certainly had my suspicions from the moment Greyson had shown up at the pack house with Fenrir and Maren in tow. I looked to Greyson, who was pale—ashen, really. He looked like he’d just been dragged from death’s doorstep, and he eyed my father like he was speaking a foreign language.

*So Greyson doesn’t know what’s going on either.* It made me feel marginally better that in this gigantic “gotcha” moment my father had thrown at us, Greyson wasn’t acting guilty or defensive. He seemed just as confused as I was. Where had Dad even heard that? He’d been here at the pack house for like, ten minutes. How did he allegedly know things about Greyson that I didn’t?

*Maybe he’s been watching too much* Maury*.*

But what would my dad have to gain by accusing Greyson of having a child? Dad’s knowledge about our world barely scratched the surface. And, as upset as he’d been with everything lately, I couldn’t imagine him just going around throwing out paternity accusations left and right. Dad was honest, straightforward. And more than that, he was *nice*. No matter how unhappy he was with this situation, he wouldn’t make waves like this if he didn’t believe what he was saying was true.

Which begged the question: why did my dad think Greyson had a son?

Sure, Fenrir *looked* just like Greyson—even in his wolf form. It was like watching a puppy version of my mate running around in the yard. I obviously didn’t know all the details about Greyson’s relationship with Maren, but the timing seemed right, too. It was entirely possible—and, if I was being honest with myself, sometimes it even seemed *likely*—that Fenrir was Greyson’s son.

But genetics were weird, right? They had to be for a Fae werewolf…

*Am I a fool for believing Maren?* I sure felt like one. Maybe I’d been so quick to buy her story because I wanted it to be true. I didn’t want Greyson to have a child with another woman.

But worse than my embarrassment and horror was the possibility that Greyson had been lying to me this whole time. He’d never seemed like the particularly hospitable type, and yet here he was, offering up the pack house to some Fae woman and her son. An ex, no less. What if he really had known all along?

Greyson, still looking a bit dazed by his near-death experience, glared at my dad. “With all due respect, you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Dad scowled. “And with all due respect, I know a liar when I see one. I heard you and Maren arguing about your son.”

Greyson slowly lifted himself to his feet. “Then you should know that Maren made it clear that Fenrir is *not* my son. Or did you only listen to the parts that suited the narrative you’re looking for?”

I was speechless, watching with wide eyes as two of the most important men in my life—in my dual lives, past and present crashing together—argued.

“I know what I heard,” Dad insisted.

“And the fact that you’re accusing me of not only having a son, but of hiding his existence from Cali, tells me that you didn’t hear enough to warrant this conversation,” Greyson snapped.

I didn’t know who to believe. I didn’t know what my dad had seen or heard, exactly, though Greyson seemed to think this was just an ugly misunderstanding. But Dad didn’t have any reason to lie about what he’d heard, whereas Greyson could have all sorts of reasons for keeping Fenrir’s parentage a secret—if he was, in fact, the boy’s father. I didn’t think I could take Maren’s word for it, either.

The only certainly I could cling onto was the fact that Fenrir did look like Greyson, and he was just the right age to be his son.

And really, weren’t those two things damning enough?

Dad took a deep breath and turned to me. “I understand that all of this must be upsetting, but you should realize that everything I said about you not belonging here is true—you deserve better, sweetheart.”

I didn’t want to listen to my father right now, and judging by the snarl etched into Greyson’s face, I wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

I looked over at Xavier. He was hardly Greyson’s biggest fan. What did he think of all of this?

When he met my eyes, his expression was pained. “Cali, your father is wrong about one thing—you do belong here. With us.”

I looked away. I didn’t feel like I belonged anywhere. I was a half-Fae cursed with *due destini* and two werewolf mates. I lived in a house full of werewolves. I’d spent the vast majority of my life so far as a human, but I had Fae family members both here and in another world entirely. There were so many puzzle pieces, and none of them seemed to fit.

Adding the possibility that I might have accidentally killed Greyson, and that one of my mates might have a four-year-old son with another woman… It was all too much.

*Maybe Dad’s right. Maybe I should get away from all of this.*

I started toward the pack house, ignoring Xavier’s hand as he reached for me. But as I neared the front steps, I felt another presence close behind me.

*Greyson*.

“Please, Cali. Please listen,” he begged.

I didn’t want to listen to him, not now. Not when I’d already asked him about Fenrir, about his relationship with Maren. If his answer had changed since then… I shook my head. I was so confused; I didn’t know what—or who—to believe.

But I was desperate for an explanation.

I spun to face him. “I’m giving you one chance to tell me the truth,” I said, my voice hard and my expression even harder. “Is Fenrir your son?”

Greyson didn’t answer right away. Instead he looked down at our feet, biting his lip. Then he slowly reached out and took my hand. His eyes lifted to mine, gentle and mournful all at once. “I wish I could tell you more definitively, but the truth is I honestly don’t know.”

I yanked my hand out of his grip. “What kind of answer is that?”

“It’s the only one I have. What would you do if Fenrir *were* my son? Would that change anything between us?”

I took a deep breath, trying to see the situation logically—without the jealous, possessive piece of my heart that snarled at the mere idea of Greyson having a child with anyone else. “I have no issue with you having a son,” I said. “Sure, it would take some getting used to. But the bigger issue is if you knew this whole time and never told me. So tell me now, Greyson—why did you bring Maren here?”

His shoulders curled inward a bit, and he blew out a long, slow breath. “She needed my help—I’ve told you that. I did what you would have done. And if it turns out that Fenrir is my son, then I will have a responsibility toward him. I hope you can understand that.”

“I want to understand. Really, I do. But before I can even think about that, I need to talk to Maren,” I said with a nod. “Alone.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think that’s—”

“I’m not asking for permission.” I spun on my heel and walked away, heading away from Greyson, from my father, from Xavier and the pack house. I paced around the yard for a moment, trying to get my head on straight. I didn’t know where to find Maren, or how to even broach this topic with her.

*I can’t exactly go up to her and say, “Hey, I hear Greyson’s your baby daddy”…*

I took a deep breath to calm myself, but the image of Fenrir and his uncanny resemblance to Greyson kept filling my head—along with the spreading black veins on Greyson’s chest.

*Oh my god. I almost killed him.* My heart began to race.

“Hey, are you okay?”

I turned to see Maren standing just a couple feet away, Fenrir by her side.

“You look upset,” she continued. “Are you going to be all right? Can I get you anything?”

I took another deep breath. “I need to talk to you. Maybe Fenrir can go play with Astrid for a few minutes?”

She frowned slightly, but turned to her son. “Astrid and Torin are in the kitchen, sweetheart. Maybe they can get you a snack. I’ll be right here.”

“Yay!” Fenrir happily skipped away.

I had the self-control to wait until he disappeared inside before I blurted out that burning question. “I want you to tell me. I want the truth. Is he Greyson’s son?”

Maren huffed. “How many times do I have to answer this question?”

“Just *once*,” I snapped. “Is he or isn’t he?”

“And no matter how I answer, you’re going to believe what I say?”

I paused. I wanted to believe Maren, but I didn’t know her. Not really. And I had no reason to think anyone was telling me the truth right now. “I would believe you… if you agree to a paternity test. Will you do that?”

**Episode 1110**

XAVIER

It killed me to not follow after Cali when she walked away, but her silence killed me even more. I’d tried to temper Tom’s anger, to remind her that she belonged here with us. With me. And she hadn’t even responded. She’d just walked away.

And then, of course, Greyson had gone after her. Probably trying to grovel and convince her that he wasn’t the bad guy her dad was making him out to be. Either way, my brother’s choices were finally starting to catch up with him. Maybe now Cali would begin to see who he really was. And then she’d pick me.

*Hell, she chose me for that stupid* Bachelorette *date—but then of course Greyson almost dropped dead.*

I’d have been lying if I said that, in the moment my brother had collapsed to the ground—looking more and more like a corpse with each passing second—there hadn’t been a small, vindictive part of me that had wished he *was* dropping dead and finally leaving Cali and me alone. While I had to concede Greyson wasn’t quite the villain I’d always thought, that didn’t mean I wanted him stealing my mate, either. He’d been a pain in the ass since he’d popped back up in my life during the Lupo Finale, and I hadn’t been able to shake him since. The way things were going, all three of us were in this together until one of us *did* drop dead.

The whole episode was like some wild fairytale. Greyson collapsing, Cali rushing over and kissing him back to life… The memory made my lips curl into a snarl. Seeing Cali kneeling over him, crying and begging for him to be okay, *kissing* him… It had torn me apart, and all I’d wanted to do was rip Greyson to pieces in turn.

I knew he wasn’t all bad, and we were actually closer to acting like real brothers now than we had ever been. How would I have reacted if Greyson *had* died right then and there, so suddenly and so senselessly? Once my selfish inner beast was satisfied to finally have Cali all to myself, how would the rest of me have felt?

My throat tightened. I didn’t want to think about that right now.

One thing I was genuinely surprised about was that I completely believed that my brother had no idea if Fenrir was really his son or not. Why I believed him, I had no idea. Even if I was being generous about it, Greyson had a history of keeping things close to his chest. Things that affected other people, things that, even now, I was still waiting for answers to. Plus, it almost went without saying that a scenario in which Tom was right and Greyson *had* willingly kept the existence of his own son a secret from Cali would only result in making me look good.

And despite all of that, I was willing to believe him now. It was a damn shame, really.

But not half as much of a shame as if Fenrir really did turn out to be Greyson’s son. If that was the case, the kid was fucked. He was all sweetness and puppy-like energy right now, but he would grow into a little shit. It was in his genes.

And Greyson being a father? To an actual child? He’d be hopeless. He’d be even worse at it than I would, and that was saying something. At least I had my mom’s example to look back on. Greyson had never had a good, loving parent. It was kind of a miracle that he hadn’t turned out even more fucked up, really.

*Not that I’m much better. Let’s face it—none of the Evers brothers were ever going to win father of the year.*

Jay jogged over. “Hey, I heard about what happened with Greyson and Cali’s dad.”

My eyebrows lifted. Even for the pack house gossip mill, that was fast.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“Uh, not well,” I confessed. But it was the truth. Between Tom losing his shit about the life Cali had been living, and Greyson’s near-death episode derailing my date with Cali, “not well”felt like a huge understatement.

Then I noticed Jay’s black turtleneck, and a smirk tugged at my lips. “Are you channeling Steve Jobs or something?”

Jay glanced down at his attire and then chuckled and shook his head. Was he blushing? “I, um, I’m embarrassed to admit it, but, uh, Lola got a little aggressive last night and gave me a hickey.”

I winced. “You know what? Forget I asked.” I looked away, clearing my throat. Whatever kinky shit Lola and Jay got up to wasn’t my business.

My gaze landed on Torin, who was screwing around with something over to the side of the house. “Now, him, on the other hand—I’d love to tear his head off and use it as a bowling ball.”

After all, Greyson had been keeping his mouth shut about what had happened in the zoo. Torin, obnoxious idiot that he was, had been the one to blab about it and use it as leverage against me.

“That’s a bit harsh,” Jay said. “Justified, maybe, but harsh. Is there anything I can do?”

I sighed. “I think the first thing I need to do is talk to Cali’s dad, see if we can come to some kind of understanding. This whole *due destini* thing isn’t going to amount to much if Tom keeps berating Cali into going back to Minnesota.”

“Good luck with that. He’s pretty upset. Then again, you can’t blame the poor guy. He’s in a tough spot.”

I thanked Jay and headed over to talk to Tom. He was standing by himself, looking out at the lake. I stood next to him, aware that he was giving me a sideways glance. He didn’t say anything, though, and neither did I.

For a long string of seconds, we both stared silently out at the water until that silence became a suffocating thing between us. I knew I needed to say something, but I had no idea where to start. These kinds of conversations weren’t something I had a whole lot of experience with.

Fortunately, Tom threw me a bone and broke the silence first. “You know, I didn’t mean everything I said back there. I think I’m just overwhelmed.”

I shrugged. “You have every right to be concerned about Cali. You’re her father.”

“I am. And I’ll never stop worrying or trying to protect her, but maybe I could have handled things better. The way she looked when she walked out… I don’t want to ever see her like that again.”

I paused for a moment, trying to come up with the right combination of words. Empathy wasn’t a completely foreign concept to me, but I was pretty damn rusty. “I’ve gotten to know Cali in our time together, and if I know one thing about her, it’s that she loves you. Nothing you do will ever change that.” I cleared my throat. “And, um, if you’ll recall, the reason she met me in the first place was to raise money to save you from financial ruin.”

My words didn’t have the effect I was hoping for. Instead of being pacified, Tom grimaced like he’d just tasted something sour. I instantly regretted bringing up *that* particular piece of my history with Cali.

“Everything’s changing so fast,” Tom said. “It may not seem like it, but I’m trying my best to keep up. A lot has happened since you and I first met.”

*If he only knew the half of it.*

Tom put a hand on my shoulder and gave me a small, stiff smile. “I should have stuck with my first impression of you. I remember when we made that fabulous stir fry. I saw then just how much you care about Cali—and our family. I must have forgotten that in all the craziness.”

I nodded. “Thank you.” His words were a huge relief, but I sensed there was something else on his mind.

Tom looked back out at the lake, pausing for a long moment. “There’s something I haven’t told Cali. Haven’t even told my wife. And I’m not even sure I’ve admitted it to myself…”

*Oh boy. What could a guy like Tom possibly be hiding?*

“Are you aware that Orla, Violet, Charlie, and I were attacked by a werewolf in Minnesota?” he asked.

My eyes widened. “No. I didn’t know anything about it.”

Tom blew out a breath. “It was… terrifying.” He paused again, and then pointed to his shoulder. “It bit me.”

“I had no idea,” I said, genuinely surprised.

“I didn’t worry about it much. Orla dressed the wound and everyone convinced me I’d be fine. But…” His brows knit together. “But all the ranting I just did back there? It wasn’t necessarily because of Cali or you or any of that. It was because I’m starting to think that we were wrong.”

“Wrong about what?”

“I’ve started noticing things I’ve never noticed before. Like Holly Ringer’s bakery.”

I blinked. What the hell was he talking about?

“I could smell the moment the apple pies came out of the oven,” he continued.

“Okay…” I really hoped he was going somewhere with this, but I was also a little worried about where it would lead.

“That bakery is over two miles away from my home. But I could smell it. And lately I’ve been hearing sounds I’ve never heard before. Sounds I’ve *never been able* to hear before.” Tom looked me square in the eye. “I think it’s happening. I think I’m turning into a werewolf.”

**Episode 1111**

When the idea for the paternity test had popped into my head, I hadn’t expected Maren to be particularly thrilled with that request—or the implication that her word wasn’t enough for me to believe that Fenrir wasn’t Greyson’s flesh and blood.

Maren didn’t disappoint. Her eyes narrowed, and she looked like she wanted very much to slap me. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.” My voice was calm, collected, and made it crystal clear that I gave exactly zero fucks if Maren was insulted by my request.

“You think I’m lying?” she snarled. “That I would use Fenrir—my son—as, what? Leverage? To what end? Do you think I’m trying to manipulate Greyson? If I wanted to manipulate him, I’d tell him he *was* the father, and yet I’m still here in front of you, a single mother. Are you really that insecure?”

Her words cut deep. They hit me in all my weak points, all the parts of me that were insecure, were afraid, were angry or jealous or resentful. It took everything for me not to lose my temper at this woman.

I shrugged. “Honestly, Maren I don’t know you well enough to assume anything about you, good or bad. You might just be a single mom in need with a kid who, as you’ve said, is not Greyson’s. Or you might have some kind of long-term plan to get back together with him—maybe try to take over the Redwood pack. Who knows?” I said. “Even Greyson doesn’t believe you. Not a hundred percent, and how could he? Fenrir is his double in miniature, whether he’s in his human form or his wolf form.”

“That is not my problem.” Maren folded her arms over her chest. “Aiden’s sister has the same eyes as Fenrir—you do realize that grey eyes and blonde hair are common traits for werewolves? Because, oh, yeah—he’s one too.” She laughed bitterly. “Everybody around here is making assumptions—about me, about my son—and I don’t think I have to tell you how poorly assumptions can play out.”

*Not her problem? Can’t she see this question is already everyone else’s problem, and that it hit critical mass the moment my dad decided to throw Fenrir’s paternity into question in the most public way possible?*

I took a deep breath and tried again. Maybe I had come on too strong. Maybe a gentler approach would be a better fit. One that was less bitchy demands and more strongly worded requests.

“Maren, I’m sure you can see why there are questions—”

She cut me off. “You’re so worried I’m going to steal Greyson away from you, aren’t you? Well, allow me to give you a bit of advice. A man’s love cannot be taken—he either loves you or he doesn’t. So if you’re worried about Greyson’s feelings toward me, maybe you should talk to him about that instead of projecting all your insecurities onto someone who has nothing to do with whatever toxic triangle you have going on with the Evers brothers.”

My vision went red. “How dare—”

Maren stepped close, her eyes flashing. “I came here because my son’s life was in danger. And since he is a werewolf, it made sense that he be introduced to his own kind. That’s *it*. Greyson and I crossed paths again by chance, and it is by his will that Fenrir and I are here. So, again, if you have a problem, you know who you need to talk to about it.”

My fingers curled into fists, but I straightened them with a measured breath. *Argh! I hate that she’s right. At least a little bit. If only Artemis were here—she could force Maren to tell the truth and then we wouldn’t even be in this situation!*

“Look, will you take the test?” I asked. “And before you answer, let me remind you that you’re new here. No one trusts you, and no one believes you. If you do this, if you take the test and it proves you’re telling the truth, then people will start to believe you. *I’ll* believe you.”

Maren rolled her eyes. “Do you even hear yourself? You sound like a paranoid egomaniac. Now let me remind *you* of something—I don’t give a flying fuck what you believe. But if it will make *Greyson* feel better, and if it will help put all of this behind us, then yes. I’ll agree to a DNA test.”

I was so relieved she was giving in that I forgot to be angry. At least for now. “Okay,” I said stiffly, trying to put on a strong face and not show Maren exactly how much power she had over me. “I’ll look into it and let you know. Thank you.”

Maren just scoffed and—because the thought of blasting her with my magic was sounding more and more tempting every moment that I had to look at her scowl—I walked away.

I let out a long breath. *Well, that went just super.* At least Maren was willing to do the test. That would go a long way toward easing my concerns. Without that uncertainty, I believed Maren and Fenrir would find a place here in the pack sooner, too. It was a win-win.

I stopped short.

But what if it wasn’t?

What if Maren was mistaken? Or she’d miscalculated which events had led to her pregnancy? Or what if she was just plain lying?

*What if the DNA test reveals that Greyson is Fenrir’s father?*

My mind blanked into a shrill monotone, like when big snowstorms cause the TV to lose signal. What if my mate had a son? How would that make me feel? Could I deal with knowing that Greyson would forever be connected to another woman, and that connection, that reminder, would be a part of our lives? Would that make me Fenrir’s step… person?

*I’m too young for that!* I’d always thought that I’d have children one day, but in my daydreams I was always so much older, more experienced, more stable and settled into my life. And in my daydreams, the child I was raising was never someone else’s.

Could I do that? Would Maren or Greyson even want me to?

And speaking of Greyson—how would he feel about having a son? He had so much baggage from his own father… Would he be ready to step up and be a father to Fenrir? Did he even *want* Fenrir to be his son? Would that make him happy?

I groaned and clutched my head. The what-ifs swarmed around me, each with its own set of questions and complications and consequences. *I hope the answers aren’t worse than the questions.*

Maren had been right about at least one thing: I did need to talk to Greyson. Now. I turned and headed back to where I’d seen him earlier. At minimum, I needed to tell him that Maren had agreed to the paternity test. This whole “maybe he’s my kid” thing had gone on long enough.

I stomped across the grass, looking around for Greyson—and stopped short when I saw Xavier talking with my dad over by the lake. Dad was gesticulating wildly, and Xavier was unmoving as stone.

*Fuck. Did Xavier just make things worse?* That was the last thing I needed right now! Dad had already been weird enough earlier. I knew that if Xavier was trying to talk to my dad, it was out of a desire to help. But I didn’t have the emotional bandwidth right now to deal with Greyson *and* Maren *and* Xavier *and* my dad.

I kept walking. That fire could burn for a little while longer.

Just then, Maren brushed past me, practically shoulder-checking me even though we were both in an open space with plenty of room for two people to walk.

“Excuse me,” she said, but didn’t slow down.

*She’s sure in a hurry. I wonder what…*

My gaze settled on the figure up ahead, the person Maren was currently beelining toward.

It was Greyson.

“Oh, hell no,” I muttered.

I sprinted over, even though I knew Maren would make it to him first. “She wants to talk to you about the paternity test!” I blurted out.

Maren rounded on me with a snarl. “The adults are talking now, Cali.” My jaw dropped, but she was already turning back to face Greyson. “I want to know why you’re causing all this trouble. Don’t forget—it was your idea for me to come here. So why am I being treated with so much hostility?”

I grimaced. I hated being reminded that it had been Greyson’s idea to bring Maren and Fenrir here.

The Fae woman turned to throw me a dirty look. “If I had known that everyone here would judge me, make me feel unwelcome, and *constantly* ask such invasive questions, I never would have agreed to come here.”

Greyson blinked, glancing between Maren and me. He still didn’t look great after having almost been maybe-killed. “I’m sorry, what is this about, exactly?”

“Maren agreed to Fenrir taking a DNA test to prove he’s not your son.”

My mate’s eyes widened, and he looked a bit exasperated. He sighed and turned to Maren. “I’m sorry, I just want an answer, that’s all.”

“And the one I’ve given you time and time again—that’s not enough?” she asked.

Greyson furrowed his brow. “Just take the test and you’ll never have to answer that question again,” he said.

She scoffed. “Oh, you’ll get your answer. But it’s not going to solve your problems.”

Maren stormed off, and I watched her go. “What do you think she meant by that?”

Greyson opened his mouth to speak, but then Torin sprinted over.

“Hey Cali, is now a bad time for your date with Xavier?” he demanded.

**Episode 1112**

ARTEMIS

*Who the hell is this person with the gigantic hat? Is he some kind of mountain lord? Is that why he’s not letting us go up the mountain?* He removed his hat, the sun shining against his dark brown skin as he ran hand through his short curls before putting it back on. He had nice eyes at least—green mixed with hints of brown and gold. I swear he kept glancing at me, even though I was beyond Nneka, in the back of the van.

Nice eyes or not, I wasn’t going to let some pesky human stand in the way of our plan.

Nneka frowned at the ranger, from the top of his oversized hat down to the patch on his chest that signified his position in the national park. “And why, exactly, won’t you allow us to pass?”

His eyes flicked over to me for just a moment before he pointed to the mountain. “There’s too much snow up there. We closed the access road this morning. You know it’s November, right?”

My mother leaned forward, resting her hands on the backs of Nneka and Big Mac’s seats. “Please, Ranger… I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“I’m Vander.” Those gorgeous eyes landed on me again. “But you can call me Van.”

I made a noise of acknowledgement that sounded more like a high-pitched grunt.

*Good one, Artemis.* I crossed and uncrossed my tanned legs, looking away from Vander and trying to appear busy… for some reason. Rishika was giving me strange looks, but nobody else in the car seemed to notice or care.

“Vander, do you think you can make an exception for us?” my mother asked, anxiously tapping her white fingers against the dark blue seats of the car. “It’s very important that we get to the summit.”

A crease appeared between Vander’s nearly luminescent eyes, and his mouth tightened. He shook his head. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I wish I could let you go up, but it’s just too dangerous. Maybe you can come back when the snow clears… If this year’s melt is any indication, the road should be back open around July.”

“No, we’re not doing that,” Big Mac snapped. “That’s ridiculous. You said it yourself—it’s only November!” You really expect us to wait nine months?”

I narrowed my eyes at Vander, who was still grimacing apologetically, but I had a feeling he wasn’t all that sorry—not really. There was a distance in his gaze, like he’d done all of this countless times before and he wasn’t going to expend any extra effort to help us. Short of Nneka or Big Mac casting a spell to turn him into a toad or whatever, I didn’t see him capitulating. How was it that we were already hitting a *literal* road block? This task, already monumentally hard, was beginning to seem impossible, and I didn’t like it one bit.

*This Vander guy may be cute and all that, but he’s not standing in the way of our journey.*

Rishika growled and leaned forward to whisper to my mother. “I can take care of Ranger Boy. Just give me the word.”

Her voice seemed a bit rougher than the situation truly called for, like she was facing down a truly vile monster instead of a stubborn human who didn’t know when it was in his best interest to step aside and let the supernaturals do their thing.

*Wait…* was she jealous?

“How about I help you ladies turn back around?” Vander suggested, cutting off whatever Nneka had been about to say in our defense.

Nneka ignored him completely and leaned over to murmur something to Big Mac. I couldn’t quite make it out, but I thought I heard the word “spell”. Oh gods, were they actually going to turn him into a lizard or something? There was no need for that. He was just a human trying to do his job. We didn’t need to hurt him to get up the mountain.

Fortunately for us. I had a few tricks up my sleeve for a situation just like this one. I leaned in to Rishika. “I can get him to change his mind,” I whispered.

She huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “I doubt it would take much—the guy’s flirting with you like a teenage boy hoping to get some action.

*Oh, she* is *jealous.* I barely contained my grin.

“I’ll just put the van in reverse,” Nneka said to Vander, a little too loudly to be completely normal. What did those witches have in store for Ranger Boy?

“Wait,” I called. “Let me talk to him.” Before she could respond, I unbuckled my seat belt, unlatched the door, and slid it open. I hopped out of the van and Vander smiled.

“Oh, did you want to grab a snapshot of this beautiful scenery before you leave?” he asked. “If you like, I can take a picture of you with the mountain in the background. There’s a great spot just over there.” He pointed to a spot just off the side of the road, where the forest cover opened up to provide an unhindered view of the mountain.

“Yeah, cool mountain,” I said noncommittally, shoving my cold hands into the pocket of my jacket. I tipped my head to the side, batted my eyelashes like I’d seen Cali do around the Evers brothers, and affixed a smile to my lips. It was the same smile I’d always used back in the Fae world when I was bounty hunting and brute force wasn’t going to be quite enough to get the job done. It didn’t always work perfectly, but I thought I had a pretty good handle on the whole flirting thing. And that had been *before* I’d found out about my mind control powers.

“So, Vander.” I let the syllables of his name roll off my tongue in a sing-song cadence. I focused on him intently, on the edges of his mind, using my power to invite myself in. “I know you want to help us. I can tell—you’re a nice guy, and I’m sure that as a ranger, helping is in your job description. So you’re going to let us pass. Okay?”

I fluttered my lashes at him a bit, but instead of complying, he frowned. “Why do you want to go up so badly, anyway?”

*What? My power didn’t work?* I thought fast. “We’re, um, having a picnic.”

He raised his eyebrows. “In the snow?”

“Yes!” I nodded wildly. “We’re from the north?” The inflection of my voice turned my statement into a question, and I poured more power into my assault on his mind. “So, you’ll let us pass, right?”

“Um, no. I won’t. Didn’t I just explain to you why I can’t let you up the mountain? Were you not listening or something?”

*Why isn’t this working?* Ever since I’d learned of these particular powers, I’d never had a problem using them. Sure, they didn’t always hold my target for long, but they did at least work. Right now, it was like I was trying to compel a brick wall.

I had to keep trying. I had to convince him to let us through. If I didn’t succeed, who knew what kind of bonkers things the witches might try? I needed to do this myself.

And if my magic ended up not working at all, well, there was always my knife. The old-fashioned approach worked too. But first, I’d try the magic one more time.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped closer to Vander, ignoring the strange looks he was sending my way. I stared deep into those green eyes. “So, *Van*,” I said, straining to project every ounce of power I could grasp. “We’re going to drive past and you’re going to let us. What do you say?”

He pulled back for a moment, frowning, and I thought for sure I’d failed, but then he grinned. “Welcome to Mount Rainier! Have a great trip up the mountain, and watch out for those hairpin turns!”

I had no idea what a hairpin turn was, but the important thing was that I’d changed his mind. “Thank you, Vander.” I hurried back into the van, and he stepped aside and waved us through.

“What did you say to him?” Big Mac asked.

I grinned. “I convinced him that it was something he wanted to do.”

“Did you threaten him?” Rishika asked.

I glanced at my mother, who was giving me a hard look, and shrugged. “I just used my natural charm to persuade him.”

“You mean you flirted?”

“Yes. Are you jealous yet?”

Rishika rolled her eyes.

Nneka steered the car up the steep, sharply curved road. “It doesn’t matter how you did it—we still have to get there. And if Vander was telling the truth, we’re going to have to proceed on foot at some point.”

It didn’t take long before Vander was proven right. In the middle of one of those sharp curves, the snow became too deep to continue. I reached for the door handle, ready to start trekking up the mountain on foot, when Big Mac snorted. “What are you doing? We can’t just walk through this mess the whole way up. Everyone, hold hands.”

Confusion on all our faces, we clasped hands.

*What in the world is this all about?*

Then, suddenly, we all found ourselves standing at the top of the mountain.

“What just happened?” I asked. “Did we teleport?”

Rishika glared at Big Mac. “Why didn't you just do this in the first place? Why did we have to drive here at all?”

“The longer the distance, the more magic it requires,” Big Mac said. “I’m not your chauffeur.”

“Weenie,” Nneka muttered.

My mother slowly turned in a circle, looking out over the mountain. “The view is amazing.”

I couldn’t disagree. “It is a little cold, though.”

The crunching of boots on snow echoed from the edge of the mountain, coming closer, and we all spun around to see Vander standing on the top of the mountain with us, his arms crossed.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

**Episode 1113**

LOLA

*I need some space.*

After that disastrous Rose Ceremony, I couldn’t get away from Torin’s makeshift set fast enough. Last I checked, Greyson was still on the ground but awake, and Cali’s dad was yelling at her about something. Poor guy. Between being cooped up here at the pack house with a bunch of werewolves and Fae—whose very existence he was still getting used to—and Cali’s mom up and leaving to go find Artemis and the Orb, it seemed like he was having a tough go of things. Struggling to not only understand this new life Cali had built for herself, but also how he fit into it.

I knew exactly how that felt. It sucked. Ever since my wolf left me, I’d been feeling more and more like an outsider with each passing day. And what I couldn’t quite parse out was whether I felt out of place because I wasn’t a werewolf anymore, or because I was now human.

Of course I had known going in that losing my wolf was a risk. According to Big Mac, it had been fifty-fifty. The flip of a coin. Apparently I’d gotten the wrong side.

And the worst part about all of this was that Jay and Cali and everyone else were so relieved I was no longer half-feral and prone to shifting at the least opportune times that it felt like they’d forgotten that I was still mourning my wolf. She was half of my soul, and I’d given her up to be safe.

To be *human*.

These days, the pack house had supernaturals of every designation—a witch, werewolves, a formerly dead werewolf who’d been brought back to life, a half-Fae, half-wolf kid, a handful of full-blooded Fae of both the Light and Dark variety, and, of course, Cali. Tom and I were the only two humans here, and it seemed neither one of us was handling it all that well.

It was one of those rare days in Oregon in which the sun was shining, and I held out my arm, watching the sunlight play across my skin.

But what if I wasn’t exactly human anymore?

*I don’t see sparkles.* I pulled my arm back. *Pretty sure that part’s just made up, though.*

But what about last night? When I’d bitten my own mate so hard that his blood had gushed into my mouth?

*And I liked it.*

A shudder rolled through me. What the hell had come over me? Sure, Jay and I had tried out our share of kinky stuff before—just because you were soulmates, didn’t mean you wanted your connection to get stale—but of all the stuff we’d tried, all the things I’d let him do to me and vice versa, I’d never once felt the urge to bite him.

Was that a sign that I was becoming a vampire? Or had I just gotten carried away in the moment?

I thought back, and heat rose in my cheeks. Things had been getting pretty exciting before I’d gone and ruined things with my big mouth. Literally. Or maybe Jay was right, and I’d just been obsessing about all of this too much. Maybe I was influencing myself, and that had led me to take a bite out of my mate.

Whatever it was, I *really* didn’t want it to become a regular thing. I loved Jay, and honestly his blood hadn’t been all that bad, but I couldn’t just subject the poor guy to looking like Steve Jobs every time I got a little bite-y. To say nothing of the stigma of playing werewolf and vampire with each other.

*Our bond has already been through more than enough, thank you!*

If there was one positive thing that was supposed to come out of Big Mac curing my werewolf madness—or whatever the hell that had been—it was that things with Jay would calm down. He wouldn’t have to babysit me all the time anymore, worrying that some random thing would set me off and I’d lose control and try to eat one of the pack members. With that taken care of, he was supposed to kick back and just be my mate. But now that I’d bitten him, things felt… wrong.

I’d been trying to avoid him all day, and it had actually been a really easy thing to do. Too easy. Was he avoiding me too? Was he just as freaked out by all of this as I was?

I glanced back at the pack house. *We can’t avoid each other forever. This house is big, but it’s not* that *big. At some point, Jay and I have to talk.*

At that moment, Torin whizzed by, speaking too fast for me to make out. Something about a date.

*He’s such a weirdo. And this werewolf* Bachelorette *thing isn’t really that fun anymore. If it weren’t for his healing powers, I’m not sure what the use would be in keeping him around.*

Then I froze, wondering how many people thought the exact same thing about me now that I was human. The sun was beginning to feel too hot for my tastes—or was my skin just extra sensitive after being bitten by that vampire?

*Don’t think about that. Just go inside.*

The thought made me bite my lip. Go inside and do what exactly? Cali was caught up in her boyfriend/dating game show/father drama; I wasn’t ready to talk to Jay yet; and with everyone else, I couldn’t shake the sense that they saw me differently somehow. That I was an outsider now that I didn’t have my wolf.

But my skin really was beginning to burn.

I turned back to the pack house and saw Ava approaching. My lip immediately pulled up into a snarl.

*If anyone should feel like an outsider in all of this, it’s her.*

Rather than heading inside, I shifted directions and headed toward Ava. Fast. I was practically stomping my way across the grass with my weak, useless little human limbs.

Her eyes widened. “Hi, Lo—”

“Why are you here?” I demanded. “Haven’t you caused enough harm to Cali already?”

“I didn’t choose to come back,” she reminded me, her brows knitting together in a scowl to match my own. “Xavier brought me back when I was half-conscious.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Well, you’re not half-conscious now—feel free to leave anytime.”

Ava scoffed. “Listen, I get that you’re Cali’s friend and you’re trying to baby her the same way everyone else does around here, but you should just stay out of my way.”

“I really wish I could, but that’s kind of tricky, what with you living here and all. You know the way out. What’s keeping you here, anyway?”

“I haven’t figured out where to go.” She shrugged. “It’s not like I can go back to the diner. My vampire boss tried to drain me, remember? And thanks to Silas, my pack house was destroyed. My brother’s old pack is in shambles, too.”

“Your problems aren’t really the pack’s concern. And I kind of doubt that Xavier is thrilled to have you around.” I sneered. “I’m no expert on the subject, but I can imagine that killing your mate’s mother tends to piss your mate off.”

The werewolf snarled and stepped forward, right into my space. “You’re really starting to piss me off.”

I lifted my chin, not backing down. “Try anything, and I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Ava cackled like the evil witch she was. “I hear you’re just a human now, Lola. Cali’s little human sidekick. It would be wise for you to remember that, before you pick a fight with a werewolf.”

All the anger rushed out of me, and I blinked, stunned by this reminder of my new limitations. I shook myself. This bitch didn’t get to boss me around, not in my own home. “Jay’s not a human—and he’s still my mate. So don’t even think about it.”

Ava smirked. “So you’re gonna run to your mate and tell on me? Is that how it is?”

*How fucking dare she!* “Just because I’m not a werewolf anymore, doesn’t mean I can’t handle a two-faced werewolf bitch like you.”

She just laughed again. “How terrifying.”

I snarled. “There’s a good chance that I’ll be the one draining blood when I become a vampire. And unlike your boss, I’ll make sure you don’t survive.”

That seemed to take her by surprise. Her eyebrows rose. “You’re a vampire? Seriously? That’s hilarious.”

“I was bitten by a vampire. I can already tell I’m turning.”

“You’ve got to be joking. But it’s a pretty lousy joke. Why would you act like you *want* to be a bloodsucker? They’re the walking dead.”

I scoffed. “If anyone’s the walking dead, it’s you. Maybe you should have just *stayed* dead.”

She took a step toward me, so close I only had to jerk my hand to reach out and touch her. “Maybe you’d like to try?” She smiled. “So you really think you’re becoming a vampire? How about I give you a chance to prove it?”

Before I could answer, Ava partially shifted, and one of her hands turned into a clawed paw. She held out her arm and dragged that razor-sharp claw down her skin. Blood immediately began to seep out of the wound, and she held out her injured arm.

“Have a drink,” she said.

**Episode 1114**

CHARLIE

I watched myself carefully in the brass-edged mirror as I wound my tie around my neck, my fingers slipping over each other to create the perfect Windsor knot. My darling lady would never be seen out and about with me, were I to look anything less than perfect.

*Such is a woman’s way, I suppose*,I mused. When I finished my task, the knot looked a little… lumpy. The tail also looked slightly askew. I frowned, unknotted my tie, and tried again.

I’d performed this task countless times, enough to have more than ample muscle memory. So why did it look so awful now?

It took another two tries of adjusting my technique, the length at which I slipped the knot through, and fussing with the way it lay against my starched white shirt. By that point I wasn’t exactly pleased with the result, but I didn’t have all evening to spend knotting my tie. I was a very important man, and tonight’s event would prove to be very important. It wasn’t every night we hosted a ball, after all.

My lovely wife hurried back into our bedroom, a vision in Chantilly lace. “Darling, you must hurry,” she admonished me. “We’re going to be late.”

I turned away from my reflection—and the image of the lackluster Windsor knot. “Yes, of course. Do you approve?”

She slowly approached me, her shrewd eyes missing nothing as she eyed my recently polished shoes, my pleated slacks, and my starched and pressed white dress shirt. She paused, staring at something just below my chin, and her expression tightened.

“Your tie is a mess, Daniel.” She closed the distance and, with nimble fingers that clearly knew better than mine how to tie a Windsor knot, began to fix the mess I’d made. “Were you truly about to greet our guests looking like some kind of vagabond in a stolen suit?” She *tsked*. “Honestly, my love, I don’t know what you would do without me.”

I smiled warmly at her fussing. “That makes two of us, my lady.”

The way her lips turned up just slightly in the corners told me that she was appeased—for now. She patted my chest. “There. Now everything is as it should be.”

I turned to view her handiwork in the mirror, and instead my eyes made contact with my own reflection—not just the tie, but the eyes that were staring back at me. Horror rushed through me. I knew those eyes, and I knew they did not belong to Daniel Herrington.

They belonged to a young werewolf named Charlie.

*Charlie*.

I gasped and spun back around to face Lady Herrington. No, not Lady Herrington. This young woman was wearing old-fashioned clothes, but she was not the lady of this house. She was someone different, someone who didn’t belong here amidst the dust and faded grandeur.

*Dust…* I looked around the room wildly, and the image in front of me flickered like slides in a silent film. One moment, warm, vivid opulence, the next, ruins of an era long passed, heirlooms passed down to nobody, left to rot as time took its heavy toll.

“Daniel?” I felt a soft touch on my arm. “What’s the matter, darling?”

I grasped her elbow, holding on tight like she was my only lifeline. “Who are we?”

She blinked and reeled back a little bit. “I—I beg your pardon?”

“Who. Are. We?” I pressed, and with each passing second I felt more and more as if the world—my world—was crumbling beneath my feet. And I was on the verge of crumbling too, turning to dust like so many of these old things around me.

“Sweetheart, whatever do you mean?”

A flood of images and memories smashed into me, and the thread holding me, holding Daniel, to this moment shattered. I saw pale, fanged figures leaping at me, their mouths stained and dripping with blood.

*Vampires.*

I turned and slashed, eviscerating each of them with a speed and skill that seemed impossible for Daniel to possess. And then I saw a man and a woman, two people who resembled the reflection I’d caught in the mirror. My… my parents? No, they weren’t Daniel’s parents. They looked nothing like Daniel.

And then the realization hit me. I was not Daniel Herrington.

Daniel Herrington was long dead, and his wife along with him.

New images assaulted my mind. A smashed window; Bert, the butler locking us up in this house; and…

And Violet.

Not the wife of a railroad tycoon, but the mate of the young werewolf I’d seen in the mirror. The person I knew from my memories. Me.

*Charlie. My name is Charlie.*

The thought was like a bucket of ice water poured over my senses, shocking me back into reality, into the very real danger Violet and I were in as we unknowingly played dress-up for the entertainment of a poltergeist. I began tearing off my clothes, starting with that godawful Windsor knot.

Lady Herrington—no, *Violet*—was appalled. Her jaw dropped, and she clutched a hand to her chest. “Whatever is the matter, dear?”

It was an old-fashioned gesture that looked sorely out of place coming from Violet, and if I hadn’t been absolutely fucking terrified for our lives, I might have found the whole thing funny. I grabbed her by the shoulders. “You’re Violet. You’re not Lady Herrington.”

If possible, that simple string of words made her look even more scandalized. “Have you gone mad? Should I call Dr. Harris? Surely he can prescribe something for whatever is ailing you.”

Her words flipped some kind of switch, and I paused, suddenly confused. “Dr. Harris? Jameson Harris? Isn’t he coming to the ball this evening?”

Relief spread over her face. “Yes, which is why you shouldn’t be standing around in your birthday suit. Get dressed or we’ll be late for our own ball! Imagine how disgraceful that would be.”

My darling wife had to help me with my tie once more—kind and generous soul that she was—and then it was time to make our entrance. We descended the grand staircase, discussing whether Madame Poppy would be joining us tonight, and the unfortunate onset of Mr. Holmes’s gout.

“I can’t wait to reconnect with Agnes Winterbottom.” My wife grinned. “It’s been way too long. Rumor has it she’s been seen with the Professor.” She lifted her eyebrows at me, the teasing little minx.

I couldn’t help laughing, but something about it felt wrong. Like it somehow didn’t belong to me.

*I’ll need to discuss this in private with Dr. Harris.*

Once we reached the foot of the staircase, our butler, Bert, appeared. “Milord, milady, the guests will be arriving shortly. Everyone shall be assembling in the ballroom.”

As I held out my arm and escorted Lady Herrington to the ballroom, I couldn’t help but note how utterly captivating she looked in her gown. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was pull my wife into my arms and kiss her senseless, to peel away the layers of that dress and lose myself in her.

“Daniel, are you all right?” Lady Herrington asked. “You’re looking quite red in the face.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s, um, nothing.”

We entered the ballroom, taking in the sparkling crystal chandelier, the plated hors d’oeuvres being passed around, and the string quartet playing in the corner. It was perfect.

The doorbell let out a regal chime, and I turned to my wife. “Let’s have fun tonight.”

Bert went to the door, announcing the arrival of all the ladies and lords of note, and soon guest after guest was pouring in.

The music was top-notch, and the food and beverages were the talk of the party.

“Agnes, do tell me—I hear you’ve snagged yourself quite the handsome beau,” I overheard Lady Herrington say while I spoke with another man about the rising prices of steel. Our guests were a mixture of old money, those who had come into wealth more recently, and interesting characters who had neither money nor land but were interesting enough to listen to.

It was a wonderful night, with wonderful conversation and wonderful dancing. Indeed, I found myself struck by how all of our guests were so light on their feet. It was almost as if they were gliding through the air!

The quartet began a new piece, and I broke away from my conversation and found my wife. I held out my hand. “May I have this dance, my lady?”

She smiled. “Certainly, my lord.”

We began to move through the ballroom, and I was hit by another vision. I was… by a lake, and there was a pumpkin boat. And I was with a beautiful woman—

Lady Herrington stopped dancing. “What did you just call me?”

I blinked, confused. “Beg pardon?”

“You just called me ‘Violet’. Don’t you know I abhor those flowers? Purple is far too gauche.”

“I’m so sorry, my love. It must have slipped my mind. Perhaps I’m just a bit lightheaded from swirling around the room with a dazzling beauty such as yourself.”

She smiled, apparently placated, and led me to a nearby chair for a brief respite. As we both sat down, a maid approached us. There was something different about her, something that set her apart from the others. Something about her clothes, and the way she moved.

She held up a tray of hors d’oeuvres. “You should both have one of these.” Her voice sounded wrong, too.

I eyed the strange-looking food on the tray. “No, thank you, Dolores.”

The maid leaned in close and whispered, “I’m not asking, I’m telling you. Eat this.”

**Episode 1115**

“This is ridiculous,” Xavier huffed.

I tossed him a sympathetic look. “Maybe it won’t be that bad.”

I stood on the porch with Xavier, ready for our date. I couldn’t figure out what Torin thought he was accomplishing by continuing to push this werewolf *Bachelorette* thing. I’d kind of assumed the whole thing would just fade away after my choosing Xavier for a date had nearly killed Greyson, but apparently that was not the case.

“Remind me why we agreed to do this,” Xavier pressed. “Really. Because so far, Torin’s little game has been a complete shitshow.”

I shrugged. “I thought it sounded fun.”

Greyson seemed fine now, and my new theory was that as long as I didn’t say, “I choose…”, then we were probably in the clear. And honestly? I needed to put some space between myself and the whole Maren/Greyson paternity situation, if only for a few hours.

Xavier turned to me, a frown tugging at his lips. “If you want to go on a date with me, great. Let’s go on a *real* date. I know some great places in Portland—”

“I can’t.” I shook my head. “Big Mac grounded me, remember? I don’t get to go to Portland. I don’t even get to go to the end of the driveway. It’s not like we have a wealth of options for our date. Plus, we’ve made it this far, haven’t we? Why not see it through?” I tried to smile. “We can at least see what Torin has in mind, and if we don’t want to do it, we can just politely decline. Sound good?”

Xavier sighed and crossed his arms. “We should have made him go back to the Fae world,” he grumbled.

I turned to him with a grin. It wasn’t exactly the most enthusiastic response he could’ve mustered up, but it would do. I tried not to think about the person Xavier *had* tried to leave in the Fae world. Partly because I was trying to take a break from all things Greyson. And also because I hadn’t forgiven Xavier for what he’d done. I was still hurt and shocked and frankly disgusted that my mate had been so callous. But I needed a distraction. Something fun and silly that had nothing to do with worrying about Mom and Artemis, or paternity tests, or my father trying to convince me to go back to Minnesota, or whatever terrible thing one of my mates had done that just hadn’t yet come to light.

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to be happy. And, dammit, if that meant willfully ignoring some of the ugliness that had taken root in my life, then I would do it.

As if on cue, Torin rushed up to us, grinning from ear to ear. “Cali, Xavier, welcome to your date! I can’t wait to get started and show you the fun things I have in store for you this afternoon.”

“Let’s get on with it, then.” Xavier crossed his arms, scowling down at Torin.

The Fae man, as always, seemed to find Xavier’s brooding nothing more than a charming personality quirk, and his grin simply widened. “That’s the spirit! I hope you two like wine!”

Xavier and I exchanged looks. Wine? Were we just going to drink on the back lawn or something? Because I didn’t need Torin’s help with that. Or Xavier’s.

“Um, yeah,” I said slowly. “Sure. I like wine.”

“It’s fine,” grunted Xavier.

Torin clapped his hands. “Perfect! Because today, you two are going to become oenologists!”

“Excuse me?” I blinked. “Ee-what? Is that a Fae word?”

He laughed, shaking his head as if I’d just told a great joke, and I decided that if the sun were ever magically transformed into a person, it would be Torin. Bright, optimistic, happy, and undimmed by the skepticism of those around him. It was obnoxious sometimes, sure, but sometimes I wished I could be more like Torin. Wished I could allow all the negativity and anger and worry to just slip right off me. Torin would probably be out of his mind with joy if Fenrir did turn out to be Greyson’s son.

“Oenologists are experts at making wine,” Torin explained kindly. “And you two will soon be experts as well—when you make your own wine! Now come with me!”

Torin practically bounced away as he led us over to the side of the pack house. I glanced over at Xavier, who rolled his eyes and muttered, “Let’s get this over with.”

“Don’t be such a rain cloud. We might have fun.”

His expression told me he didn’t believe me, but he didn’t storm off, so I counted it as a win. We followed Torin over to the side of the house, where he had set up a gigantic wooden barrel filled with dark, juicy grapes. My mouth watered from the scent alone.

I glanced around, but I didn’t see any other wine-making equipment—just the barrel and the grapes. “Okay, what now?”

Torin gestured to the barrel like a game show host. “Take your shoes off and hop in!”

*Say what?* I had a vague recollection of an *I Love Lucy* rerun playing on the TV when I was really little—Mom had always been so fascinated by sitcoms when I was growing up, and I’d never really understood it. Now I knew. But in the episode, Lucy had made grape juice by stomping barefoot in a grape-filled barrel just like this one. It probably wasn’t the most hygienic thing in the world, but it had looked like so much fun.

Xavier stepped back. “This has gone far enough.”

I caught his arm before he could retreat any farther. “Please, Xavier? I think it sounds fun—and it certainly is different. Besides, it’s not like I can go anywhere or have a lot of other options. Why not smash some grapes? It might be a good way to blow off some steam.”

I gave him my best pleading expression, and he sighed. “Fine.”

“Yay! I knew you’d love it!” Torin clapped again, grinning from ear to ear as Xavier and I slipped out of our shoes and stood on the grass next to the barrel.

I looked around for steps or a ladder of some kind, but there was nothing but the giant barrel. “How do I—”

Xavier’s hands bracketed my waist. “Ladies first.” And then he lifted me up like I weighed nothing at all and dropped me into the barrel of grapes.

I sank down several inches, grapes bursting around me and juice saturating my clothes. Some of the grapes on the surface sprayed my face and hair with juice too, and I gaped at Xaiver. “You did *not* just do that!”

His grin was feral. “What are you going to do about it?”

There was a twinkle in his eye—one that I had been missing for a long while now. A smile tugging at my lips, I grabbed a handful of half-smooshed grapes and chucked them right at his face. The dark red juice sliding down his cheek looked an awful lot like victory.

He wiped the mess from his face, and I could tell he was trying very hard to not smile. “You’re going to regret that.”

In a blur of movement, he leapt into the barrel. Juice splashed upward as he landed. It got *everywhere*. I wiped grape juice and bits of pulp out of my eyes, spluttering, and when my vision cleared, Xavier was right in front of me.

“Shall we make some wine?” he asked, and before I could respond, he stomped downward, smashing the grapes and sending a whole new wave of juice and grapey bits flying.

He never broke eye contact, despite how utterly ridiculous he looked, and there was a challenge in his gaze that I couldn’t help but respond to.

“Let’s.” I started jumping up and down, smashing the grapes with my bare feet and trying to ignore the strange, squelchy sensation of the fruit bursting between my toes. Xavier kept up the same pace, and it quickly became a—very messy—competition to see who could create the most juice.

In no time at all, I was cackling wildly, and Xavier was grinning and alternating between smashing down the grapes on his side of the barrel and trying to throw me off balance so I’d fall into the mess we were making.

I froze for a second, drinking in his smile. Despite his tough exterior and his clear derision where Torin was concerned, Xavier was having *fun*.

*This feels like a real date—something Xavier and I have never had before.*

I lost track of Torin in the fun, but he reappeared next to the barrel holding up two wine bottles.

“Torin,” I gasped, out of breath from laughing and smashing the grapes. “Thank you. This has been so much fun.”

“It’s not over yet.” He held out the bottles. “This is from the very juice that you’ve already made.”

I looked down at my feet and then back up at him. “Doesn’t wine take years to make?”

“This is special wine, and I may have sped up the process a little.” He gave me a sly wink. “Okay, I lied. Sage and Zainab helped me buy it online. Did you know there’s a world of shops out there all in the palm of your hand?”

Xavier took the bottles from Torin and handed one to me. “How about a toast? To my little tiger.”

I blushed and focused on popping the top on my bottle before clinking it against Xavier’s. I took a sip. “Oh, wow.” I didn’t know all that much about wine, but this was pretty good. By the look on Xavier’s face, he agreed.

We continued squishing our way around the barrel, sipping the wine from our bottles and laughing. I couldn’t remember the last time Xavier and I had just… *played* like this.

It didn’t take long for the alcohol to hit my brain. *Oh, boy. This wine is strong! It’s been like five minutes and I’m already buzzed.*

I jumped on a particularly large pile of uncrushed grapes, but my feet didn’t stop once I hit the bottom of the barrel. I slipped—vaguely aware of Xavier reaching out for me, his fingers slipping down my juice-soaked arm—and smacked my head against the side of the barrel.

“Ow.” I blinked, rubbing my head, and then I opened my eyes to find myself alone in the woods, facing the three witches.

**Episode 1116**

AVA

Some small, halfway-civilized part of me knew that it wasn’t nice to pick on the newly human girl.

But a much bigger part of me was so damn tired of being kicked around, abused, taken advantage of, and treated like I was something less than human—and if there was one person in this fucked up pack who I had a small bit of power over, it was Lola. The werewolf who wasn’t. She was a human now, helpless and so, so breakable. What she’d been thinking, rushing up and picking a fight with me, I had no clue.

I’d been outside—getting some fresh air and studiously trying to ignore whatever fresh hell that strange Fae man and his dating show had in store—and Lola had appeared out of nowhere, practically foaming at the mouth, and had started chewing me out.

*I guess words are the only weapons she has now. It’s a shame she doesn’t use them better.*

But if Lola wanted to face someone outside of her weight class, then so be it. I’d been putting up with shit from one person or another from the moment I’d come back to life—Silas, Demeter, Iñigo, and even Nolan. I was *done*.

I held out my bleeding wrist with a sharp smile. “What, you’re not thirsty? Drink up, Lola. If you’re truly a vampire then you should be all over my blood—Iñigo certainly enjoyed it.”

The thought of that monster made a chill run down my spine. I had honestly been convinced that I would die in that cage, slowly used up until I was nothing but an empty husk, my second chance at life snuffed out before I’d even had a chance to truly live.

I hoped like hell I would never come across Iñigo again, but if I did, then it would be the end of him. I’d stake him three times over for everything he’d done to me.

Lola blinked at the blood seeping down my wrist. Her eyes had gone wide, and she looked a little pale. I rolled my eyes. The girl was so obviously *not* a vampire.

She looked up at me. “You’re crazy. Why would I want to drink your blood? That’s disgusting.”

“Exactly my point. It’s a truly vile thing to live off the blood of another creature, so why are you fantasizing about it?”

She shook her head wildly. “I’m not—”

“You came at me looking for a fight, and when you realized you were outclassed you proceeded to tell me all about how you’re turning into a vampire. But obviously you know jack shit about real vampires because if you did, you’d know that a newborn vampire is desperate for blood. If you were really changing, you’d be all over what I’m offering you,” I said.

There was something about watching her shoulders hunch forward and her eyes fall down to my arm in defeat… It was a victory. A small, petty one against a weak and insignificant girl. But I was in such desperate need for a win right now that I’d take what I could get.

Lola took a step back and crossed her arms. “You think you’ve got me all figured out, don’t you?”

“You’re not a werewolf anymore, and I can only imagine how incredibly painful and humiliating that must be.” I inserted just a little bit of sincerity into my tone, because I honestly didn’t know how the woman in front of me was able to get out of bed in the morning. I couldn’t imagine living without my wolf. I didn’t *want* to imagine it. I would rather die again than give up that piece of myself.

“Spare me,” she huffed. “Everyone knows you’re not capable of caring about anyone but yourself. That's why you have no one, why you're hanging around here in a house full of people who despise you.

That one, I had to admit, stung a bit. Her little verbal daggers were getting better. “Well, since you clearly don’t want to be human,” I continued, “that must mean you’re shopping around for another paranormal designation. I think you can do better than a vampire, though. How about a witch? Or a Fae? Which disguise are you going to put on to avoid who you really are?”

She blinked rapidly, shaking her head. “I didn’t… I wasn’t—”

She had taken a few more steps back to put distance between us, and I closed it again. “Face it, Lola. You’re just another weak human surrounded by far superior beings. You should learn your new place before it’s too late.”

Her eyes flashed. “Right back at you. Hell, why don’t you die again and do us all a favor?” She spun and walked away, her head held high, before I could respond.

That was fine. She could hold her head high all she wanted, but I knew the truth. I’d gotten to her. And it felt good.

I smirked. *Maybe I should send her a thank you note.*

Movement caught my eye, and I turned to see Cali and Xavier jumping around in a giant wooden barrel. Cali had just thrown a messy handful of what looked like grapes at my mate, who caught her arm and pulled her in for a kiss.

My stomach twisted and my lips curled up into a grimace. *There goes my appetite.*

I turned away to avoid the happy couple and whatever the hell it was they were doing, and headed off in the opposite direction. I truly could not stand Cali. I could only imagine the *due destini* curse was powerful beyond imagining if it was leaving both Xavier and Greyson so blind to how obnoxious and selfish that girl was.

Cali let out a laugh-shriek, and I growled. Even walking away from them, there was no escape. It made me sick to know that I’d once had that exact same voice, that I’d once looked just like Cali, thanks to Demeter.

Changing back into my own body had been the biggest glow up possible.If I’d been forced to pretend to be that doe-eyed harpy for even a day longer, I would have completely lost my mind.

I hated to see Xavier pining after her—I’d hated it even when I’d been pretending to be her. At the time, I’d told myself that I could just pretend he meant those things for me, for Ava, but watching my mate lose all sense in this obsession with that girl… I couldn’t stand how devoted he was to her, especially when she was just stringing him along. Xavier and Greyson both.

What were they thinking, playing these stupid games in order to try to win her over? Making *wine?* How did that reveal anything about themselves? And besides, they were Alphas! They had the strength and power to command an entire pack, and instead they were putting all that energy into chasing after some half-Fae bitch.

I knew Xavier—inside and out. I didn’t need a silly dating game to learn more about him. To know who he was and to love him for it. Maybe Cali needed the drama to stay invested, but I didn’t. I was Xavier’s mate. His first mate. *Me.* And despite all of Cali’s attempts to convince Xavier that she was his one true mate, nothing would change that truth—or the bond Xavier and I shared.

And somewhere deep down, Xavier knew that too. He had to, because he could have left me to die at that diner, but he hadn’t. He’d saved me. And despite everything that I’d done, he’d brought me into the safety of his home. I would never forget the great kindness Xavier had shown me, and I would never let him forget it either.

Warm blood dripped down onto my leg while I walked, and I realized my arm was still bleeding. It hadn’t healed fully yet. I must have cut myself more deeply than I’d thought.

*I should head inside and clean up.*

As soon as I stepped into the pack house, I was met by Fenrir. The little brat almost ran directly into me.

“Sorry!” he said, his eyes wide. They were locked on my bloody arm.

“Fenrir, don’t run inside!” Maren called, coming up to us. Those two were never far apart. She stopped when she saw the blood on my wrist. “That doesn’t look good.”

I shrugged. “It’s nothing. Just proving a point.”

I started to move past Maren, but then she stepped in front of me. “Why did you tell everyone Fenrir is Greyson’s son?”

I rolled my eyes. I’d had more than enough drama for one day. “I only told Xavier what you told me.”

The Fae woman shook her head. “I think we misunderstood each other. I said that a boy should be around his father; I never said that father was Greyson.”

“Oh,” I said flatly, “forgive me for mistaking your vague phrasing.”

Maren glowered at my snarky remark but didn’t say anything.

I took a step forward, then paused and turned to face her. “I know why you’re really upset.”

The Fae twisted her pretty face, scoffing. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know you want Greyson.”

She glared daggers at me. “You don’t know that.”

“You can deny it to the others, but not me.” I offered her a small smile. “We don’t have to like each other, but we also don’t have to be enemies. I think we can help each other out.”

**Episode 1117**

GREYSON

Unlike my date with Cali by the lake, Torin wasn’t aiming for privacy with Xavier and Cali’s date. I could see them from my bedroom window, clear as day, frolicking around in that overenthusiastic Fae’s idiotic wine-making barrel. And since the date was taking place so damn close to the house, all I had to do was crack open my window to overhear them laughing and flirting.

I made it about two minutes before I’d ended up turning away and closing my blinds. I could still hear the louder shrieks of delight through the closed window, but it was better than nothing.

There weren’t a lot of places to escape in the pack house, but I had to try. I couldn’t listen to them, couldn’t watch them be so happy together while Cali was still so upset with me—especially after she’d “accidentally” slipped and fell toward Xavier, clearly expecting him to catch her. I’d turned away just in time to avoid *that* romantic moment between the two of them. The way things were going, they’d probably end up making out in that damn barrel. As it was, I’d never look at wine the same way again.

I slumped down on my bed and pulled my pillow tight over my ears to block out any residual sounds from their date. Had Cali completely forgotten about Xavier leaving me to die in the Fae world? Had she forgotten that “choosing” him for the stupid date they were on had almost killed me? Did she even care? Or was this all her way of getting back at me for kissing Maren, and the whole paternity question?

*Come on, Greyson. Pull yourself together. You’re spiraling.*

I hated how much a simple thing like going on a “date” in the fucking back yard was driving me to the edge of reason. I knew I shouldn’t be upset, that after everything, I couldn’t expect Cali to just up and choose me—especially now that the curse had stopped pulling its punches. But I couldn’t help it. All the logic and empathy in the world wouldn’t keep me from feeling possessive whenever I saw Cali and Xavier together. She was *my mate* and seeing her with my brother, knowing that after everything Cali and I had been through together, he still had a hold on her heart… I didn’t know how to handle it.

I’d thought—maybe foolishly—that after our date, when I’d opened up to Cali about my visions, that we were in a better place. That things had gone well, and that we were finally in sync for the first time since my father had died. But clearly that *wasn’t* the case, and I needed to up my game.

I didn’t hear any sounds filtering through my pillow anymore, so I took a chance and rolled over onto my stomach, letting out a long, deep sigh. The only choice I had—short of killing Xavier—was to do whatever was necessary to make Cali realize that there really was no choice to make. That I was her mate. Period.

And if I had to play these silly games to get her to understand that, then so be it.

Cries echoed from the yard, but I couldn’t bring myself to look and see what the commotion was about. It was torture—why subject myself to that? If I had to watch anymore happy moments between my mate and another man, I was going to lose my fucking mind.

I took another deep, calming breath. *At the end of this, when everything is said and done and this* due destini *shit is all behind us, I’ll emerge with Cali at my side. Exactly where she should be.*

Our connection just had to survive this new set of challenges, that was all. And I had no reason to think that it couldn’t. After everything we’d been through, was some half-assed dating game and my ex staying at the pack house going to be the thing that broke us? I didn’t think so. I wouldn’t allow that to happen.

Except it wasn’t just about my ex, was it? It was about her son, and the possibility that he was my son too. I honestly couldn’t believe Cali had gotten Maren to agree to a paternity test. Maren had been firm and, if I was being honest, somewhat cagey, about Fenrir since the beginning. It was a testament to just how dynamic Cali could be that she, of all people, had gotten Maren to agree. I wanted to know more about that conversation, to find out exactly what Maren had told her, but of course Torin had absolutely needed to interrupt our conversation and whisk Cali away for her date with Xavier.

When the Fae man had asked her if she even wanted to go, I’d been expecting her to say no. And it still stung that she’d blown me off so quickly.

But I appreciated Cali pushing for a paternity test. It was the smartest, most definitive course of action, and knowing for sure whether or not Fenrir was mine would give me some much-needed peace of mind.

I knew I *should* believe what Maren had told me, especially after our escape from Hans. A big part of me did want to believe her. Things would be so much simpler if Fenrir wasn’t mine, for about a million reasons.

But there was another part of me that still didn’t know how to trust her. Still hadn’t forgiven her for shattering me into pieces five years ago. Maren had betrayed me before and, at minimum, she’d demonstrated her own issues with honesty in the past. This paternity test, while definitively settling the issue of my relation to Fenrir, would also prove how much—if at all—Maren could be trusted. It was the right thing to do. And hey, even if it was true that I wasn’t Fenrir’s father, the kid would still benefit from spending time around werewolves, and even more so, around *good* people.

I frowned a bit as I imagined a very different scenario for that sweet, happy little boy—a future in which he was raised by that bastard Aiden. I knew better than most the damage that a bad parent could do to an impressionable child, and my heart sank at the mere thought of Fenrir suffering the same abuse that his mother had at that monster’s hands. No matter who his real father was, it would be a tragedy for Fenrir to end up with Aiden as his only role model.

*Will Aiden even try to find Fenrir?* I had a hard time picturing the man expending the energy required to track down Fenrir and his mother.

If I were someone’s father and I had unknowingly missed years of that kid’s life… Well, I would never be like Silas. Never.

For just a moment, I imagined what it would be like if the test said I was Fenrir’s father. My stomach flip-flopped, but not in an unpleasant way. I didn’t want to get my hopes up, and I still didn’t even know if this was what I truly wanted. But… if Fenrir *were* my son, I knew, deep down, that I would be happy about it.

And I’d learned the hard way that happiness was the most dangerous emotion of all.

I sat up, then rolled off my bed and looked at myself in my mirror, trying to draw out the features that Fenrir and I shared. It wasn’t difficult.

*It will be good to know the truth. Even if, as Maren said, it won’t solve the other problems in my life.*

As I thought of Maren, I decided it would be good to finish our conversation from earlier. I left my bedroom in search of Maren and caught her coming out of her and Fenrir’s bedroom. The boy was nowhere in sight.

“Hi,” I said, stopping in the hall just in front of her. “Can we talk?”

“Hey.” Her lips twitched. “You hiding out till their date’s over?”

I kind of hated how good she was at reading me. “I don’t like it flaunted in front of my face.”

“Then why do you put up with it?”

“It’s… It’s complicated.” This wasn’t the conversation I wanted to have with Maren right now. Maybe not ever.

She put a hand on my arm. “I’m not trying to be a dick, here. I’m just trying to understand. The Greyson I remember would never have tolerated sharing his mate.”

The simple touch felt like it was burning me , and I stepped back and eased my arm out of her grip. “Until the *due destini* issue is resolved, I think you’ll find there’s a lot that I’ll tolerate.” Besides, I wasn’t the Greyson she’d known all those years ago. I’d changed. Cali had changed me. “I’m not the same person anymore,” I told Maren.

“I’m not so sure about that,” she said. “After all, you risked your life to save me and Fenrir after everything you and I had been through.”

I shrugged. “Anyone with any amount of decency would have done the same.”

She snorted. “It’s funny how you’re almost ashamed to admit you have a heart. Why is that? There’s nothing wrong with admitting it, you know. You can still be a fearsome Alpha.” Her lips tugged up into a teasing smile, and her expression softened a bit. “Besides, I’m not convinced that you would have risked so much for just anyone.”

“What are you suggesting?”

Maren glanced away, seeming to mull something over before looking up at me. “What would you do if Fenrir really was your son?”

**Episode 1118**

I sucked in a breath as I felt my heart beat erratically. I lifted my head, coming face to face with the three mysterious women. They were covered in tattoos, jewelry, and translucent crystals swinging delicately against their skin. The air around them hummed with an ancient sort of energy while they stood there, unmoving. They were observing me with unnervingly calm, but calculating, eyes.

I spun around, turning my back to them, suddenly hyperaware of the fact I was no longer with Xavier. Not really wanting to take my eyes off of them, I did a slow circle back around. I must have looked ridiculous, but I wasn’t about to let my guard down. I lifted my head, noticing the trees that loomed over me. I shifted my gaze to the leafy ground: it was lit up with the sun that was shining overhead.

How the hell did I even get here?

A nauseating, disorienting feeling churned in my gut. Where was the wine barrel? And Torin?

In the bright light, a distant object caught my eye— the pack house. I gaped, realizing how far away it was.

How was that possible? Had Big Mac’s spell been disabled? Or did that mean I was free permanently?

I suppressed the small grin that was threatening to appear on my face at the possibility. *Free!* I couldn’t help the wild exuberance that raced through me at the idea. *I’m actually free.*

My little celebration party was quickly shut down by one of the witches, who stalked forward and started circling me. She peered at me closely, taking time to study and assess every inch of my face and body. I shifted on my feet, intensely uncomfortable under her gaze.

“Which one of you is going to tell me what’s going on?” I demanded, staring at the woman crossly.

She ignored me.

“I don’t really see what all the fuss is about,” she called back, not even looking at the other two witches. “She doesn’t seem very special.”

One of the others snorted. “It made sense with the other *due destini* trio.” She cackled. “That woman had real appeal, it was obvious.”

The third witch hummed questioningly, considering me. She hobbled forward, poking and prodding at me.

“Hey!” I screeched, batting her away.

The third witch drew her hand back.

“There must be *something* about her,” she said, clucking. “Why else would two brothers be at each other’s throats over her?”

I straightened, attentive again. I scowled at the witches, annoyed that they kept talking over me. How did they even *know* about any of this?

“Are you talking about Greyson and Xavier?” I asked, wary of them and their intentions.

The witch who’d been the first to inspect me raised a brow, stepping back. “Why do you ask?” she said, her voice high and innocent. “Are there others?”

“None of this is your business,” I bit out, frustrated with all of their questions—and their lack of answers.

“Perhaps not,” the witch said simply, as the other two stepped into line with her. “But we’ll let Greyson decide.”

I had so many more questions to hound them with when I found myself suddenly back in the wine barrel, looking up into Xavier’s eyes.

Ugh, this was getting old fast. My head spun with the sudden change of scene. My expression of shock about everything must have been obvious, as Xavier was giving me quite the odd look. I twisted from side to side, looking around wildly.

“Where are they?” I asked, breathless.

Xavier, who was still holding me in his arms, looked at me worriedly. His brow was furrowed, his mouth curving down into a frown. His eyes darted around, checking our surroundings, before settling on me once again.

“Where are… who?” he asked, his voice gruff.

I opened my mouth, then closed it, hesitating. It had felt so real… But if I was still in Xavier’s arms—and he wasn’t here demanding to know where I’d gone—then I couldn’t have possibly gone anywhere, right? It must have been my imagination.

When I didn’t say anything, Xavier pressed on.

“Are you okay?” he asked me, using his hand to turn my face to the side, looking for injuries. Satisfied that I wasn’t bleeding or visibly hurt, he gently stroked his thumb across my cheek, bringing my focus back to him. “You knocked your head pretty hard.”

In response, my head pulsed with a throbbing pain. I blinked back tears before Xavier could see them, suddenly aware of the pain in my head.

“I’m fine,” I croaked. “Just a little disoriented.”

Mouth set in a grim line, Xavier swept me into his arms without warning and carried me to the side of the barrel. Then he carefully climbed over the barrel before gingerly setting me down on the ground.

“You had me worried,” Xavier admitted, still keeping a hand around my waist, keeping me steady.

I gave him a strained, but sure, smile. “I’m fine,” I assured him, waving away his fussing. I held out my arms and tilted my head forward, giving him a closer look. “Not a scratch,” I added, hoping it would ease his worry.

Xavier gave me a wry smile as I straightened again. I looked over his shoulder, toward the woods, looking for the three witches. But all I saw was miles and miles of trees.

I pursed my lips, wondering if they were still there but just hiding.

All of a sudden, Torin stepped forward, his brow furrowed in genuine concern.

“Cali!” he cried out. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Torin,” I told him, emphasizing my words. “I’m fine. I promise.”

“Let me heal you up,” Torin offered, completely ignoring my pleas. “So that you guys can continue your date.”

“I don’t need healing,” I insisted, giving him a look. I glanced at Xavier. “And as for continuing the date,” I added, keeping my voice light, “maybe Xavier and I could just sit and talk?”

Torin leaned back, his face scrunching up in confusion. “Is that even allowed?” he asked.

Xavier turned toward Torin, eyeing him.

“If it isn’t,” he said, his voice deceptively even, “make an exception.”

Without waiting for Torin’s reply, Xavier tightened his grip on my waist and shepherded me to the front porch. He held my elbows, helping me to lower myself onto the porch’s staircase.

I sighed, knowing there was no use swatting him away—he’d still do it anyway.

Once I was sitting, Xavier dropped down to my level, bouncing on his toes.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asked, looking at me closely.

I shook my head slowly, wrapping my arms around my legs and resting my cheek on my knees. I peered up at him. “No,” I mumbled. “I don’t want anything.”

I was honestly still feeling the effects of the wine. My eyesight was starting to get a little fuzzy, and my head felt a bit heavy from the alcohol. Maybe that was why my vision—or dream, or whatever it was—had felt so real. It was probably just the effects of the alcohol.

“I’m sorry,” I told Xavier. “I didn’t mean to cut our wine-*tastic* date short,” I added with a small smile.

Xavier settled down beside me on the porch. He leaned back on his hands, looking straight ahead. “I don’t care,” he said after a moment. “I was just worried when you hit your head.”

I couldn’t help the sappy smile that spread across my face at that. Xavier really cared about me—even if he was a stubborn, annoying, domineering, werewolf ass at times, there was no doubt that he loved and cared for me.

I reached out, taking his hand. I looked down at our joined hands, noting how small mine was compared to his.

“Was I out long?” I asked.

“Not at all,” Xavier said. “It all happened so fast.”

That was odd. I could have sworn I had been “away” for a few minutes, at the very least. How could I have been out for less than a minute, but been with the witches for such a long time? Unless it had all been my imagination…

“I have to admit…” Xavier started, then stopped.

I turned to him, arching a brow, urging him to go on.

“I have to admit,” he said hesitantly, his eyes glinting in hurt and frustration. “It really tore me up when I saw you kiss Greyson back there.”

I squeezed Xavier’s hand, understanding how it was probably hard for him to see me kiss *anyone* otherthan him. But he had to know that the hurt wasn’t intentional.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” I said gently.

“I was *thrilled* when you chose me,” Xavier continued, ignoring my explanation. “But watching you kiss Greyson, well, talk about pulling the rug out from under a guy.”

“I couldn’t just let Greyson *die*,” I said crossly. It has been his brother’s life on the line, for god’s sake. “Is that what *you* would have wanted?”

Xavier looked away, not answering me, which didn’t fill me with any kind of confidence. My heart hammered in my chest. I was already still feeling off from my little trip into the woods with the witches. This was the last thing I needed.

“Wait,” I said shakily, horrified. “Do you *want* Greyson to die?”

**Episode 1119**

ARTEMIS

Vander’s presence startled me more than any self-respecting Fae ought to have admitted. I tried to recover, to affect an aura of casual calm. I think I just looked more ridiculous in the attempt.

The others shifted around me, all probably wondering the same as me: how the hell had he managed to get here?

Vander looked around a little, seemingly a bit disoriented. His gaze traveled across the snow, up the tall trees around him, and down to his hands, before his beautiful eyes finally focused on me.

“Hey,” he said, crossing his arms with a pout. “What you did to me isn’t cool.”

“I—” I shook my head, confused. “What do you mean?”

“There’s only one way you could have convinced me to let you pass,” Vander stated, narrowing his eyes at me. He lifted his chin in a defiant manner, like a toddler who had discovered they had been deceived. “You used a Fae mind trick!”

That may be so, but did he have to just… say it like that? *Who is this guy? He’s obviously more than just some human ranger.*

I felt Rishika come up behind me, her lips close to my ear. With each breath she took, my neck was greeted by a rush of warm air.

“Is Vander a witch?” Rishika whispered, echoing my suspicions. She took a slight step to the side, falling into my line of vision. “How else could he possibly get here so fast?” she asked, louder now.

“He’s no witch,” Big Mac said, eyeing Vander suspiciously.

Vander gave me a sly grin, stepping closer. “I can be whatever you want me to be,” he purred, his voice low and gravelly.

What exactly was this creature’s game? Was… Was he flirting with me again? I resisted the urge to roll my eyes—god, this was *so* not the time for that. I just needed to know what the hell was going on. There was something fantastically primal about whatever Vander was. Not a Fae, not a witch. I’m not sure I had ever encountered someone like him. I wasn’t sure if I should be terrified about that… or just intrigued.

Rishika stepped forward, bristling at his innuendos toward me. “Cut the cute lumberjack routine,” she barked out, “and tell us what you’re up to.”

At that, Vander glanced at Rishika. “I’ll have to keep my eye on the two of you,” he commented, his gaze darting between Rishika and me.

Then he turned to address everyone else.

“The question is not what I’m doing,” he said loftily, amplifying his voice as he spread out his arms. “It’s why you have come here.” With a slight upward quirk of his lips, Vander continued. “If it’s for the view, I can take you to the best vantage point.”

He dropped his hands, coolly assessing Big Mac.

“Though you should have hiked up here instead of witching it,” he said simply. “There are so many things to see, the air is so fresh, the trees are so big. Maybe, if you’re lucky, you’ll even find an adorable little anim—”

“Maybe some other time,” Big Mac interrupted, her face scrunched up in annoyance. She dusted off an invisible speck of dirt, gathering her stuff. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have work to do.”

Vander shrugged, unaffected by Big Mac’s dismissive tone.

“Who am I to stop you from doing your work?” he said, eyeing everyone else.

I stepped forward, curious. “Who are you?” I asked.

Vander turned, coming closer to me. “I told you,” he said. “I’m Vander. I’m just the local ranger.”

I looked at him, disbelieving. He was lying. There was no way he could have gotten up here that fast—not without possessing some sort of magic or supernatural power of his own. Maybe he was a wolf and just very, very good at hiding it.

I started forward, ready to get some answers, but then I felt a hand pull me back. I looked over to see Orla grabbing me.

“Let’s just get this over with,” she said.

I glanced back at Vander, pinning him with a stare, still wondering what he really was—but it was likely a lost cause. Sighing, I fell back with Orla.

I could feel Vander watching us as we busied ourselves with what we needed to do in order to draw out the Keeper of All Nature. After a while, he hustled up to us, curiosity clearly written on his face.

“So what kind of work do you plan on doing here?” Vander asked.

No one bothered answering.

“This is a national forest!” he exclaimed, clearly concerned. “You can’t just choose this as your office.”

“Out of our way, ranger,” Nneka snapped at him. “Or I’ll turn you into a chipmunk.”

Vander gave Nneka a slow smile, his eyes dancing with mischief. “Like this?” he asked.

And before we knew it, where there had once been a ranger stood a chattering chipmunk, swishing its tail in the snow.

Everyone screamed in surprise, including me. Was there even such a thing as chipmunk shifters? The mortal world was so much stranger than I could have imagined.

I turned to Nneka, slightly panicked. “Did you do that, or—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Vander was back.

He stood there proudly in front of us, apparently happy that he’d been able to shock us.

Vander beamed at us. “I can also turn into a rat, a squirrel, a beaver, a gerbil, a hamster—”

“I told you he’s a witch!” Rishika exclaimed.

Vander stopped talking abruptly, turning toward Rishika.

“I can do that, too!” he said chirpily. Immediately, his skin started turning green, and warts popped up on his face. I blinked, and he was dressed in a black pointed hat, holding a broom.

Vander—now looking like the classic witch—cackled loudly, the sound echoing through the air around us. Okay, so much for my chipmunk shifter idea.

And, as if the situation could get any more ridiculous, Vander began to shout, “I’m melting! I’m melting!”

How absurd. As if something as powerful as a witch could simply melt.

As he was screeching, his body was rippling in and out of sight. Slowly, he started disappearing, until only his hand was left, reaching out dramatically toward us. Then, poof! With a puff of smoke, he was completely gone.

“He’s *melting?*” I asked, incredulous. “What’s wrong with him? Where’d he even go?”

“I’m here.” It was Vander’s voice, echoing all around us. “In the wind.” Then, suddenly, his voice came from below us. “Or here, in the soil.”

By now, we were gaping, completely and utterly confused. Vander reappeared before us, in one piece, as his human self. He gave us another smile, his eyes sparkling.

“I can be anything,” he said excitedly. “Go anywhere.”

Big Mac let out a groan, apparently having had enough.

“He’s wasting our time,” she said, turning away from him.

I pursed my lips, torn between fascination with Vander’s antics and eagerness to solve the portal problem. In the end, I decided we needed to get the portal figured out.

“Look, Vander,” I said, trying to keep my voice level. “I’m sorry, but we don’t really have time to play.”

Vander simply cocked his head at me. “Oh, I’ve got nothing but time, and you still haven’t explained why you’ve come all this way.”

This time, Orla decided to try and deal with him.

With a gentle smile, she said, “I appreciate your inquisitive mind, but I doubt you would fully understand.”

Vander just blinked at her. “Try me.”

Big Mac stopped what she was doing, exchanging looks with all of us. Apparently, no one was sure what to do or say.

I took a deep breath, figuring that if we told him the truth, maybe he’d stop bugging us.

I squared my gaze at Vander.

“Well,” I said, prepared for him to start firing off a million questions. “We’re here to seek out the Keeper of All Nature.”

Vander just looked at us, oddly unsurprised. “Why?” he asked simply, a little amused twinkle in his eyes.

I sighed, wondering if I really had to get into all of the details. It wasn’t like he needed to know.

“We just have a question for the Keeper,” I told him, hoping that would be enough to keep his incessant questions at bay for a while.

I shifted away slightly, finally taking a genuine look around. We were at the summit, and there was nothing but air and snow here. Nothing else.

I turned to Nneka, a doubtful look on my face. “I think you made a mistake,” I told her lightly, arching a brow at her. “The Keeper’s not here.”

Nneka frowned at me, her brows furrowed in indignation.

“Don’t question me, Fae,” she snarled.

“Maybe we should have gone to Mount Hood,” Orla wondered aloud, apparently coming to the same realization as me.

“No.” Vander’s strong voice echoed throughout the mountain. “You don’t need to go there.”

I turned to him, curious but hopeful. “Oh,” I asked. “Do you know where the Keeper is?”

There was an ear-splitting sound of thunder that came up from the very depths of the earth. The ground trembled underfoot as heat rushed across my face. I shielded my eyes against the grit and the embers that surrounded us from out of nowhere.

I started coughing along with the others, waving away the smoke that had suddenly appeared. Slowly, it cleared away, revealing Vander—who had transformed into a tall, menacing-looking lava monster.

Through the heat and the dripping lava, I could swear I saw the creature smile as two molten eyes appeared. “Why, the Keeper is right here.”

**Episode 1120**

VIOLET

I narrowed my gaze at the little maid, who was presenting us with a platter of hors d’oeuvres. I eyed the deviled eggs with disgust—these were absolutely inappropriate for a party of this class. Much less a lady such as myself.

“How dare you try to force us to eat something so common!” I scolded the maid. I looked to Daniel for support. “Daniel, this is unacceptable.”

Daniel glanced at me, opening his mouth but then closing it. It looked like he was hesitating. Honestly, how could he even be thinking it? “Are you really considering this?” I cried out.

Then, without so much as a glance at me, Daniel reached out to the platter, scooped up one of the deviled eggs, and popped it into his mouth. Immediately, his eyes widened as he continued chewing—albeit more slowly, now.

“Are they really that good?” I asked him, noting the sudden look in his eyes, which glinted with something I couldn’t quite put a name to.

I looked at the deviled eggs again. Hmm, well they did look particularly delicious—I took a delicate sniff—they did smell absolutely scrumptious. I took a cursory glance at the rest of the party. Everyone was mingling and eating and talking amongst themselves. I looked back at the eggs.

“Oh, all right,” I said, sighing as I stepped forward and grabbed a deviled egg. “Fine, I’ll try one.”

It was a party, after all.

The second I put the egg in my mouth and started chewing, the room started to spin. I went completely still, not even breathing as my surroundings went in and out of focus, like my vision was being run through a kaleidoscope.

The mansion that had looked so beautiful was actually falling apart around us. There was dust and decay everywhere; what had seemed like beautiful, ornate decor was actually just broken and chipped remnants of the past.

And the guests! They weren’t even physical beings—their feet weren’t even touching the floor. They were gliding.

As I swallowed the egg, it all hit me at once. I… I was Violet! My name was *Violet*.

I practically jumped out of my skin at the sudden realization.

Then, without so much as a sound, the decrepit manor was replaced with the image of the party once more. I looked around, trying to figure out whether anyone else had seen what I’d just seen—but all the guests were still busy partying. It was as if nothing had even happened.

I looked at Charlie—*oh, my sweet Charlie*—whose eyes were still wide.

“What…” he whispered, shocked, lifting his eyes to meet mine. “What just happened?”

The maid, who was still standing there with her platter, was watching us carefully, her face drawn in nervous anticipation as she waited for us to say something.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, realizing that the maid had *wanted* us to see the truth.

“Wait… do you know something?” Charlie chimed in, also turning to address the maid.

The maid looked around, her gaze darting side to side. She edged slightly closer.

“None of us are safe here,” she murmured.

In an instant, everything started coming back to me, flashing through my mind as small, scattered bits of information—the mansion, Bert, how the clothes were making Charlie and I think we were different people…

“What do you mean?” I pressed, my eyes still wide from the sudden flood of information.

The maid looked around again, her expression grim. “It’s not safe to talk here, either,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “There are too many ears and eyes.”

She glanced up at us, bowing cordially.

“Meet me at the grand staircase in five minutes,” she said under her breath, her head still bowed. Then she straightened and scurried off.

I exchanged a look with Charlie.

“Have we been drugged? I feel like there’s something we were supposed to be doing… or… where were we before all this?” He said, rubbing the back of his head, brow furrowed in concentration.

“We’re literally in a room full of ghosts,” I pointed out, subtly gesturing to the rest of the room. I could feel my heart beating erratically at the craziness of this whole situation. “And we haven’t been able to get out of here. If Dolores—or whatever her real name is—knows anything about this, then we need to listen.”

Charlie nodded and, without a word, we both stood up and started toward the staircase. As we made our way through the party, Bert glided up to us.

“Are you both enjoying the party?” he asked with a wide smile, observing us closely.

I paused momentarily, trying to take on the voice of Lady Herrington. I brandished an alarmingly large smile. “It’s lovely, really,” I said, my voice once again high and aristocratic. I turned toward Charlie. “Isn’t it, Daniel?”

Charlie didn’t answer, too busy staring at Bert. I nudged him covertly.

“Daniel?”

Charlie snapped back into the moment, giving Bert a mild smile while looking lovingly at me.

“Ah, yes,” Charlie said. “The ambience is truly excellent, old boy!”

I eyed Charlie, trying to will him to tone it down. He was trying a little *too* hard.

Bert grinned at us even more widely, as if that were possible. “I knew you two would love it!” he exclaimed loudly. “Have you both met the Ellerys? They own the copper mine.”

“Yes, they’re wonderful,” I said hastily. This conversation needed to end, and soon. “And their copper… It just sparkles.”

With my shoulder, I pushed Charlie forward, toward the staircase. But as we started moving away from Bert, he called out to us.

“Why are you two leaving?” he asked, frowning.

Charlie and I both stared at each other, panicked. What the heck were we supposed to say?

“We, er…” I scrambled for an answer that sounded plausible. “We wanted to see the gorgeous staircase?”

I grimaced inwardly, chiding myself. Couldn’t I have come up with something better than that? We wanted to see the *staircase?* Only an idiot would believe that bit of nonsense.

Bert assessed us. Immediately, his smile brightened and became sly as his eyes glistened in an ethereal way.

“Oh, I understand,” he said demurely, winking. “I’m so pleased. I knew this party would put you two in the mood!” He began to shoo us away. “Get to it, my dears!”

Then, he left us, gliding away.

I could feel my cheeks burning from embarrassment after Bert’s horribly inaccurate understanding, but at least it had gotten us out from under his scrutiny. I gathered the skirts of my dress and hurried out with Charlie to the staircase.

Charlie shook his head. “This is the weirdest thing—look out!”

He grabbed me by the elbow and steered me away from a large hole in a broken floorboard. I gasped, breaking out in a cold sweat. I pressed a hand to my chest to calm my racing heart, and I looked up at Charlie with a grateful smile.

“Everything is decaying,” he said. “Like when we first came here.”

I glanced toward the ballroom. “Bert must have done a real number on us,” I commented. “How could we ever have liked this dump?”

Charlie hummed in agreement. “I wonder what Dolores wanted,” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I hope she can help us.”

I looked up at him. “Did you notice that Dolores looked like a real human, not one of those creepy ghosts? Do you think she’s trapped here, too?”

Charlie was opening his mouth to speak when a harsh whisper grabbed our attention.

“Come with me.”

Speak of the devil… or only other human. We followed her as she led us around to the side of the staircase, stopping in front of a small door. She opened the door and ushered us inside. Once she came through as well, she quickly closed it.

She turned toward us, putting her back to the door.

“If Bert find us, he’s going to make things difficult for all of us,” Dolores warned. “Especially me.”

I looked at her curiously. I had so many questions.

“Why are you here, Dolores?” I asked.

“My name’s really Marta Zhao,” she said. “Bert trapped me here.”

That answered my question. We were all stuck here now. We couldn’t have been Bert’s only victims. The real question now was, how were we all going to get back out?

“Can you help us escape?” Charlie asked hopefully, saying precisely what I had been thinking.

She looked at us solemnly. “The only way out is to capture Bert.”

I arched a brow—it could hardly be that easy. “If it’s that simple,” I said, “then why haven’t you done it before?”

Marta chewed on her lip, hesitating. Finally, after a moment, she decided to speak.

“The last time I tried,” she said, “the three people who tried to help me…” She stared at us, her eyes taking on a haunted look. “Well, they disappeared.”

Charlie and I looked at each other. Disappeared? That didn’t sound so good.

Marta clambered up, reaching over to a drawer. “But you two seem different, like you could actually put up a fight. Maybe we’d stand half a chance. What do you say? Will you help me?”

**Episode 1121**

The silence from Xavier was not comforting. He could stall for as long as he wanted, I wasn’t going to let him off the hook. I narrowed my eyes at him and frowned.

“So you *do* want him to die?” I asked, my mouth hanging open slightly in disbelief.

Xavier rubbed at the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. No matter how much I kept trying to make eye contact with him, he kept looking away, avoiding my gaze.

“It would solve a lot of problems,” Xavier admitted slowly.

I gaped at him. “Your own *brother*,” I said, my voice taking on an edge.

Xavier quickly tried to explain it away.

“I just want to be with you,” he said, his voice pleading for me to understand. He gestured to our surroundings. “I don’t want to play these silly games.” His hands fell back to his lap, as he finally looked me in the eye. “I know you can’t actively pick anyone,” he said. “But I don’t know how long we can indulge Torin’s little gameshow fantasies, either.”

“I’m not so sure I’d call them silly,” I responded, a bit annoyed. What did he want me to do? Just end the games and choosehim? He knew I couldn’t do that. “I mean, I almost killed Greyson,” I added, pinning Xavier with a look.

“But you didn’t,” he shot back.

Was he serious right now? The only reason his brother hadn’t *died* was because my last-minute completely spontaneous decision had *saved* him. I could feel my ears heat, warmth spreading across my cheeks at the memory of that impulsive move.

“Don’t you understand?” I bit out, getting louder as my frustration with Xavier increased. “I accidentally caused Greyson harm—and it could have been worse!”

By now, I was breathing much more heavily, anger now filling every crevice in my body.

“And it was all because I said that I—” I stopped short, catching myself before I said the word. I didn’t want to send Greyson flying toward his death again. I honestly couldn’t be too careful. “P–I–C–K–E–D,” I spelled out, praying it wouldn’t count, “you.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed with hurt, then immediately hardened as he regarded me coolly.

“Are you sorry that you picked me?” he asked, keeping his voice even.

I let out a breath of air, beyond frustrated with the way this conversation was going.

“That’s not it,” I told him, shaking my head. “Not only am I in this horrible position where if I choose, one of your dies, but now I have to be careful with everything I say.”

Xavier simply twisted his lips, not saying anything.

“Just one wrong word…” I continued, my voice dropping to a shaky whisper as the reality of my situation hit me. Tears started to form in my eyes as I thought back on today’s events and imagined a world without either one of them. “Just one word and I could lose either of you—maybe both. Who knows?”

Xavier’s head whipped toward me at the sound of my nasally voice and soft sniffles. He immediately softened and sidled closer, tucking me against him.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” he said gently as he brushed my cheek, wiping away the lone tear that had escaped.

I leaned into his touch, finding comfort within it. I closed my eyes, inhaling his scent.

“I don’t know what to say anymore,” I said quietly, after a moment. “I feel like everything is a ticking timebomb.”

Xavier moved my face toward him, pressing a quick kiss against my forehead, and despite everything I had to admit that little action gave me more comfort than anything had in a while. I hated being trapped in the middle like this.

“We’ll just have to be more careful with our words, then,” he said as he stroked my hair, trying to calm me down. “And…”

He turned away, resting his chin on top of my head, not saying anything. I stayed silent, thinking he would finish his sentence. But instead, he just continued to stroke my hair, apparently lost in thought. After a couple of minutes, Xavier’s hand stilled.

“And,” he said, his voice low but steady with confidence, “why risk anything when I know that in the end, you’re going to pick me? And it won’t be because you say it accidentally.”

I shifted away slightly, trying to look him in the eye again. I opened my mouth to respond, but Xavier simply tightened his hold on me, bringing me back against him.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he stated.

What was there to even say to something like that? This was life and death, not inconveniencing some date on prom night! His confidence rankled me, but could I really fault him for it? He was just as trapped as I was.

Xavier glanced over toward the wine barrel.

“Is Torin watching us?” Xavier asked, changing the topic, apparently having said what he needed to say.

I looked over to where he was looking. There was Torin, trying—and failing—to hide behind the wine barrel so he could spy on us.

“He means well,” I said, smiling softly. “He’s just a romantic at heart.”

Xavier nodded, his chin pressing down on my head with the motion.

“I think we should continue our date.” His voice had taken on that hard, seductive edge, and he gestured toward the wine barrel.

I gave him a half-smile, only one side of my mouth quirking up.

“I’m not in the mood for squishy grapes,” I admitted, wriggling my toes. I could still feel the grapes under my feet. I glanced down, realizing how ridiculous I looked.

“Look at my feet,” I said. “They’re purple.”

Xavier looked down at my feet, then laughed, smiling widely. He quieted down after a moment and looked up at me. His eyes sparkled as some sort of idea took root.

“We can still have a date,” he said, smiling slyly. “But maybe we can do it my way.”

I cocked my head, intrigued. “What do you have in mind?”

Xavier shrugged, looking sheepish. “I realize that when you and I first met, I wasn’t exactly the most romantic guy around.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Maybe not,” I said, my voice light, as I reached over to squeeze his hand briefly. “But I don’t regret any of it. You and I have been through so much.”

And it was true. This whole thing had started with Xavier. And honestly? If it wasn’t for the *due destini*, Xavier and I would be together right now, as mates. It would be so simple. Nobody would die, nobody would have to get hurt. I wouldn’t have to deal with having to *choose*, nor would I have to deal with complicated feelings.

But what about Greyson?

I paused, remembering the witches and what Greyson had told me—about their offer to change the past in order to change the future. Would I dare? And how would I even decide what to change?

I flexed my fingers, tense from… well, everything. No matter what possibility or solution I considered, it still came down to the damn curse. Xavier or Greyson?

“Cali? Earth to Cali.”

Xavier’s playful tone pulled me out of my thoughts. I blinked rapidly, trying to focus on the voice.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, of course I am,” I exclaimed. Xavier raised his brows, caught off-guard by my loudness. I immediately corrected my tone, making myself sound calmer. “I’m fine, weirdo, don’t look at me like that.”

Xavier looked at me suspiciously. “Are you sure?” he pressed. “I asked you twice and you didn’t respond.”

What did he want me to say? *“Oh, sorry, I’m just stressed as all hell about some magical ladies I saw once in a forest who gave me some omens of doom. Let’s go back to our date now!”*?

“I’m so sorry,” I said, my cheeks reddening. “What did you want to know?”

“I was asking,” he said slowly, still appraising me, “if you could go anywhere on a date with me, where would it be?”

I smiled up at him, touched. It was cute that he wanted to take me on my dream date, but I wasn’t exactly in a state where I could just go anywhere.

“It’s a nice thought,” I finally said. “But I can’t go anywhere, remember?”

“I know,” Xavier insisted. “But still. What would be the perfect date?”

I paused to think, imagining myself with Xavier. Just the two of us, with no rowdy pack house to pester us. I felt a sappy smile creep onto my face as thoughts of us at an intimate, romantic restaurant filled my mind.

Xavier would be all dressed up, looking delectable in a tux, complete with a bowtie. He would open doors for me, pull my seat out, and hold my hands across the table. We would stare lovingly into each other’s eyes, feed each other little bites of our dishes…

Sure, it was silly, and a bit old-fashioned, but I knew I wanted to have that kind of experience with Xavier.

I lifted my head to look up at him again.

“A quiet, romantic dinner where we can talk would be just right,” I told him.

Xavier smiled at me. “I know the perfect place,” he said, sounding a bit excited. “And the food is great.”

I gave him a sad smile.

“If only we could go,” I said wistfully.

Xavier dusted off his hands and stood up. “We will,” he declared.

“But what about the spell around the house?” I asked, dubious. “Which, might I remind you, is keeping me here.”

Xavier simply grinned at me. “Maybe not,” he said, eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Oh Xavier, you’re not seriously suggesting—”

“What if I could break you out?”

**Episode 1122**

GREYSON

*What exactly did she want me to say?*

I mean, it wasn’t like I had never thought about this… possibility. Quite honestly, I had thought about this very question multiple times since I’d first seen Fenrir. He just looked so much like me, with his blond hair and grey eyes and that smile that looked so much like mine, that I couldn’t help *considering* it.

I had imagined what my life would be like, if it were true—being responsible for a young boy, being a father. I knew I hadn’t had the best role model in that department, but I knew I wouldn’t just leave Fenrir fatherless. I knew I would step up.

But I’d also wondered how Cali would fit into this imagined life, in which Fenrir was actually my child. Cali was young—would she even want to be saddled with the responsibility? Would she really be all right with being thrust into the role of mother, even if not in the biological sense?

That was, of course, if she picked me—which she would, no doubt about it.

Maren’s voice drew me out of my thoughts. “I’m not sure how to interpret your lack of response,” she said. Her face was drawn tight with either concern, confusion, or fear—I couldn’t tell which.

I straightened, refocusing on Maren. I looked her in the eye, taking everything into consideration—my life, my past, Cali…

“If Fenrir turns out to be my son,” I told Maren, my voice steady and unwavering, “I’d… I’d be there for him. I wouldn’t just abandon him. I couldn’t.”

“And if you aren’t his father?” Maren asked. Her face remained calm and expressionless, though her eyes seemed to watch me carefully. “What then?”

I cocked my head, pondering this. If Fenrir wasn’t my son, I technically had no obligation or responsibility toward him. But still, I couldn’t just leave him like that, with no good example of what a werewolf—or man—should be. Maren would love and do anything for Fenrir, I had no doubt, but to grow up without the guidance of a pack… I knew far too well what a bad pack experience was like, and I sure didn’t want Fenrir to experience it.

I swung my gaze back to Maren, who was waiting patiently for my answer. I took a deep breath.

“Fenrir is a young werewolf,” I said. “He should be raised in a pack. So, even if he’s not my son, I could still be his Alpha.”

I knew I would always be there for Fenrir—to guide him, teach him, protect him.

Then I thought about how Fenrir had grown on everyone else—the rest of the pack had taken an immediate liking to the boy’s demanding but sweet nature. I realized then that I wouldn’t be the only one who would support him.

“And he’d have the whole pack to help raise him into a fine, young werewolf,” I added hastily.

Maren nodded, considering my words. “And where do I fit into this?” she asked. She watched me, her face revealing nothing.

“You’re Fenrir’s mother,” I responded, keeping my voice light, “So, obviously, you’d be involved in his life and in this pack.”

Maren’s cool eyes regarded me. Then she smiled. “This conversation is making you uneasy, isn’t it?” she murmured. “Is it the idea of being Fenrir’s father?” Her voice suddenly went icy. “Or is it imagining how I would fit into your pack’s world?”

I narrowed my eyes at her, not liking what she was insinuating. She knew that I already had a mate—and she knew that I loved Cali. There was no doubt about that.

“What was between us is in the past,” I reminded Maren, my voice taking on an edge. “And whatever our future is, we’ll just have to see.”

For a second there, Maren’s eyes lit up—with hope, with anticipation, with excitement. I immediately backtracked, realizing how she might have taken my words. I needed to address this, and I needed to address it now, before it became too much of an issue.

“But I want to make a few things clear,” I added, my voice hard. “What happened in Portland will *not* happen again. Ever.”

Maren’s eyes instantly dulled, but she started laughing loudly, her entire body shaking. She threw her head back, wiping an imaginary tear from her eye.

“Well, at least we agree on something!” she exclaimed, still laughing. “There’s hope.”

My brow furrowed in utter confusion as I puzzled over her reaction. Maybe I’d been reading her wrong this whole time…

“I completely agree that what happened between us in Portland was a mistake,” Maren said, after calming down from her bout of laughter. “It was fueled by old feelings that we clearly don’t have for each other anymore.”

Maren gave me a sad smile and stepped closer, until we were only a couple of inches apart. She reached out and brushed back my hair, her fingers curling into the strands as her nails gently caressed my scalp.

“It’s a shame, really,” she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

I stood frozen in front of her, not understanding what was going on. Just a minute ago she’d been laughing about the idea us being together, and now she was touching me like we were still a couple.

I eyed her, trying to figure out what she was playing at. Which one was it? Did she want me or not?

Suddenly, I felt Maren’s fingers grasp a small chunk of my hair, her gaze turning hard.

“A shame that you have to give up one of your precious strands of hair,” Maren finished, her lips turning down into a small frown. Without warning, Maren plucked out a strand of my hair.

“What?”

Maren held my hair up in front of my face, between her fingers. “For the DNA test.”

Then, she turned away, heading to her room. I released a long breath. It was like I was back to square one with Maren. I didn’t know what she wanted, I didn’t know if she wanted me, and I still didn’t know if Fenrir was my son.

I couldn’t let this continue to distract me. I was already caught in hell with Cali, I didn’t need to be turned around by my ex at the same time. With a heavy sigh, I turned and decided to head downstairs. As I went toward the front door, I paused. Cali and Xavier were there, on their little date.

Part of me would have loved to interrupt, but I also knew that we’d all agreed—albeit begrudgingly—to play Torin’s little *Bachelorette* game.

Plus, I wasn’t really in the mood. The truth was, I was still a bit unnerved by Maren’s behavior. I had a strong feeling she was playing some kind of game—I just didn’t know the rules yet.

With a huff, I pivoted around and headed out to the back. As I stepped into the back yard, I spotted Astrid, who was running from the lake at full speed with Fenrir in her arms. As I watched them approach, I realized Fenrir was crying.

I flexed my fingers, readying myself. Maybe this was a chance to test my fathering skills.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Astrid looked at me, worry and panic in her eyes.

“I don’t know,” she said breathlessly, her voice high and shaky. “We were just playing by the lake, when all of a sudden, Fenrir got upset.”

I focused on Fenrir, who was still in Astrid’s arms. I touched his arm gently.

“Hey, little man, what happened?” I asked him softly.

Fenrir’s face was red as he continued to cry. “It—it smells b-bad,” he choked out between sobs.

“He kept saying that,” Astrid said. “But I didn’t smell anything.”

The poor kid was crying from a bad smell? I stifled the smile that threatened to appear on my face—kids could be real amusing, sometimes.

“What smelled bad?” I asked, addressing Fenrir again.

He immediately pointed at the lake.

“How about we check it out together?” I asked, reaching out toward him. Maybe this would be a potential father-son moment. If he *was* my son, that is.

Fenrir shook his head vigorously, a new batch of tears forming in his eyes. “No!” he cried out. “I want my mommy.”

That was expected; he had only just met me. There was time to establish a bond. I had to remind myself something like that couldn’t just happen overnight.

“That’s all right,” I said. “How about I check it out, and you can stay inside with Mommy, okay?”

I gestured toward the house, indicating that Astrid should take Fenrir inside. Then I headed toward the lake.

As I made my way there, I couldn’t help but wonder if this was what my life would be like if Fenrir was my son—soothing cries and investigating fears.

But as I got closer to the lake, I realized that Fenrir’s bad smell wasn’t just nothing.

I stilled, the scent of death filling my nose.

*Vampires*.

**Episode 1123**

ARTEMIS

Everyone around me shrieked as we all craned our necks to look up at the creature. He was now almost twice my height and seemed to be made entirely out of smoldering lava that threatened to spill right off his shambling form. It was still shaped like a man, though—two arms, two legs, and a head-looking thing on top.

But how did one go about defeating a being made out of red-hot glowing rock?

I heard the telltale cracking of bones that told me Rishika was shifting. I turned to see her wolf taking a defensive step in front of me and baring her teeth at the lava creature. My heart gave an unexpected leap in my chest at her protection. That was still something I was getting used to, having people… care about me.

I hadn’t looked for that quality in a person in a long time. I’d gotten used to being my own caretaker, and I tended to scoff at anyone who tried to treat me like anything other than the personification of a deadly weapon. But something about the way Rishika did it felt different. I didn’t find myself bristling at her desire to shield me from danger. I liked being cared for.

But I also didn’t want her to die, so I grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and pulled her backward.

“Be careful,” I told her while reaching for my blade, knowing I’d feel safer once I had it in my grasp. But would a hunting knife like this even be useful against something like… whatever this thing was?

Big Mac and Nneka raised their arms and began to chant. I recognized witchery when I saw it, andI knew they had to be attempting a first strike against him. Orla followed suit, reaching out repeatedly and making pulling movements in the air as a nearby tree’s roots slowly crept toward the creature, attempting to ensnare his ankles and hold him to the ground.

I shook my head, knowing that getting caught up watching my mother do battle wouldn’t help anyone. I focused on the monster and sent a surge of energy toward him. The bolt hit him, but all it did was make him vibrate a little. He threw back his head, and I hoped I would hear him howl in agony.

Instead, he burst out into a throaty and booming laugh.

“Oh, do that again,” he implored me. “It tickles!”

Angry, I tried again, releasing a bolt at least twice as powerful as the first. But all it did was make him clutch at his belly as he laughed, lava and embers spraying all around, making us all jump back. My stomach sank as I noticed the roots burning up from the heat of the creature’s lava body. None of our magic was working.

Orla, Big Mac, and Nneka must have realized the same thing, because they all lowered their arms.

Orla looked at us, nervous. “Nothing affects him.”

Rishika wrestled out of my grip and lunged forward toward the lava beast. I yelped in surprise and reached out for her, trying to grab her by the tail. Anything to keep her safe. But I missed her and nearly lost my balance and face planted into the snow.

I watched powerlessly as Rishika flew through the air, but then she came to a stop—like she’d hit some kind of invisible wall—and bounced backward. She shifted back into her human form in midair and landed crouched beside me.

She looked up, naked and confused.

“What happened?” she asked, her teeth already chattering. It was far too cold up here for her to be without a shred of clothing.

I pulled her up and unzipped my coat, trying to invite her into its warm embrace. She slid her hands around my waist and leaned against me, taking the warmth I offered. I tried to keep the blush from my cheeks, but as she pressed against me under my coat, I could just feel the slight chill of her own skin and the musky, wolfish scent of her hair.

“What are you?” Rishika shouted at the towering figure.

“I am he,” it replied, its voice familiar. “The one you seek.”

“Vander?” I asked, confused. “Is that… still you?”

The lava man chuckled again, his laugh sounding more like the crash of boulders than anything human.

“Fooled you, didn’t I?” he teased. “I’ll warn you, don’t get too close. My lava is at a constant twenty-two hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Trust me, you can’t handle the heat.”

“Can you do something about that?” Big Mac asked Orla, keeping her voice low as she gestured toward Rishika. “Damn werewolves always exposing themselves. She needs to cover up if she’s going to survive this weather.”

“Of course.” Orla shot Rishika a kind smile—it appeared she’d grown fond of her during their time together. She tangled her fingers together and rocked her joined hands back and forth. Soon enough, a garment made out of woven leaves and vines appeared above Rishika’s head and was lowered onto her body.

Apparently satisfied, Big Mac turned to Vander, planting her hands on her hips as she looked up at him angrily.

“What did you mean ‘I am he, the one you seek’?” Big Mac barked. “That’s vague as hell.”

Vander gestured to himself, which caused some ash to slip off of his fingertips and onto the ground a foot away from Nneka. She took a large step backward.

“Apologies,” he murmured to her before answering Big Mac’s question. “I am the Keeper of All Nature. Sometimes it gets away from me a bit, but… that’s for another day.”

“What does the Keeper of All Nature do?” I asked. It was a pretty nebulous title.

Was he like the Kollector? Did he gather elements of nature only to trap and curate them for his own pleasure? Did he seek to control everything with no care for how others might prefer to live?

Vander gestured around at the beautiful mountaintop.

“There’s nature everywhere,” he said. “I am the one who keeps it all in balance.”

“So you’re saying you’re actually Mother Nature?” Rishika blurted out.

“There are many names,” Vander said. “Did you know that the Incas called me *Pachamama*?”

“So… Mother Nature is a dude?” Rishika asked. “Gotta be honest, wasn’t expecting that one.”

“I mean, today I’m a man,” Vander answered, a bit defensively. “Who knows what tomorrow will bring?”

“Oh,” Rishika mumbled, seeming a little embarrassed. “Well that makes… a bit more sense.”

“It’s why your magic does not work on me,” he continued, a bit more kindly. “Magic exists to right wrongs, to create balance where there is none. But I *am* balance. I am a constant in a constantly changing world… which means that I too must change. For our world to work as it is supposed to, spells must not be able to harm the natural balance of things.”

I dodged another bit of falling ash that slipped off of his nose, resisting the urge to yell at him to be a bit more careful with his lava body.

“Now you know about me,” Vander sat down so he didn’t quite tower over us anymore. “In return, I would like to know about you. What is the real reason you’ve come here?”

We all exchanged looks. It wasn’t every day you ran into a guy who told you he was Mother Nature, the sentient life force of the entire Earth. Could we trust him?

“If what you say is true,” Orla started, eyeing him warily, “then you need to help us, or the natural order will be thrown into chaos.”

“Chaos?” he asked, seeming only slightly concerned. “You have described a terrible thing. A powerful thing. There has been nothing I have faced I could not set right when all was said and done.”

“What happened to the portal to the Fae world?” Nneka asked, clearly bristling at how casually Vander was taking this news. “The one at Haystack Rock?”

Vander shrugged. “I closed it,” he answered simply, as if that required no further explanation.

“And why the hell would you do a thing like that?” Big Mac asked sharply. “People use that thing.”

“I felt a powerful surge vibrate between the two worlds,” he said. “It threatened the balance, so I closed it up. That is my job.”

The powerful surge must have been the Orb entering the Fae world. It made sense to hear this from Vander, but it didn’t make me feel any more at ease. Who knew kind of havoc the Orb could be wreaking in the Fae world?

“Well…” Nneka looked at Vander, clearly bewildered. “Open it back up!”

Vander leaned forward, shifting back into his human form and getting up to his feet. His smile faded as he stood, and I braced for bad news. He looked at me solemnly.

“I’d like to…” he admitted. “You seem like nice people, so why not? As long as you promise to be careful?”

I nodded, hoping it would be enough to answer his question.

Vander turned to look out at the view. The fog was thick around us, but what I could make out of the scenery was beautiful. He stared out into the far distance, concentrating hard.

I realized he had to be looking at Haystack Rock. I wondered if he could actually see it from here, and what it would look like to him.

But then I saw his brow furrow in worry.

“What?” I asked, not liking that look one bit.

“This has never happened before,” he said, almost more to himself than to me. “I can’t do it.”

“You can’t do what?” Orla asked anxiously.

“I can’t open the portal.”

**Episode 1124**

VIOLET

Charlie and I watched as Marta removed something from her skirts—a bundle of rags that she unwrapped to reveal some kind of mechanical device. A silver hodgepodge of steampunk-esque parts, and what looked like pieces of an old digital camera.

“What’s that?” Charlie asked, looking down at the thing Marta cradled as if it were as precious to her as a baby.

“I built it myself,” Marta explained. “It’s a vessel to capture poltergeists, like Bert.”

“Like *Ghostbusters*?” Charlie asked excitedly. “That’s dope.”

Marta raised a brow and looked at me. “Is he all right?” she asked, sounding concerned. “He’s speaking nonsense.”

I shot Charlie a look that I hoped read “Let’s not talk about 80s movies with random strangers who have been trapped in an alternate dimension for who knows how long. We don’t have time for that.”

I wondered if Marta’s device could possibly work. I knew that Cali and the others had managed to trap Tony’s ghost in the vase they’d stolen from that museum. I’d try to avoid telling Charlie about the theft. He already had enough baggage with supernaturals, given his family history and now this recent run-in with vampires *and* poltergeists. When were we going to catch a break and meet a chill group of magical people?

But that was beside the point. The vase the others had used had already been magical. Could you actually build an object to house a spirit like Bert? And could you do it with a bunch of gears and Radio Shack reject parts?

“Your device…” I eyed Marta, watching like a hawk to see if there were any signs she wasn’t telling us the whole truth. “How does it work?”

“First I need to know that you’re going to help me,” she insisted. “I’ve been alone in my fight against Bert for so long.”

Charlie and I looked into each other’s eyes. I saw how eager he was to believe there was a way out of this. I wanted to believe it too, but I couldn’t help but be skeptical. Not everyone who promised to help you could be trusted.

*We don’t have much of a choice*,I told him through our mind link, hoping he could prove me wrong.

*I agree*, he admitted. *But I don’t want to lose you.*

*What do you mean ‘lose me?’* I asked him, reaching out to give his hand a squeeze.

*You heard what Marta said*,he reminded me. *The last time she tried this, the people who helped her disappeared. I can’t risk the same thing happening to you.*

*We can’t stay in this house forever*,I told him. *And we can’t risk Bert getting his hooks into us again with his influence, or whatever. You’re not going to lose me. We’re getting out of here together.*

“Deepest apologies,” Marta interrupted. “But are you two going to stare at each other for much longer? We have work to do.”

Charlie nodded at me, and I knew we were both in. We had to try.

“All right, we’re in.” I turned to Marta. “What do you need?”

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Charlie and I returned to the ballroom a few minutes later. We were both doing our absolute best to stay in character as Daniel and Lady Herrington. I didn’t know if I could make my posture any more perfect—I was actually hurting my back a little.

*Which curtain is Marta going to be hiding in, again?* I mind-linked with Charlie, not wanting to be overheard.

Charlie made an almost imperceptibly small gesture toward the window at the far end of the ballroom.

*All we have to do is get Bert there so Marta can use her thing*, he reminded me.

*Okay, I’ve got this*, I replied.

That last part was mostly to psyche myself up.

I made my way through the crowd of ghosts, toward Bert. He hadn’t spotted me yet, so I had a chance to just observe him. He was watching over the party, his eyes sparkling with emotion. Like nothing made him prouder than seeing the place full and people at ease.

Apparently, it didn’t matter to him that it was all a lie.

He put a hand over his heart when he saw me, positively beaming with pride. Like he’d raised me from birth as opposed to having met me a mere twenty-four hours ago.

“I didn’t expect you back so soon, my lady,” he said with a saucy wink.

I clenched my fists behind my back as I willed my broad smile not to turn into a grimace. If he sensed I was immune to his charms, he might try to wrestle my mind back into his own control. And I couldn’t let that happen.

“Bert.” I tried to sound as fond as possible. “Would you care to dance?”

Bert’s eyes went wide. The mixture of shock and faux humility reminded me of a beauty pageant winner. The “Oh me? No, it couldn’t be!” energy was so palpable I could practically taste it.

“Are you suggesting that *I* should dance with *you*, Lady Herrington?” he asked, as if it would be a dream come true.

“I would be honored,” I answered him, bowing my head in a sort of curtsy that I hoped befitted a respectable lady asking a servant to dance.

But instead of taking me up on my offer, Bert stepped back. His face crumpled into a sorrowful expression that almost made me feel sorry for him. *Almost*.

“I’m terribly sorry, Madam, if I gave you the wrong impression.” He couldn’t even look me in the eye as he spoke. “But, a highly esteemed aristocrat like you should never be seen gallivanting with a humble servant like me. It would cause a scandal, taint your name… all in the name of trying to show me a kindness. I simply couldn’t allow it.”

This wasn’t how this was supposed to go. I opened my mouth, searching for the words that would change his mind, but they didn’t come.

“Now if you’ll excuse me…” He snuck a look at my face, his expression guilty. “I have to see to Dr. Wiggins.”

And, to my dismay, he glided away from me and over to a manacled ghost. The two specters started to engage in conversation, and my heart sank when I realized they were about as far from the drape Marta was hiding behind as was possible in this huge room.

“What just happened?” Charlie murmured in my ear, appearing at my side almost immediately after Bert left.

“We’re going to need another plan,” I replied, feeling my stomach twist.

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Alone in “our” bedroom, Charlie and I both paced nervously. So far, the new plan we’d devised required Marta to convince Bert that Charlie and I were planning on escaping. That way, we would get him alone to talk, and Marta would be able to catch him with her device.

We’d filled Marta in and were waiting for her to do her part, but she’d been gone at least twice as long as we’d expected.

“What’s taking her so long?” I groaned to Charlie, sick of the anxiety that was eating away at my stomach lining—I would have killed for a Tums right about now.

“I don’t know,” Charlie admitted before flashing me a tight smile. “But we just have to hold tight a little longer. The sooner we get out of here, the better. These old clothes are starting to make me feel old. Like, my lungs feel weaker and my back hurts… It’s really weird.”

“Oh my god,” I cried in horror. “Don’t you see? They are *literally* doing that. We have to get out of these things!”

I reached for my corset strings, trying to untie them so I could strip off the ugly, old dress.

“I’m sorry.” Charlie cocked his head, confused. “Not to be the guy who’s against his girlfriend getting naked, but… care to explain?”

“The clothes are helping Bert mess with our minds,” I reminded him. “What if Marta’s magical eggs wear off? The clothes could trick us again, and then we’ll be right back where we started—only maybe without Marta’s help, this time.”

“Right.” Charlie started tearing at his cufflinks.

“There are so many goddamn layers,” I grumbled, kicking at my hoop skirt.

“Let me help you with that.” Charlie reached for my corset and started making quick work of the laces. For a second, I couldn’t help but feel like I was in a romance novel. He was so close, and his hands felt so good on me as he pulled at the threads until I could finally breathe.

But I shook my head. This wouldn’t be the last time he touched me. Not if we did this right.

“*Finally*,” Charlie muttered as the fabric fell to the floor, leaving both of us without a stitch of clothing.

Just then, the door flew open, revealing Bert and Marta. Bert’s eyes went wide as he took in the sight of us.

“It doesn’t *look* like they’re escaping,” he exclaimed, aghast. “It looks like they’re about to fornicate!”

Marta shoved him inside and slammed the door shut behind the both of them. Charlie darted over to the closet, grabbed the device from its hiding place, and tossed it to Marta. Bert looked at us all accusingly.

“What is going on here?” he cried. “May I remind you—”

But Marta had aimed the device at him, and he was staring down the barrel of her contraption, looking shocked.

“Do it!” I shouted.

Marta pressed a button. The gears turned, the camera light began to flash, and the device itself made a whirring, purring sound.

And then…

Nothing.

All of us were still in the house, still staring down a now rather angry poltergeist, with no plan, and no clothes.

Bert growled, shooting each one of us an individual glare before straightening to his full height.

“You’re all going to pay for this!” he yelled.

**Episode 1125**

XAVIER

Cali had an incredulous look in her eyes.

“What?” she finally asked. “You know of a way to get rid of the spell Big Mac put on me and you didn’t think to tell me until *now?* What the hell, Xavier?”

“Cali.” I reached for her, but she took a huge step backward. “I didn’t have a way. I just have an idea. And it only just came to me now. I haven’t kept anything from you, I swear.”

I watched her righteous anger deflate before my eyes, along with any hope she’d had.

“Oh,” she mumbled, looking down at her shoes. “Sorry, I guess I just got a little carried away at the idea there was a way out.”

“Hey.” I fought the urge to reach out to her again. “Do you really think if I knew a way to take this off so you could go after Artemis, I wouldn’t have told you?”

I looked at Cali, who still appeared to be very interested in her sneakers. I knew finding out I’d left Greyson in the Fae world had hurt her. I knew she felt lied to. But did she really think I’d lie about being able to help her? That I’d keep her from trying to keep her sister safe?

“No,” Cali admitted, shaking her head.

I let out a breath. At least there was that. If she’d truly believed that of me, it would’ve meant that something was fundamentally broken between us. Something I wouldn’t have known how to rebuild.

I was careful to mask any relief in my expression. I didn’t want Cali to know I was worrying about this. I didn’t want her to have any more reasons to doubt our connection. This *due destini* thing sometimes meant I had to do the believing for both of us. But one day, that wouldn’t be the case.

I took her hand in mine and was relieved again when she let me. I studied her tiny hand, which looked even smaller held between both of mine. It felt so good to hold it. It felt right. Like things were how they should be.

I squeezed it.

“I promise you, Cali,” I said, looking up to find she was finally ready to return my gaze, “I’ll help you get all this sorted out.”

“Yeah?” Cali asked, the hope in her eyes making my heart pound. As if I wouldn’t already move mountains for her, she had to go and look at me like that. It made me want to promise her the world, even though I wouldn’t even know how to begin to go about getting it for her.

“Of course,” I assured her.

I tugged her to me gently and planted a kiss on top of her head, letting myself breathe her in, the scent of her hair, the soap she was fondest of. All of it was her. I wrapped my arms around her and held her close.

I let myself imagine us at a restaurant on a real date. At a fancy place in the city I’d been to once with Gabriel, who had made me go with him because he “liked the finer things in life”. He’d almost blown the whole thing when a waiter had accidentally spilled some wine on his new shirt and he’d had to cling to the table and yoga breathe for a full minute to keep from shifting and tearing the poor guy’s throat out.

But being there with Cali would be different. Sure, there’d be the same flickering candlelight, soft music, and amazing food—and hopefully a different waiter. But if I could just get one normal night, one chance to prove that I could be the sweet, romantic guy Torin waxed poetic about when he was pretending to be Chris Hemsworth or whoever the hell hosted *The Bachelorette*, then maybe we wouldn’t have to be walking on eggshells around each other all the time.

Greyson approached us, and I found myself squeezing Cali’s hand even tighter, though I knew that didn’t help make my case as a chill fairytale prince come to life. But I couldn’t help it—just seeing Greyson set my teeth on edge.

“What do you want?” I asked, trying to keep my voice even.

Greyson looked at our joined hands, and I got a sick kind of pleasure from the way he stiffened at the sight.

“We need to get to the lake,” he replied.

I held back a scoff at his lame attempt to break up my date with Cali. Seriously, was this guy so insecure he couldn’t stand me having a minute alone with her?

“The vampires are back.”

Okay, if that *was* a lie it was a terrible one, and if it wasn’t…

Cali gasped, and I pulled her close. I’d known they wouldn’t just disappear. If you didn’t kill a vampire, they would always come back to finish the fight. Eternal life made you patient like that.

“I’m having everyone assemble on the front lawn,” Greyson continued. “Except for you, Cali. You need to stay here.”

“Like hell I am!” Cali spluttered, her cheeks turning bright red with frustration. “That’s ridiculous! I’m Fae! I have magic. You really don’t think that would be helpful to have on your side in a supernatural fight?”

I felt her pain. Being left out of a fight sucked, and Cali was almost always being told to stay behind. But I knew she couldn’t come along. No matter how close I felt to her right now, I needed to keep her the hell away from any and all bloodsuckers.

“As much I hate to say it… I agree with Greyson,” I told her, as gently as I could.

Greyson looked at me with something like gratitude in his eyes. He knew I hated siding with him against Cali, but the one thing I at least could trust about the wolf was that I knew he would always agree that we wanted Cali safe.

“I’m going to get the others,” Greyson murmured before turning to Cali. “Sorry.”

And with that, he ran off.

Cali looked up at me, her brow furrowed with worry and annoyance.

“I know this sucks,” I told her as I led her inside. “But I’m begging you to listen to us this time. Stay inside.”

I took her hand and gave it a gentle kiss, marveling at how soft her skin felt.

“Our date’s just postponed,” I assured her. “So don’t go making any other plans for tonight. You’re booked.”

“Damn, there goes my idea of magically breaking out of here so I could secretly run away with Lola,” she laughed, but I could tell she was nervous. “Be careful.”

“Always am.” I gave her a wink before bounding off to the front lawn.

I was quickly joined by the rest of the pack. I looked back at the house, secretly thankful for Big Mac’s spell. Even if Cali did try to leave the house, she wouldn’t be able to get far. I couldn’t lose her. She’d be safe.

I sniffed the air, prepared for the decayed stench of vampires, but was surprised when I didn’t catch anything out of the ordinary. Was Greyson pulling some kind of trick?

“I don’t smell anything,” I told Jay. “Do you?”

“You don’t?” he asked, clearly surprised. “Because I totally do. They’re out there. Somewhere.”

I took another inhale, and this time I caught a whiff of it.

*Death*.

“I guess my brother was telling the truth,” I murmured.

Last time the vampires had attacked, they’d masked their smell. They’d be stupid not to do it around wolves. Why would they let us smell them coming now?

Greyson strode out to meet us, Ava on his heels. Her eyes were flashing with excitement. She loved a fight.

*Great.*

“I assume you can smell them now,” Greyson said, addressing the group. “Their scent seems to be coming from the lake. Let’s head over there. But proceed with caution, okay?”

Not waiting for our answer, Greyson shifted and set off. The rest of us had no choice but to follow suit. I wondered if I’d be a more communicative leader than Greyson, if I’d allow more democracy and sharing of ideas. But before I could think on this further, I heard Ava’s voice in my head.

*Should I have just stayed inside?* she asked.

*I don’t care what you do*, I replied, curt. *Just stay out of my way.*

The smell of death intensified as we drew closer to the lake. It was enough to make me want to gag. How could these vamps not realize they were giving themselves away?

*Take positions around the woods and water*, Greyson ordered. *Wait for my signal.*

I bounded over to the woods, trying to enjoy the feeling of fresh air rustling through my fur. I hoped it would distract me from the annoyance that came with having to listen to Greyson when it should have been *me* giving *him* orders.

Why couldn’t Greyson just realize that and go away? When would he stop fighting to take my spot and go off and find his own?

I knew he was bound to leave sooner or later. Eventually it would get through his thick skull that this wasn’t where he belonged. And maybe Cali not choosing was the only thing keeping him here. But if he were gone, it would at least *feel* like she’d chosen. The two of us would be able to try to get back to the way things used to be.

I followed the scent along the tree line at the border of the lake. It was getting stronger and stronger, and—

I heard Sage’s howl pierce the air. I raced toward her and was shocked to see a dead body floating in the lake, face down.

I felt like I’d been hit in the chest with a battering ram.

It was a trap.

**Episode 1126**

VIOLET

Bert began to swell up like a balloon. We all watched in horror as he grew larger and larger, like he was sucking up all the air in the room to loom like a giant over all of us.

“After everything I offered you!” he spat as he continued to grow. “This is the thanks I get?”

I gasped as he towered over us, his head in danger of scraping the vaulted ceilings. But as I took in a breath, I realized that the air around us was getting humid and musty. I wondered if it was the room’s true scent—decay and rot and age.

Did that mean Bert’s glamour on the house was fading?

Why hadn’t Marta’s machine worked? Why had she been so certain it would work this time?

Was this the same thing that had happened last time? Was this how the other people had disappeared? Had Bert gotten huge and eaten them or something?

I felt frustrated tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I cursed myself for not asking more questions before agreeing to Marta’s plan. Because honestly, what did she know? Why had I trusted her with something as serious as Charlie’s life? He was my mate and, yeah, he had incredible instincts thanks to his vampire hunter genes, but he was new to all this. And I wasn’t. I should have known better. I should have protected us.

Charlie stepped in front of me, putting his body between Bert and me. I appreciated his bravery and didn’t know if I’d ever tire of his desire to protect me. But also… even if I didn’t know how to fight a poltergeist, now seemed to be the best time to learn. And I hated the idea of being useless in a fight for our lives.

“Do we punch it?” Charlie asked me, not looking back. “Or will our fists just hit air?”

“I’ve got a way to find out,” I growled, sidestepping him and bounding forward.

I swung my fist in a mean uppercut, aiming for his stomach, sure that I would just hit air. But instead, I felt a cold wave as I hit Bert right where his kidney should have been.

He stumbled back, his eyes wide as dinner plates—literally.

“You dare strike me?” he roared, then took in another gasp of air and grew even larger.

“Keep him occupied,” Marta shouted at us before turning back to her device and adjusting various screws and bits of metal.

I bit my tongue and resisted the urge to yell at her for not thinking to check that her device worked beforehand. It didn’t really seem like constructive criticism. Plus, I had a fight to win.

Charlie leapt into action beside me. He side tackled Bert, driving all of his weight into the poltergeist’s foot to make him lose his balance. As he stumbled backward, I hit him in the exact same spot as before, knowing it would be good to keep working the area, hoping it would force him to double over and fall to the ground, disoriented.

Bert shrieked indignantly, but I couldn’t tell if the things we were doing were hurting him or just pissing him off.

Charlie took a running leap and started to climb up Bert’s jacket like it was a rope or a rock wall or something. He grabbed one of Bert’s fingers and twisted until it made a snapping sound. Bert threw back his head and screamed in fury. But everything we did seemed to startle and anger him more than cause him any pain.

I kept leaping up, trying to hit him all over, hoping I’d find the perfect spot—or that Marta would get her shit together and make her invention work. But, honestly, I was starting to get tired. I looked over at Charlie and saw that he was looking pretty winded himself.

How much longer could we keep this up?

Charlie and I were shoulder to shoulder, facing Bert down as he lumbered toward us. I looked around the room—the one Bert had to crouch to fit inside—looking for something, *anything*, that could help us. But everything looked so useless and small compared to him.

And that was when I realized.

*This isn’t working*, I told Charlie through our mind link. *We have to piss him off. Taunt him. Then he’ll get angrier. Which will make him get bigger.*

*Is that a good thing?* Charlie asked, shooting me a bewildered look.

*If we can get him so big he won’t even fit in the room*, I said, giving him a tight smile, *then yeah, I think so.*

“You’re a genius,” Charlie told me out loud, grinning broadly.

Before I could even blush, Charlie was shouting at Bert through cupped hands.

“Maybe if you could throw a decent party we wouldn’t be trying to leave!” he yelled.

Bert’s jaw dropped and he stared down at Charlie like he’d just slapped him in the face. He sucked in an indignant breath and expanded again.

“Yeah, you’re a pretty lazy butler,” I added, joining. “Would it have killed you to give the party a theme?”

“A theme?” he wheezed, now practically on all fours to fit in the room.

“Also…” Charlie searched for something else to say. “Railroads suck.”

“TAKE THAT BACK!” Bert screamed, the chandelier tinkling as he hit his head on it.

“Why would anyone want to stay here with you?” I yelled, running around and delivering a swift kick to the back of his knees. “It’s a pigsty in here!”

“Such language. Who raised you? Wolves?” Bert cried as he reached down and batted me aside.

If only he knew how right he was.

I flew through the air and crashed into the wall. The wood creaked and groaned in protest. I struggled to my feet as the floor shook beneath me. I looked at Marta, who still had her device cradled in her hands like it was made out of porcelain.

“The house,” she cried, looking up in horror as huge cracks began to form in the ceiling, despite Bert hunching over in an attempt to fit inside.

Charlie came bounding over to my side and took my hand.

“Violet, we have to get out of here!” he cried.

“Let’s shift and try the windows,” I called out.

But when I tried to shift, I found that I couldn’t. I glanced at Charlie, who looked just as confused and frustrated as I did. Bert still had some kind of control over us—it was the only explanation.

The window we’d run to—the same one we’d seen shatter and then reassemble earlier—blew out as Bert continued to swell, eating up all the free space. I grabbed Charlie by the wrist and tugged until we were both pressed up against the wall, Bert’s swollen belly button now at Charlie’s eye level.

I could feel Bert’s body pressing against me. We stopped at the window, both of us peeking out. It was a long way down. Would we be able to survive the drop in our human forms?

If only we could shift…

“Well.” Charlie looked back and forth between me and the open window, almost like he could read my mind. “We can’t stay here. We’ll suffocate.”

“Take my hand,” I told him, reaching out to him.

“What?” Charlie looked at me, confused.

“Take my hand,” I ordered. “Now!”

In a gesture of pure trust, Charlie placed his hand in my mine. He looked like he almost felt guilty that he hadn’t done it earlier. I wished I could tell him everything. How dark my life had been when I’d seen him for the first time. How he’d managed to turn it all around. How I knew things hadn’t been easy for us since we’d gotten together, but that I didn’t care. That it was all worth it.

But there was no time for that.

“I love you,” I shouted instead as I leapt through the window and pulled Charlie after me. We both screamed as we fell through the air. My hair whipped around me. *Don’t look down, don’t look down…* of course I did, I knew I would. Oh god, it was coming up so much faster than I could have anticipated.

Finally, we slammed into the bushes and tumbled to the ground. Pain sliced through my body like I’d been cut. Charlie landed on top of me and knocked the wind out of me. I gasped for air as I looked into his eyes, hardly believing we’d both made it.

“That was… the *craziest* thing you have ever done,” Charlie laughed in near hysterics, probably just adrenaline from taking the plunge. He scrambled to get off me. By the way he winced, I could tell he was hurting too. His cheeks were turning pink, and he kept stealing glances at me.

“We made it,” Charlie said weakly.

And then the house exploded—leaving a huge, angry Bert standing there in its place, shaking the debris off his waistcoat.

“I told you you’d pay for this!” he growled as he took his first lumbering step toward us.

Charlie and I scrambled backward in a frantic attempt to avoid being squashed. Could he even squash us? We were werewolves after all—it stood to reason we were made of pretty strong stuff. But given Bert’s new size, I didn’t want to test it.

Suddenly, Bert jerked backward. Like an invisible lasso had wound around him and was now pulling him back.

“What the—” Charlie cut himself off when Bert was pulled back further and further, until he disappeared with a whoosh into Marta’s device.

“*Fuck*,” I said softly, finishing Charlie’s sentence.

**Episode 1127**

*Trapped inside once again… not even allowed to help.*

I stared out the window of the pack house, desperate to know what was going on in the yard. I couldn’t stop wringing my hands. I was so furious that they hadn’t let me come along. That they’d forced me to stay in the house with the others.

With *Maren*.

I hated how powerless it felt to have nothing to do when people I cared about were in danger. Adding this to the pressure Big Mac’s spell was already putting on me, I felt like a grounded teenager. At least if I *were* a grounded teenager, I would’ve been able to shut myself in my room and listen to loud angry music.

All I could do now was wait.

Lola sidled up to me and handed me a mug.

“Hard from this side, isn’t it?” she asked.

“I would much rather be dealing with battle jitters than waiting it out in here, for sure.” I nodded before taking a sip of incredibly bitter liquid that tasted like it was full of… little bits of sand?

I spat it back out into the cup, coughing and sputtering. I didn’t know something could actually taste that… upsetting.

“Sorry,” Lola patted my back. “Still can’t quite make coffee, can I?”

“Guess not,” I wheezed, setting the mug down and resisting the urge to ask for a glass of water or twelve.

“Can’t make coffee,” Lola mused sadly. “Can’t shift, can’t figure out if I’m a vampire… What *can* I do?”

I sighed and, even though my body begged me to reconsider, picked up the mug and took another tiny sip. Lola was my best friend and needed a win.

“It’s not that bad,” I lied. “It was just too hot. You know, I was expecting it to be a different temperature and it burned me, so…”

I trailed off as Lola stared at me judgmentally.

“Okay!” I cried out. “It’s pretty bad. But at least you can leave the house. I can’t even get past the lake without being blown back like I’m smacking into a sliding glass door.”

“Like at Evan Bately’s grad party.” Lola snickered. “Remember when you had one two many wine coolers and tried to run out into the yard to puke, but instead you ran into the door and—”

“It was a very clean door!” I squealed, shoving her as she laughed.

And as much as I didn’t love my most embarrassing moments being recounted, it did make me happy to see her laughing. She’d been far too anxious lately.

“How are you feeling?” I asked once her laughter subsided. “Vampy?”

“No,” Lola admitted, shaking her head. “Just sort of weird. I think it’s all in my head? But honestly, I don’t know. And not knowing really sucks.”

I nodded, wishing I could do something to make it easier. But it wasn’t like there was a vampire test we could buy at the pharmacy and have her pee on or whatever. Though that would maybe be a smart invention that could pick up a pretty penny in the right markets. Although having seen quite a few shady, supernatural business these last few months it wouldn’t exactly surprise me if there *was* a vampire test already out there somewhere. Maybe I could call Mikah…

“How’s your dad doing?” Lola asked, almost like she’d read my mind.

“Not great,” I told her, sneaking a glance at him. He was reading a *Barefoot Contessa* cookbook in the corner. I wondered where he possibly could have gotten it. It didn’t seem like something we’d just have lying around in the pack house.

“I think it’s just all kind of a lot for him,” I whispered to Lola, not wanting him to hear us talking about him. “I can’t blame him. It was hard for me when I first found out.”

Lola snatched the mug of terrible coffee out of my hands and set it on a nearby side table. She seemed bursting with purpose all of a sudden. And as much as I loved Lola, that didn’t seem to bode well.

“I won’t just stand here,” she told me, puffing out her chest. “Like some woman watching the sea, scanning the horizon, waiting for her pirate husband to return to her for the one day they’re allowed to spend together every fifty years or whatever.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked, feeling incredibly confused.

“*Pirates of the Caribbean*?” Lola looked at me like I’d just asked her who Beyoncé was. “Ugh, Cali. Orlando Bloom. I had a poster in our dorm? He has a face sculpted by the gods.”

“Okay?” I shrugged. “What does he have to do with the werewolf/vampire battle we’re about to face?”

“Nothing,” Lola huffed. “Just… we’re going out there. And we’re defending the house. Because it’s the least we can do.”

I chewed on my lower lip, feeling torn once again. Both Greyson and Xavier had wanted me to stay inside. They’d both seemed really freaked out, and I wasn’t really in the mood to get into a fight with either of them for disobeying them.

But since when did I listen to them? Since when did I obey anyone? They might’ve had Alpha blood, but I was an independent Fae woman! It would be a waste to have me sit here like some helpless seventeenth century damsel doing embroidery while her suitors were off at war!

“Okay.” I nodded at Lola. “Let’s do this.”

Lola grinned, and almost immediately it dawned on me that she was the last person I should be listening to right now.

“Maybe you should stay?” I asked, feeling guilt wash over me immediately.

“What?” Lola blurted out.

“I’m worried about you,” I admitted. “Humans versus vampires. Bad.”

“I don’t care,” Lola growled, sounding every bit the wolf she used to be. “All I need is a sturdy, sharp piece of wood. As long as you get them in the heart, they die.”

She spun around and started stomping through the house, searching for something suitable. I followed on her heels, listening as she talked more to herself than anyone else.

“I miss shifting,” she mumbled. “It was so quick and easy. You never have to look for a weapon, you *are* the weapon. So convenient. Aha!”

She found a large stake, holding up a leaning plant.

“This will do just fine.” She brandished it proudly and we stormed outside, ready to kick some ass.

\*\*\*\*

“Should I have a weapon?” I asked after we’d been standing outside in silence for a few minutes. “Like, other than my magic?”

“Your magic should be fine,” Lola reasoned, not taking her eyes off the horizon.

After a few more silent, tense minutes, Lola sighed and squatted down in the grass.

“Wow, this is boring!” she grumbled. “I thought defending the house would be exciting. Do you want to go back inside? I can try to make another pot of coffee?”

I opened my mouth to agree, as long as she let me supervise. But then I saw movement in the trees nearby. I braced myself for the sight of a dozen or so bloodsuckers, but instead it was just the pack heading toward us. No sign of any vampires.

“Is it over already?” I somehow doubted that.

“I don’t know.” Lola shrugged. “Maybe they scared them off? Maybe we didn’t see it, but they did one of those intimidating battle dances and it freaked the vamps out? Should we get into dance fighting? Maybe that could be our thing?”

“I kind of feel like you have to be good at dancing to be good at dance fighting, though,” I reminded her.

Lola nudged me. “You’re not that bad a dancer.”

“I was talking about you,” I quipped back, watching as Xavier’s and Greyson’s wolves led the pack toward us.

Was it a false alarm? But everyone had been so sure that they’d caught the scent…

“Maybe we should check the back of the house?” Lola suggested. “Just in case.”

“I guess,” I said, still puzzled. The truth was, I didn’t want to go anywhere until I talked to Greyson and Xavier and figured out what was going on—

I heard Lola scream, and I turned around to see Gregor standing there, staring at us both. A sickly, twisted smile spread slowly across his face.

“It’s time to finish what we started,” he told us.

Before either of us could reply, he lunged for Lola. Lola screamed and tried to jab him with the planter stake, but it snapped in half and fell to the ground, useless. I knew I had to intervene. I was the only one close enough to save her.

I reached out my hand, waiting for the power to surge through me. But Gregor was fast and strong. He was already dragging Lola away across the lawn. I felt my heart leap up into my throat. I couldn’t let him take her. I couldn’t lose Lola.

I ran after them and let loose a bolt of my magic. I missed and fired off another, which hit him in the chest and seemed to stun him. I caught up to them and grabbed Lola by the hand, determined to pull her away. She looked at me, wide-eyed. It was like she’d gone limp with fear.

I felt a violent tug as Gregor pulled back on Lola’s arm. Oh, like hell I was about lose a tug-of-war when my best friend’s life was on the line.

“Help!” I screamed, knowing I needed backup. Fae magic wasn’t going to help me win a strength contest with a vampire.

Gregor tugged on Lola’s arm. Hard.

Her hand slipped out of my grasp, and Gregor widened the gap between us as he ran. I raced after them, desperate to get to her. To stop him.

But suddenly, I was bouncing backward—I must have run smack into the barrier. I fell to the ground and screamed as I watched Lola disappear into the woods, Gregor dragging her.

I had let him take her. And I couldn’t follow.

**Episode 1128**

Lola struggled in Gregor’s grip, and I could do nothing but watch. She had no supernatural powers, but she sure could throw a punch. Unfortunately, though, she was no longer a werewolf, so Gregor kept gaining ground, and Lola was barely missing his teeth every time. It really felt like he was simply humoring her—like a cat playing with its food before devouring it.

“No! Leave her alone, you freak!” I tried to run through the barrier for what felt like the millionth time, but I was bounced back. Again. “UGH!”

“Cali!” Lola called in agony, and my heart broke.

My friend was going to get eaten by a vampire—if I didn’t do something, fast.

*Oh my god!* I screamed inside my head. *This damn barrier is ruining everything!*

“Hang in there, Lola! I’LL SAVE YOU!” I yelled.

“Can you two just shut the fuck up?” Gregor snarled, looking between Lola and me. “I’m just trying to have a good time here—I’ve never met chattier blood bags in my entire fucking life.”

First of all, his use of the phrase “having a good time” confirmed my suspicions about him playing with his food. Second, had this creep just called me a blood bag?

I looked around for anything I could use against Gregor. Anything sharp and deadly would work, but there was nothing. I really needed to invest in a dagger of some sort, and also learn how to throw daggers at targets. I felt like I could be a knife kind of person, even though I wasn’t very coordinated. Or maybe I could learn how to shoot an arrow? That would be very Katniss of me—I could try it out. Or I could—

“CALI!” Lola screamed. Gregor had pushed her to the ground and was looming over her like some sort of massive cockroach.

“Hey, fangy!” I shouted, grabbing the first thing I saw. Which was a rock—I faintly registered that it was one of the rocks Fenrir played with extensively, creating little villages of rock friends for himself. Was the child lonely, or did he just have an overactive imagination? Regardless, I grabbed one of those and threw it through the barrier, directly at Gregor.

It did not hit the target.

*Great job, Cali!* I thought to myself*. You can’t even throw a rock, and you were thinking about getting a bow and arrow? You idiot!*

Nevertheless, the rock actually worked to distract Gregor, probably along with my screaming, which seemed to be annoying him more than anything. But still, it was enough for Lola to kick Gregor right in the jaw, finally making him stumble back.

Lola started running toward me, a wild look on her face, and I shouted, “Yes! You can do it! We have to get into the house!”

But just as Lola was about to breach the barrier, Gregor the jerk jerked her back.

“You have GOT TO BE KIDDING ME!” I bellowed, groaning as I looked around for more things to throw. I realized, though, that nothing would really work with this kind of enemy. Meanwhile, my Fae powers were blocked behind the barrier. This invisible block would have been a million times more useful if Big Mac had made it to keep vampires out of our territory, but *noooo!*

Apparently, keeping me trapped in here was more important than protecting us from any vampire nonsense.

Out of pure desperation—and also because I felt like my brain cells were leaving me—I tried to use my Fae power again. It bounced back from the barrier and knocked me out backward. I crashed against the outdoor table unceremoniously and squealed. There were now smashed glass bottles that hadn’t been cleaned up everywhere, and I felt a sharp pain in my palm.

I had cut myself.

“I HATE EVERYTHING!” I screamed at nobody in particular, and I grabbed one of the bottles to throw at Gregor, who had cornered Lola on the ground and was fighting to sink his fangs into her skin. The bottle landed on his back, and he drew in a sharp breath.

*Yes!* I thought, doing a mental happy dance that didn’t last very long. Because as Lola scrambled to run away, Gregor latched on to her, grabbing the back of her shirt to keep her in place like she was some sort of pet.

At the same time, a strange look passed over his face.

He looked down at the bottle that had bounced off his back, still glistening with my blood. He sniffed, and I realized that he liked the scent, because he was a crazy freak. Not to kink-shame anyone, but that was weird. But maybe I could use my blood to lure him away from my friend.

“Yeah!” I said, raising my bloodied palm to wave it at him tauntingly. “You want some of this? Come and get it! Fae blood, yum!”

Gregor stared at me, his eyes suddenly so cold and piercing and focused that I felt a shiver of actual fear run down my spine. His grip on Lola had loosened so much that she squirmed away, running toward me, panting.

“Let’s go!” she shouted and grabbed me by the arm, pulling me toward the house. She glanced over her shoulder at the still frozen Gregor, who licked his lips and glanced between me and the bottle. “Wait, what the hell did you do to him?” Lola asked.

“The bottle that I hit him with had my blood on it,” I said as Gregor picked up the bottle. To my horror, he licked my blood from it. My stomach dropped. The vampire had tasted my blood. My mother had warned me not to give my Fae blood to anyone, and here I was, semi-serving it to vampires. I was such a genius.

While I was busy berating myself, Gregor seemed pretty into my blood, smelling the bottle, licking it like he was in a trance. It was like when I would eat a waffle and forget about the rest of the world. He’d lost all interest in Lola, now—he was all about the Fae blood tastiness, which meant I needed to get the hell out of here.

“Move your ass, Cali!” Lola shouted from a few feet behind me. She had already started running toward the house. The house! Yes, I had known that we had to go there—vampires couldn’t enter the house unless they had been invited. I dashed after her, trying to catch up to my friend, and then Xavier, Greyson, Jay, and the others ran up to me.

Both my mates seemed shocked and very upset to see me outside. Oh great. A lecture was *exactly* what I needed right now.

Greyson and Xavier mind linked me at the same time, saying the exact same thing.

*Why didn’t you stay inside?*

Oh. Crap.

Then Greyson saw my wound. *What happened?* he asked me, alarmed, his wolf huffing.

Xavier sniffed at me, his eyes wide with worry as well, along with some anger—probably because I never did what I was told. To be honest, they should have gotten used to that by now.

Before I could explain anything, though, Jay roared and lunged past us. I turned around to see that more vampires were coming toward us, moving at a speed that I’d never seen before in a supernatural being.

It was insane.

I was about to use my Fae power on one of those suckers—literally—but then Xavier stood protectively in front of me.

*Get inside!* Greyson told me.

It sounded a lot like an order, but I couldn’t really blame him. He turned to take on another vampire, and I hated to leave my mates here. I felt like this sudden wave of attacks was my fault—the blood was still dripping from my palm, and it looked like the vampires were in a feeding frenzy because of the scent of it in the air.

I sent a blast of energy at another pair of them who tried to capture me, and then started running toward the house.

“Oh my god!” Lola shouted at me from the porch. “What’s taking you so long? Get in here!”

I pounded up the front porch stairs and was about to cross the threshold when I was knocked down. A female vampire had me pinned to the ground.

“Get off me, you maniac!” I shouted when she bared her fangs, ready to bite me. I was a second away from blasting her through the roof when someone knocked her off me.

I was dazed for a moment, trying to figure out how Lola could fend off a vampire so quickly and effectively, but then I realized that the attacker had been another vampire.

*Are the two of them actually... fighting each other right now?*

What kind of weirdness was this? Weren’t they supposed to be in the same vampire nest or whatever? Why were they fighting?

“Come on!” Lola shouted at me, apparently frustrated by the fact that I was taking approximately three million years to get inside the house. I was also frustrated with myself, so I scrambled to my feet and headed inside, to safety—but then someone yanked at me from behind.

Then there was a searing pain in my neck.

**Episode 1129**

I felt fangs chomping down on my neck, and I was hit with a euphoric feeling that was pretty close to orgasmic. The pain of the bite was instantly numbed by the emotion and forgotten. The vampire had one arm wrapped around my waist, and the other was pulling my head to the side to keep my neck bared.

I didn’t feel any fear. Why would I be afraid? This felt good. This felt *really* good, to the point where I let out a soft moan and settled back against the vampire’s muscular body.

I could hear his heartbeat, loud and steady, and mine gradually settled down to match it. I closed my eyes, swept away into a world where nothing mattered other than the mouth on my neck. His fangs felt sharp, but his lips were surprisingly soft and gentle—just like his grip on me as he stroked his hand soothingly up and down my trembling side.

But suddenly, the feeling became a little *too* soothing.

The feeling became so comforting that it turned terrifying, because it was quickly replaced by a wooziness that threatened to make me fall asleep. Fall asleep for good, it looked like, because this was probably what it felt like to have the life drained out of me. *Literally*.

*No! I won’t go like this! I’m not going to sit here and be sucked dry like a juice box!* Anger, dimmed but still present, surged inside me as I tried to push the vampire off. But his grip on me was too strong, and he he was too tall, too broad to physically fight off. In the background, I heard a distant scream and a crash, and the sound of splintering wood. The vampire dislodged his teeth from my neck and turned me around to face him.

It was a vampire I’d never seen before.

He looked young. Young and beautiful.

I was breathing very, very slowly, still woozy, still in that same trance that made me feel comfortably numb. The vampire stared at me, pale blue eyes smoldering as my blood reddened his pink lips. His every feature was perfectly proportioned, the color of his lips and eyes clashing with the pale canvas of his skin. His sharp jaw was set as he examined my face.

“You taste amazing,” he whispered. His voice was gruff, husky. His thick golden hair was swept back, and I suddenly felt the urge to touch it, to see if it was as soft as it looked.

At the same time, I was exceedingly aware that I had to get the hell away from him. But as he stared at me, as he held me tight, his large palms on either side of my waist, I thought that I could get used to this. He pulled me close, looking down at me like some sort of very creepy but very hot dark Transylvanian Lord of Bloodthirst and Madness.

For a wild, crazy second, I wanted him to put those plush soft lips against my neck again and keep feeding on me, if that would make him happy. If that would keep making *me* happy, giving me that same pleasure sensation once more.

*CLASH!*

I heard a violent crash and the vampire was knocked back, away from me. Shaking, I snapped back into reality—a reality where I definitely shouldn’t have been thinking about wanting anyone to eat me—and stepped back. Lola grabbed me with one hand, a broken chair in the other.

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

I nodded, very dubiously.

“What the hell are you doing just standing there?” Lola demanded, and pulled me back toward the threshold of the house. I stumbled backward as the vampire recovered from the blow.

He rose from the ground slowly, in a way that was almost hypnotic, never taking his eyes off me. He wiped the blood from his chin, licking it off his fingers. The movement was so sensual, I felt a pulse in the pit of my stomach.

“*Cali?*” Lola yelled from a few feet away. “Get THE FUCK IN HERE!” she demanded, and a second later, I was pulled inside.

But I still couldn’t look away from the vampire.

He smiled at me, tilting his head to the side and beckoning to me. “Come on closer, beautiful,” he murmured. “I won’t hurt you…”

I was back under that weird trance, and his voice was soft like velvet. His every move was so smooth, he became disturbingly alluring. And every single thing about him, from his perfect hair to his perfect face and chiseled body, had me shaking.

The pulse in the pit of my stomach drummed as one with the wound on my neck…

“OH MY GOD!” Lola shouted, slamming the door and jerking me deeper into the house. “What THE HELL is wrong with you? What part of ‘get inside’ don’t you understand, Caliana Hart?!”

I heard Lola, but I didn’t answer. The pulse inside me was still growing. I felt hazy, still in that trance, my head filled with nothing but the vampire’s gorgeous face. I was nothing but eager to see that face again.

I charged toward the door, even as Lola screamed and tried to stop me. What was the problem? I didn’t understand. I had more blood to give him, and he could give me more of that euphoric feeling.

But when I opened the door, the vampire was gone, along with the two others who had been fighting over me.

Almost growling, Lola slammed the door shut again. She stared at me. “Have you lost your *mind*, Cali?”

Through the window, I saw more fighting going on out on the lawn between the pack and the vampires. The window was open, so I decided that I could just get out through that, if Lola was going to keep closing the door on me.

“What are you doing? There’s a battle out there!” Lola shouted.

“I know,” I said. “Maybe I can help.”

“There’s something seriously fucking wrong with you right now,” Lola declared and grabbed me, refusing to let go.

We struggled for a long moment, Lola telling me that I was insane and me trying to blast her off but not managing it, because I was too dizzy to have good aim. My energy balls hit the coffee table and the TV, but Lola remained unharmed.

“Let me go outside!” I demanded as Astrid joined us.

*God!* I thought. *As if I need any more people to tell me not to go find my new vampire friend who just so happens to be insanely hot! Poor guy just wants my blood, and I want to give it to him! I don’t see any problems here!*

There was a part of me that could see what the problem was. But I still couldn’t think clearly enough to stop myself, to stop the urge I felt to go find that man.

“Oh no!” Astrid said. “Is that a vampire bite on your neck?”

Breathing heavily, I touched the wound, feeling the warm blood. I nodded.

Astrid pushed Lola away and dove into me, knocking us both to the floor.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, shocked and dizzy.

“We have to get the venom out!” Astrid planted her mouth over my wound and started sucking. It definitely did *not* feel anything like when the vampire had done it. This felt disgusting.

“Oh my god, stop that!” I said, pushing Astrid away. “I’m fine!”

At this point, Torin decided to grace us with his presence. Wonderful. His eyes grew wide when he saw Astrid spitting out my blood onto the floor. He gaped before shrieking, “Did Astrid become a vampire?” He gasped and then quickly changed gears. “Don’t worry, Cali! I’ll protect you!”

He grabbed Astrid by the arm and tried to pull her away from me, but honestly, I wanted them both away from me. The only person I needed to be close to right now was my friendly vampire, who had a very nice smile. He was a very nice man, with very nice biceps and probably a very big… appetite for blood.

Annoyed and frustrated over these foolish Fae trying to save me from I didn’t even *know* what, I used an energy blast to slam them both away.

Astrid and Torin both stared at me from the floor, clearly surprised.

I rolled my eyes. “I told you I’m fine!”

Lola gave me a curious look. “Actually, you’ve been fanged. Like me! We can be fang buddies!”

Feeling better suddenly, I said, “I didn’t drink his blood, so I’m not turning into a vampire.”

Astrid stared at me. “But his venom…”

“What about it?” I asked.

Astrid and Torin exchanged a look.

Torin shrugged. “We don’t know, exactly. But we’d always heard that if a vampire ever bites someone, it’s best to get the venom out. That was what you were trying to do, right?” he asked Astrid.

“Yes!”

Torin’s expression turned sheepish. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking very clearly.”

Astrid waved him off. “It’s fine.”

And then they were back to being best friends.

“I should heal the wound on your neck, though,” Torin told me.

Unable to get the smoldering vampire out of my head, I refused to let Torin come anywhere near me. “I’m fine you guys, I swear.”

Lola nodded seriously. “It’s a good thing I hit him with the chair. He could have drained you. You should rest now, Cali, okay?”

“I said I’m fine.”

I looked through the window, and Lola said, “Don’t worry, we scared him away.”

I nodded, a strange, warm, tingling feeling growing on my neck. I touched the bite mark and saw my blood. And then a feeling, almost like an echo of his voice, filled my head.

*I’ll find you…*

**Episode 1130**

ARTEMIS

Vander stood there, looking all mysterious and making absolutely no sense whatsoever.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “You’re supposed to be this all-powerful being and you can’t even open the main Fae portal?”

Vander blinked at me, looking pretty alarmed himself. “Well, if you put it that way…”

“You said you control all nature,” Mom told him. “You said that you are nature itself. Why can’t you control this?”

Big Mac scoffed, probably at everyone here, and glared at Nneka. “This was a waste of everyone’s time. I hope you’re happy.”

The old hag glared at Big Mac. “You know another way to get the portal back? Cause if you do, I’m all ears!”

Big Mac frowned. “If I did have another idea, I wouldn’t have come to you in the first place! Or did you think I just wanted to hang out with you and have a cup of tea?”

“If you ever had a cup of tea with me, I would poison you,” Nneka said, rolling her eyes at Big Mac.

“Poison?” Big Mac asked. “Though you’d probably try to stab me before it came to that.”

Nneka shrugged, wrinkling her nose. “Sometimes you have to enjoy the finer things in life.”

As the two of them kept bickering and Vander looked between them very awkwardly, Rishika elbowed me. I glanced at her, surprised for a moment by how close she was. My fingers itched to push a rogue piece of hair behind her ear. Arching an eyebrow, she muttered, “Looks like your nature boy is a bust.”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s not my nature boy! He’s a person… of nature.”

Rishika gave me a side eye. “He’s not even that attractive.”

The corners of my lips twitched. Was she jealous? Of this… whatever he was? Nature god? He was pretty attractive, I had to admit. But Rishika was a goddess in her own right. She had to know that.

“This is actually one of my most successful forms,” Vander said to Rishika, overhearing us.

“For who?” Rishika asked him in a condescending tone. I really couldn’t believe she’d just called him out like that.

As Vander processed what Rishika had said to him, Orla interrupted all the arguing. “Okay, everyone! We need to focus at the task at hand.” She stared at Vander, taking a step closer to him. “Now, could you please explain what happened? Why can’t you open the portal?”

Forgetting Rishika and going back to looking focused, Vander said, “The portal is actually gone entirely. I don’t get what’s going on… I closed it when I felt something was upsetting the balance, but I can’t explain why I’m unable to reopen it.” He glanced between the four of us. “This has never happened to me before in all my eons.”

I stared at Vander, the gears turning in my head. “Could this have something to do with the Orb?”

“Hmm,” Vander admitted. “The Orb is a type of ancient magic. It was created during a time when there were constant upheavals between the competing forces of nature.”

Well. This was new.

New, and very worrisome.

I glanced at my mother. “Ancient? I was told that the Orb was a Fae artifact, though.”

Orla nodded. “That’s what I heard. That the Orb is the Sphere.”

Vander’s expression darkened. “It may have been used by the Fae, but it predates Fae and humans alike. It was never meant to be used by either. This type of magic cannot be created from nothing.”

Big Mac, Nneka, and Rishika were all silent. My mother cleared her throat.

“But where is the thing now?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Vander said quietly.

Rishika scoffed under her breath. “Helpful.”

I nudged her as Big Mac and Nneka asked Vander more questions. I felt horrible, really, because this was all my fault. If I hadn’t tried to take the Orb and had just left it to Big Mac instead, who knows what would have become of it?

“I was planning on hiding it,” Big Mac was saying to Vander, “but based on what you’re saying, maybe it would be best to destroy it.”

Vander’s eyes went wide. “*Destroy it?* You can’t do that. The unrestrained magic would throw off the shaky balance we already have right now.”

Nneka scowled at him. “What is the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that it’s too powerful to be destroyed,” Vander said. “And even if someone wanted to destroy it, it’s not actually possible. It would just manifest itself some other way.”

“What kind of way?” Mom asked, and I nodded in agreement.

Vander stared at me. “The Orb—or the Sphere—is merely a vessel. You can destroy the container, but not the power itself.” Vander swallowed loudly and looked away, a distant, haunted expression on his face. “Which, could now be anywhere.”

“Of course fucking Demeter toyed with things that she didn’t understand. What a megalomaniac,” Big Mac grumbled.

Nneka scoffed. “Demeter was a showy hack. She probably just painted her arm with gold paint. Never liked her.”

“Me neither,” Big Mac said.

The two of them seemed to be agreeing on something, which was a first. I would have laughed it I hadn’t felt so worried and responsible for this entire mess. As if she could sense it, Rishika squeezed my shoulder. “It’s gonna be okay, don’t worry,” she whispered.

At the same time, Mom said to Vander, “The Orb must be in the Fae world, whether you can sense it or not.” She stared at him. “We just have to find a way to get there and search for it.”

“Isn’t there another portal somewhere?” I asked Vander hopefully.

He sighed. “I wish there were, but whatever is causing the Haystack Rock portal to remain closed is doing the same to all other portals.”

I couldn’t believe that I’d been shut out of my own home. Even though the Fae world had been a dark place for me more often than not, I hated knowing that I couldn’t go back. Especially during a time like this, when I actually *needed* to.

“I still might be able to communicate with the Fae world, though,” Mom said, turning to me. “Remember, Artemis?”

“You mean with your tree in Minnesota?” I asked.

Mom gave an affirmation, and Big Mac’s voice came out squeaky and outraged. “Minnesota? *Trees?*”

Oh, no. Now, the witch was angry.

“You’re telling me we could’ve been doing that this entire fucking time instead of going on this wild goose chase for this guy here?” Big Mac snapped at my mother, pointing at Vander. “No offense,” she told him.

Vander shrugged. “None taken.”

“What tree nonsense are you all talking about?” Nneka demanded. “We got plenty of trees here in Oregon.”

“It’s not just any tree,” Mom explained. “It’s a magical one. And at this point, we don’t have any other options. Unless you know of another way to communicate with the Fae world?”

Nneka scowled, obviously not having an answer to that. But then Vander said, “Actually, I know of a way. And we don’t have to go to Minnesota, though I do love its lakes.”

“Where, then?” I asked, my heart beating faster.

Rishika rolled her eyes as Vander smiled at me. “All you have to do is follow me.” I was about to ask where to when he snapped his fingers, and we were all transported to a beautiful redwood grove.

*What just happened exactly?*

I hadn’t even sensed the teleportation. It had felt like a tiny little jump, and now here we were.

“Okay,” Rishika grumbled. “I have to admit, that was impressive.”

I snorted, but then instantly focused on the matter at hand.

Vander beckoned to my mother. “Come closer.” He gestured at a huge tree that looked ancient; its trunk was so thick that a chain of five people wouldn’t have been able to stretch their arms around it. It was gorgeous.

“We can use this tree to communicate with the Fae world,” Vander told my mother.

“Here goes nothing,” she muttered.

Both of them put a hand on the bark. They closed their eyes, and I watched my mother’s face, the concentration there. The two of them were silent, and the seconds ticked by…

“So is this like a tree telephone?” Nneka whispered to Big Mac as we watched them.

Big Mac nodded.

“Bet they don’t have that in Minnesota,” Nneka said.

I shushed them both, full of anxiety as I watched Vander and my mother. Rishika squeezed my arm, trying to comfort me, but it didn’t work.

My mother’s expression shifted from focused to concerned.

And then she opened her eyes.

“What? What happened?” I asked her.

Orla stared at Vander, who nodded. Then, she faced me, her gaze fixed on mine. For a moment everything stood still, the hair on my arms rising.

Then Mom shook her head, confused. “The Orb isn’t in the Fae world.”

**Episode 1131**

GREYSON

Growling, I sank my teeth into a vampire’s neck before ripping his head off. I was so fucking furious.

I couldn’t believe that I’d been tricked by a bunch of vampires.

The dead body they’d planted in the lake had literally muddied the waters for me and the entire pack, but I was supposed to be the Alpha. I was supposed to be the one who would foresee this kind of bullshit. I was supposed to be the one who was there to protect everyone else. Xavier was going to have a field day with this. He would blame me for this entire thing, and the most annoying part was that he would be right.

At least Cali was back in the house now, safe.

She should never have left her room—not if she wanted Xavier and me to keep our heads in the fight instead of obsessing over what was going on with her. But then again, that was Cali. I would have been more surprised if she’d actually listened to our instructions.

Honestly, I loved her for it.

Still fuming with myself over my decisions, I moved to attack another vampire as Xavier did the same with the vampire’s companion.

*Let’s see who kills their target first*, Xavier told me, his tone taunting and provocative.

*Game on, little brother*, I replied, pretty fucking determined at this point.

The vampire opposite me was a massive redheaded man.

“All werewolves are beasts!” He told me that while hissing like a cat, with his face all bloodied and the stench of death radiating off him.

I wasn’t going to say that werewolves were the most *polite* or *sweet* of species, but having a vampire judge anyone was truly fucking hilarious. They were the ones who smelled like death and drank human blood. And we were supposed to be the big bad monsters here? With a roar, I launched myself at the giant redhead, my claws digging into his shoulder.

He punched me, and our fight went on. He was powerful—at least two hundred pounds of muscle and actual death—but in my wolf form I could beat him in a physical confrontation. But then he surprised me. He produced a dagger out of nowhere and stuck it into the side of my neck. It wasn’t poisoned, thankfully, but it still got deep enough that I was distracted.

He opened his mouth to bite me.

I knew that a bite would weaken me substantially, so I shoved him hard, pushing him backward to where a massive branch was sticking out of a bush. He was impaled on it, and flailed around before he went limp.

Feeling pretty good about myself, I turned to Xavier, who was actually struggling to beat a very small green-haired vampire. She clawed at his back before he pushed her backward and continued his attack. The girl was very fast and agile, working her defense perfectly.

*Need any help?* I asked Xavier smugly.

*Shut up, asshole*, he replied.

I rolled my eyes. *You started it.*

*Since I’m still busy here*, Xavier said, *you’d better go get the leader. His name is Gregor.*

Scowling, I looked around. Who was this Gregor? All I saw was leeches everywhere. Then I noticed a particular vampire in the middle of the field, staring intently at the house while licking a broken glass bottle.

Vampires were really fucking weird.

I wasn’t sure if he was the leader, but there was something about his energy in the battlefield that set him apart. He had his back half-turned on me, so I make sure to prowl toward him without making any noise. Catching him unawares would be best.

Before I could reach him, though, the vampire shifted toward me; even though I’d been entirely soundless. He offered me a sneer. “You’re the Alpha.”

I froze. I wanted to tell him, *Yeah, leech, I’m the Alpha.*

But then I realized that his words weren’t a question. He stared at me and seemed certain about his assessment. As if he could read my energy as easily as I had read his.

This had to be Gregor, the leader of the coven.

The vampire made no move to attack me. He just kept sneering. “Well? Are you going to stay a beast, or are we going to talk like civilized beings?”

This from the man who’d been licking a bloody bottle earlier, like some sort of weird cat on catnip.

I shifted back into human, ready to question him.

He arched an eyebrow. “Neat trick.”

“Why? Your kind doesn’t shapeshift at all?” I mocked.

Gregor snorted. “We don’t turn it into bats, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I assume you’re not here to discuss a werewolf’s shifting abilities,” I said. “But then again, I have no fucking idea why you keep attacking my pack house.”

There was no love lost between werewolves and vampires. A fight between us was always a possibility, but in general we tried to avoid each other, and we didn’t go out of our way to attack each other. There had to be a specific reason for these continuous attacks—no matter how petty and idiotic.

Gregor tilted his head to the side, examining me carefully. “What kind of Alpha doesn’t know his pack’s business?”

I wasn’t about to take the bait. “Answer my question before I shift back into a wolf and tear your head off.”

Gregor snorted. “The Redwoods and that tasty little Fae you’ve been hiding murdered one of my family at the Renaissance faire.”

The Renaissance faire? That felt like fucking years ago after the Lupo Finale.

“Seriously?” I scoffed. “That vampire attacked the Redwood pack first. You don’t get to be mad for a fight you instigated just because it didn’t go your way.”

Gregor shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. You’re werewolves. Your kind disgusts me, and the more of you I can get rid of tonight, the better.” He licked the broken bottle in his hand again. There was a flash in his eyes, a sudden redness in the iris.

The blood was affecting him. A moment later, the blood started to affect me too, but in a different way.

The scent was Cali’s. That was *Cali’s* blood on that bottle.

My stomach dropped, making me sick. I looked around. Was she hurt? Had she been hurt before she’d run back toward the house?

“That little Fae really is delicious,” Gregor said.

I didn’t have the time to think—my fury and hatred overwhelmed me. If this bloodsucker had harmed Cali, I would tear him limb from limb.

Without a thought in my mind, I shifted and lunged for Gregor with a roar.

Gregor laughed at me. His speed was unlike anything I’d ever seen. I was always a second too late to rip his head off. I fought with every fiber of my being until I realized that the bastard was trying to tire me out. It was a classic fighting tactic, but I had been too infuriated, too worried about Cali, to realize it sooner.

But the realization still came too late—the vampire managed to dig his claws into my shoulder.

I whined but managed to get hold of Gregor’s sleeve, fighting to pull him down onto the ground. Gregor, again with that immense speed, jumped onto my back. He wrapped his arm around my neck before I felt the sharp sting of his fangs digging into my nape.

The pain was excruciating.

I howled, trying to throw Gregor off my back, but then Xavier leapt through the air and ripped Gregor off me. The nape of my neck was throbbing from the venom.

I was going to kill that fucking vampire if it was the last thing I did.

Gregor threw Xavier off, but my brother instantly jumped back to his feet. Now, both Xavier and I were advancing toward the leech, our teeth bared as we growled.

*Let’s finish thi*s, I told Xavier.

He nodded, full of fury and determination.

“Of course it takes two of you to fight me!” Gregor laughed. “One is not enough. Not even the mighty Alpha!”

His insult stung, but not as much as the possibility that he had hurt Cali, and that was why her blood was on that bottle.

Gregor kept laughing, looking between Xavier and me before shifting his gaze to the house. “Oh, you absolute lovesick idiots! Don’t worry, your Fae princess will meet her fate!”

*NOW!* I told Xavier through our mind link.

Both Xavier and I charged at Gregor—

Who suddenly *vanished*.

He ran off at the speed of light, jumping over us with a piercing whistle. All vampires stopped fighting and followed him into the woods, leaving Xavier and me behind.

*He’s escaping!* I said. *He’s fucking fast; how the hell are we gonna stay on his trail?*

*Not sure, but we have to get to him*, Xavier replied.

But just as we were about to start a chase, Lola burst out of the house.

“Greyson, Xavier!” she shouted. “It’s Cali! Something’s wrong!”

**Episode 1132**

CHARLIE

With our mouths hanging open, Violet and I watched as Marta emerged from the dust, smoke, and rubble of the house, holding the vessel. It was so insanely cinematic that I almost thought I was watching a James Bond movie—but like, with a girl as James Bond, which was badass.

Violet grabbed both my hands, shaking them as she jumped up and down. “Marta’s device worked! We escaped!”

I grinned at my mate’s enthusiasm. I was about to pull her into a kiss when the last remnants of the house collapsed into a heap. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around Violet, protecting her from the fallout. But Violet didn’t even flinch; she kept grinning at me, nestling into my arms as she said, “We showed him, all right.”

I felt so proud of her, for how she had dealt with this entire insane situation. She was a force, my Sunshine, always had been. I leaned down to kiss her cheek while pulling her against me. She was naked, and her boobs were way too hard to pretend I wasn’t dying to look at. *Hah*. Unfortunately, before I could kiss Violet on the mouth to celebrate being alive, Marta turned to us.

“I guess that’s done now…” She seemed dubious but also elated. I couldn’t blame her.

“How did Bert even fit into that vessel?” Violet asked Marta. “He was as big as the house!”

Marta snorted. “But his spirit was much smaller. All bluster, really. He had such a big flair for the dramatic for such a tiny man.”

“Napoleon Complex, I think they call it,” I said. Violet shot me an impressed look. Unable to help my pleased smile at my mate’s approval, I asked Marta, “What are you going to do with him now?”

Marta held up the vessel, examining it closely.

“We could bury him, let him rot underground for eternity.” Marta’s soft expression darkened. She looked up at Violet and me. “Did you know that Bert kept me captive in that house for nearly fifty years?”

Violet and I exchanged a shocked look. “Wait, uh, how old are you?” she asked Marta sheepishly.

Marta sighed. “Let me see… I was eighteen when he trapped me. Add fifty or so years?”

I took in Marta’s face, her smooth forehead and cheeks. “You definitely don’t look like you’re in your sixties…”

“I was trapped both in the house and in time,” Marta said, shrugging. She seemed way too casual about this revelation. Violet blinked at her like an owl.

“Wow,” was the only thing she managed to say.

I, on the other hand, felt a million times more intrigued and morbidly fascinated by Marta’s story. This whole supernatural world was outrageous, and I felt like I was about to die every day; the least I could do was try to enjoy myself sometimes, even with all the weird stuff going on.

“Are you going to turn all wrinkly before our eyes?” I asked. “Because that’s what happened in one of those creaky horror films.”

Violet gasped, nudging me. “Charlie! That’s not a nice thing to say!”

“I’m just asking a question!” I said. “If she was stuck in time, is time going to catch up with her?”

Marta laughed, shaking her head. “I’m not going to shrivel up like a raisin. I hope.”

“Well, since there won’t be any raisin-ification happening,” Violet said, “how about we all get going?” She glanced around before looking between me and Marta. “There might be more vampires out there, and they definitely won’t be happy to see us.” Violet met my gaze, and her expression became more serious. “And your parents are still out there, too. We don’t know what they’re doing.”

My stomach dropped at the mention of my parents. Violet was right. I squeezed her hand. I was about to speak, but then Marta beat me to it.

“Wait,” she said. “Are you running away from your parents? Are you guys in some kind of forbidden love situation? Like Romeo and Juliet?”

I felt uncomfortable discussing this with anyone other than Violet, but I couldn’t let Marta believe that about us. We weren’t some doomed couple. We were mates, and that was different. Much different.

“It’s not exactly like that…” I trailed off. Being as vague as could, I said, “We’re werewolves. We were just passing through when we got lured to the house. Seems like it worked out for the best in the end for all of us though.”

Marta seemed to realize that it wasn’t her place to pressure us for more information. “So where are you two going now?” she asked instead.

Violet stared at me. Her expression was troubled. “We don’t know, exactly.”

I hated the sound of that. Did we really have nowhere to go? If we returned to the pack, my parents could potentially follow us there and hurt everyone.

My parents—my own flesh of blood who were trying to kill me.

How was a person meant to move on from that? Could I move on from that? It hadn’t really sunk in yet. It felt like the next time that I saw them, they’d tell me that all this was just a silly mistake.

“Well, wherever you go, I could come with you,” Marta said cheerfully. “If I can survive in a house of vampires and ghosts for fifty years, I can handle a road trip with two star-crossed werewolves.” She pointed behind her, at the house. “It’s not like I can move back in, anyway. Is it weird to think that a part of me will miss it, though?”

As Marta contemplated the likely deep-rooted Stockholm syndrome trauma she had developed when it came to that house, I turned to Violet.

Bringing Marta with us? That was something we needed to decide on together.

*What do you think?* I asked through mind link.

*She did save us from Bert*, Violet replied*. And she seems nice, don’t you think?*

I nodded. *But if Marta is going to come with us, she needs to know the entire truth—and the dangers of it.*

*Are you comfortable talking to her about this?* Violet asked, squeezing my hand.

*Like you said, she saved us. And she was trapped there for fifty years; she needs to know if she’s going to be flirting with danger all over again*, I replied.

Violet gave me a small smile. *That’s very thoughtful of you, Charlie*.

Feeling better with Violet encouraging me, I turned to Marta.

“I mean, it wasn’t that bad, but after ball number two hundred and forty-two, it got pretty old. I wanted to stab someone just to stop—”

“So you really do want to come with us?” I asked Marta, cutting off her rambling.

She fixed me with a stare, nodding vehemently.

“In that case, you should know why we were running away.” I took a deep breath. I had to rip off the Band-Aid once and for all. “Basically, my parents are trying to kill us.”

Marta’s mouth opened and closed in shock. “Wow,” she said. “You must have really pissed them off.”

Her words stung, but they weren’t too far off. “I guess we did.” I sighed deeply, shaking my head. “Just thought you needed to know everything before coming with us. If you still want to, that is.”

Instead of looking spooked, though, Marta shrugged. “Eh. It’s fine. I’ve got nowhere else to be, anyway.”

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I was driving, with Violet in the passenger’s seat, and Marta in the back. She was opening and closing her window, pressing the button and watching the movement of the glass with fascination.

“Cars have changed so much since my time!” She turned to Violet, grinning. “Do they still make AMC Gremlins?”

Violet chuckled awkwardly. “What now?”

Marta sighed. “It was my foster family’s first new car.”

There was a wistfulness in Marta’s tone. Violet shot me a glance before turning to her. “Is there anyone you would want to call?”

Marta paused, then she shrugged. “I can’t think of anyone.”

I stared at her through the rearview mirror. She had a sad, faraway expression on her face as she looked out the window.

“Besides, that was too long ago now,” she continued quietly. “Even if I did find someone I know, what would I say? ‘Look at me, I’m still eighteen’? I don’t have a family anymore.”

The way Marta said that made my stomach lurch.

Did *I* still have a family?

How could my parents stop treating me like family so easily?

Were they still looking for me?

My chest felt hollow, suddenly.

But at least I had Violet. Violet would always be there for me. My wonderful mate.

Violet turned to face Marta, placing a hand on her forearm. “It’s okay. You can stay with us for as long as you want… And we promise not to keep you captive.”

Marta chuckled. “Thank you. That’s good to know. I was actually—” Marta’s eyes widened as she glanced out the window, stopping mid-sentence. She pointed straight ahead. “STOP THE CAR!”

**Episode 1133**

XAVIER

I ran into the house with Lola. My mind was going a million miles an hour, still high from the battle, still worried and furious at the thought that someone—one of those fucking *leeches*—had dared to hurt my mate. Vampires just wouldn’t get the fuck away from us. It seemed like we couldn’t get rid of them, as if we had an undying cockroach infestation.

The whole thing was ridiculous, actually. They were attacking the pack because we had killed another one of their own? They were lucky we hadn’t killed the entire coven all at once. The idea that these creatures had some sort of loyalty to one another was outrageous to me. It seemed far more likely that they just enjoyed starting pissing matches that they couldn’t win.

No matter how fast Gregor was, I would never let him and his coven win.

Especially if they’d fucking wounded my *mate*.

Lola led me to the living room, where Torin and Astrid were holding Cali’s hands. Rolling her eyes, she pulled away from both of them, muttering something. As Astrid kept fussing over her, Tom held a towel to Cali’s neck.

He turned to me and we made shaky eye contact. I could see the agony in his face, and I realized that this was probably ten times worse than what I’d already imagined.

And I hadn’t imagined anything good.

I shifted back into human and gruffly asked Lola, “What happened?”

Looking a little green, Lola started talking. “Cali was bitten by one of the vampires, and now the wound won’t heal.”

Anger, hot and toxic, rose inside me. I’d kill every single one of those bloodsuckers if they returned. Hell, they didn’t even have to. I’d find them and kill them. And I would enjoy it, too—make the torture last. I’d probably sprinkle them with holy water or garlic or whatever the hell they hated, just to make the end more horrible for them.

I would make all of them pay.

“Has Torin tried to heal her?” Greyson asked.

Torin looked forlorn. Pressing his lips together, he sniffled. “Of course I have,” he said. “But I haven’t had any luck. There’s a problem here.”

I frowned. So far, since Torin had arrived in this house, his healing abilities had been his only redeeming quality. What was he without them? Just a very noisy, annoying Fae who loved reality TV and enjoyed meddling in my love life.

“How the hell is that possible?” I asked Torin, fighting to keep my voice low and even.

Torin looked between Greyson and me. When he spoke, his voice was shaking. “Whenever I try to use my magic, the wound starts to heal, but then it won’t seal up all the way. And then more blood comes out.”

“And how do you explain that?” I demanded.

Cali’s dad stared at me. “We’re all upset here, Xavier. Don’t take it out on Torin.”

I cursed myself and tried to hold back my temper. “What can we do, then?”

Greyson nodded. “There must be a solution.”

Lola stepped in, glancing between Greyson and me. “Perhaps one of you could try to heal her using the mate bond? You know, lick her wound.”

Greyson and I instantly looked at each other.

*I’m doing it*, I told him through our mind link.

*It’ll have literally the same effect if I do it*, he replied, his tone sharp.

“I’m fine you guys,” Cali said in a low voice. She waved us off, looking weak where she lay on the couch. “None of this needs to happen.”

But that was far from true. Cali looked like the blood had been drained from her face. Her hand was shaking. Her forehead had a thin layer of sweat on it. She looked ill. It looked like something was seriously wrong.

I wasn’t about to get into a pissing match with Greyson over this, because this was Cali’s life on the line, and she was *my* life, no matter what. No matter how many times she kissed Greyson or fucked Greyson or said *I love you* to Greyson, I was still Cali’s first. I was still her mate. The original one.

The true one.

Cali was mine, and she always would be. No matter what kind of shit the world tried to throw at us.

I stepped forward before Greyson could even speak. “I’ll do it,” I said.

I knew Greyson wouldn’t protest in front of Cali’s dad.

When I shifted into my wolf, Tom’s eyes almost bugged out. Slowly, I walked forward. Tom stood to give me more space, so I could take a better look at Cali’s wound. My heart ached at the sight of two bloody puncture wounds on her delicate skin. I would tear the vampire that did this to her limb from limb. This was my vow.

As I leaned forward, Cali put a hand on my head, petting my fur. “I’m okay,” she whispered, though she looked even paler than before. “I swear.”

*You’ve always been a terrible liar*, I told her.

She gave me a small, bitter smile. I nuzzled her, taking in her scent, and then I looked at the vampire wound. I could smell the foul stench of the vampire that had bitten her, and its venom… Why wasn’t it healing? It had to be seeping into her bloodstream and having a negative reaction to her Fae blood. Whatever this reaction was, it was a very bad thing, but I hoped that our bond could heal her. I licked at her as thoroughly as I could. After I was through, I shifted back to human as everybody watched the punctures on Cali’s neck.

After a bit of silence, Torin bellowed, “It’s healing!”

The relief I felt was incandescent. I eyed Greyson with an internal smug smirk that he identified, but ignored—probably trying to be the bigger person.

But before I could feel too triumphant, Lola gasped. “No! It’s bleeding again.”

I looked back at Cali’s neck, my chest tightening with panic. The puncture wounds were opening up, and red was flowing down Cali’s beautiful neck. The sight was so jarring to me, so painful—as if her ache was my own.

“Move,” Greyson told me gruffly, pushing me away.

I watched, angry but hopeful as Greyson shifted into his wolf. It was probably one of the only times I was grateful for his presence. He nuzzled her and licked at her wound. I needed this to work, for Cali to be okay—even if Greyson was the one who achieved it.

Even if it meant that I would hate myself for not managing to save her first.

Of course I always wanted Cali to be okay, but I just didn’t want Greyson to be the one to make it happen. It made me sick to see him standing next to her so intimately. It made me sick to see her staring at him like he hung the moon—even though she’d looked at me the exact same way, earlier. And I couldn’t be mad at her for it. It was the same fucking *due destini* bullshit that had dug its claws into her.

One day she’d be free of it. We all would.

Greyson’s wolf made a noise and then stepped back. He shifted back to human, and everyone stared at Cali’s wound once more.

Just as before, the punctures stitched themselves up almost entirely before bursting open again. Cali whimpered and my blood pressure rose.

I *hated* this.

Silence fell over the group, and Greyson and I exchanged a look. Both of us would have given anything for Cali to be fine right now. I could be certain about that much.

Tom broke the quiet. “Maybe we should take Caliana to a hospital?”

Lola shook her head, pressing her lips together bitterly. “And what are we going to say? ‘Excuse me, this girl was bitten by a vampire’? Besides, if magic can’t fix it, how could a doctor?”

Cali shook her head. “I said I’m fine!” But her trembling was getting worse.

“Cali, you’re not fine,” Astrid told her.

Torin jumped in, agreeing with Astrid, while Tom insisted on the hospital and everyone kept arguing. Avoiding the chaos, I knelt down next to Cali and took her hand.

“Does it hurt a lot?” I asked her.

“I’m—”

“You’re not okay, Cali.” I swallowed thickly. “Don’t lie to me. I will not let you fucking bleed out all the while telling us you’re fine.”

Cali stared over me, at Greyson. He was frowning at the puncture wounds at her neck. Glancing between us, she muttered, “You Evers brothers are so pushy sometimes.”

“Let’s try applying some pressure again,” Torin said. “Astrid, Lola, can you get some cloth?”

The girls nodded, quickly going to the kitchen. Tom sat next to Cali, holding her hand and pushing sweaty hair from her forehead.

Greyson grabbed my shoulder. *We need to talk. Alone*, he told me silently.

With one last glance at Cali and her father, I followed Greyson outside.

“I’m not going to start a fight with you right now,” I told him right away. “We’re not getting into the whole mates thing, or the—”

Greyson didn’t let me finish. “This isn’t about that. I need your help with something.”

**Episode 1134**

ARTEMIS

Orla’s words echoed in my head: The Orb wasn’t in the Fae world?

“That’s impossible,” I said vehemently. “I *know* it’s there. That’s where I left it… Or rather, that’s where it was taken from me.”

I could still remember the strange sensation when I’d put my hand through the portal trying to get rid of that thing. When I’d brought my hand back, it’d been gone. It’d felt like someone had grabbed it from me.

Mom shook her head. “It’s not there.”

Rishika looked incredulous. “What the hell? Then where is it?”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes at me and then at my mother. “How do we know this tree is speaking the truth here?”

Nneka nodded in agreement. “I’ve never trusted trees. They used to burn witches with them, remember?” she asked Big Mac, whose expression turned severe. “Haven’t ever met a Fae I’ve liked either.”

My mom sighed deeply—almost as if she were dealing with Cali and me—and glanced between the witches. “This tree is a conduit to the Fae world—it cannot lie. It only reports what it sees.”

“Sounds like a gossip to me,” Nneka scoffed.

“I hate to agree with her, but she’s probably right,” Big Mac replied. “This tree might be telling the truth, but it’s still going off of heresay.”

My mom ignored the witches and turned to me. I really admired her calmness in a time where I wanted to grab the witches’ heads and smash them together. “Can you please tell us again what happened when you lost the Orb, Artemis?”

I explained to them about the moment I’d put my hand through the portal, not leaving out a detail; Vander was the one who stared at me with the most fascination, and then Mom spoke up first.

“That doesn’t explain how exactly the Orb was taken from you,” she said seriously.

“Well, I don’t know exactly what happened,” I said awkwardly. “I just know that I felt something pulling it, and then it was gone. Like someone was on the other side.”

Big Mac huffed impatiently. “Are you even listening to yourself? You’re not making sense.”

“Hey, watch your tone,” Rishika told her.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying—either the Orb was taken, or it wasn’t. There’s no in between. Did someone take it, or did they not? Which is it?”

Realizing that I sounded like an idiot, I said, “I really don’t know. I’m sorry, I wish I knew.”

Rishika frowned. “How could anyone have taken it though? Who would have known that Artemis would be at the portal with the Orb?”

“A strong enough Fae who knows about the Orb probably could have sensed its presence,” Mom said.

Rishika processed this information. “Do a lot of Fae know about it, then? Is it a commonplace legend among your kind?”

“I’ve only heard about it once before, and it was a legend,” I said, thinking back to when the Kollector wanted me to collect the Sphere for him, “and I spent all my life in the Fae world. So it isn’t the most popular myth out there, but there are stories.”

Mom paused for a moment, looking at the witches before turning to Rishika. “Exactly. Some have doubted the Orb’s existence. But its story has always been around, in one form or another.”

“Don’t forget,” Vander added, “it’s ancient.”

Mom nodded seriously. “Exactly, and because of how long it’s been around, there are a lot of stories and legends about it. That makes it hard to separate fact from fiction. Especially when it comes to all the versions of the same myth.”

“But have there been any Fae who have looked for it in the past?” Big Mac asked.

“There are some who have never doubted its existence,” Mom said. “But those are few and far in between, and there are even fewer Fae who have ever encountered the Orb.”

I remembered the way that the Orb had made me feel. I remembered the way it had made Cali feel. The entire Redwood pack house. The thing had a mind of its own, I was certain. And even if it stayed silent, people could sense its energy. It could use its energy on them.

“So what you’re saying is that someone could have just felt the Orb through the veil of the portal?” I asked. “Or maybe someone foresaw that I would be bringing the Orb to the Fae realm?”

“That would have more to do with you than the Orb, though,” Orla said.   
“If someone foresaw your arrival, they would have realized that you were heading back to the Fae world and tracked you down.”

I scowled, confused. “Why would anyone sense my arrival? I wasn’t that close with anyone in the Fae world. Most people probably hated me.”

“I doubt that,” Vander told me, waving a hand. “You’re a very nice girl—I can tell.”

“I was actually a bounty hunter,” I told him, my eyebrows raised.

Vander cringed. “Well, then.”

“Someone could have been able to sense your arrival, Artemis,” Mom said. “Even if they weren’t your friend.”

Vander spoke up again. “But we should never forget the other possibility—that the Orb itself called to someone, because it wanted to be stolen. Its magic is so powerful, so old, that the limit of its power is unknown. It could have notified someone that it was arriving in the Fae world before you even passed through the portal.”

I had to wonder whether it could have been the Kollector.

He certainly would have loved to possess the Orb.

And the Orb, the obnoxious little megalomaniac, would have enjoyed the Kollector’s drive for power. The two of them would have been a match made in heaven—or hell. A shudder ran down my spine at the thought of something so powerful in the hands of a man like that. I was suddenly relieved he’d never pursued it further.

I reminded myself that the Kollector was gone, anyway. Cali had killed him with her magic, redirecting the thunderbird’s lightning.

“All that sounds riveting,” Big Mac said dryly, “but are we going to play twenty questions all day? I’m done with assumptions. If we can’t find the Orb here, why don’t we all head back to the pack house?”

Nneka wrinkled her nose. “A pack house? Full of all those lupines? Don’t know how you can stand it.”

Big Mac glared at Nneka. “My fiancée is a werewolf, don’t forget.”

Nneka snorted, shaking her head. “Ah, yes. Sabine. At least she’s pretty.”

Big Mac pressed her lips together stubbornly. “She’s more than pretty. She’s a wonderful person.”

Nneka laughed. “I didn’t have you pegged for a witch who cares about whether someone’s a good person or not.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes, but before the two could get into a proper fight, Vander spoke up. “Can I offer you ladies a whoosh back to your car?”

Everyone agreed, but I didn’t say anything. I was still trying to make sense of everything. It sounded like there were two possibilities for how the Orb had gotten lost. Number one: Someone had sensed me coming into the Fae world and stolen it from me. Number two: Someone had sensed the Orb—maybe the Orb itself had called to them—and that was how the Orb had been taken away… But could the truth lie somewhere in the middle?

Vander clapped his hands, and in a second, we were back at Nneka’s car. The two witches kept bickering, and Vander interrupted them again.

“I suppose I will leave you all now,” he said, looking at the five of us. “I certainly enjoyed meeting you.” His eyes stopped on me as he added, “Especially you.”

I heard Rishika offer a grunt from behind me. I couldn’t help but feel flustered—both because of his attention and her reaction.

“Thank you for all your help,” I told Vander, because that was the nice thing to do. And my mother was watching, and she liked things like good manners. Either way, though, I did feel that Vander had helped us and deserved a thanks. At least he’d done his best.

“By the way, Artemis?” he added. “If you ever need me, just call.”

Without another word, he handed me a blade of grass. Then he bade us all farewell with a wave of his hand and disappeared into thin air.

“That Keeper sure loves being dramatic,” Rishika commented, rolling her eyes. I was torn between smirking at the way she was dealing with this and wondering what the hell was going on with this blade of grass. How was I supposed to contact Vander with it exactly?

Shrugging, I tucked it into my pocket as Big Mac, Rishika, and Nneka headed toward Nneka’s car. I pulled my mom aside, eager to continue our earlier conversation and focus on the matter at hand.

“Do you really think that someone could have sensed me when I arrived in the Fae world?” I asked.

Orla nodded. “Most certainly.”

“Who, though?” I asked. “Like I said, I don’t really have any connections with anyone there. Good or bad.”

My mother stared at me. “It wouldn’t need to be a connection of friendship or acquaintance. It could be connection of blood.”

I paused, my stomach clenching. “The only relative I left back in the Fae world is Hera…” But then another possibility entered my mind. I grabbed my mom’s hand. “Unless… Do you think there’s a chance it could be Kadmos?”

**Episode 1135**

GREYSON

“What do you want my help with this time?” Xavier said, arching his eyebrows. “It feels like I’m always saving you, one way or another.”

I rolled my eyes. “Look, I’m not—”

“Yeah, I literally just saved your ass from Gregor.” Xavier slapped me on the nape of the neck, right on Gregor’s bite, which was healing, unlike Cali’s. The impact made me flinch with pain. Xavier grinned like a wolf. “Just in case you forgot.”

My brother was in the mood for a fight, but I was far from it. I shook my head. “This isn’t about the bite or anything else. I’m worried about Cali.”

*Nothing* was more important than Cali. Sure, I had been insanely fucking jealous seeing Xavier try to heal Cali’s wound first, but I had still hoped that it would work. And when it hadn’t, a sense of dread had settled inside me, but I’d still been determined to help her. Though when my licking the wound hadn’t worked either, I’d started to despair.

It was that desperation that had made me pull my fuckup brother out here to talk.

“You’re not the only one who’s worried about Cali,” Xavier told me seriously.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about,” I told my brother. Gregor’s last words echoed inside my head, all creepy, like a premonition straight out of a nightmare. *Your Fae princess will meet her fate.*

What the hell was that even supposed to mean? I fucking hated vampires and their bullshit. But regardless, it couldn’t be anything good—not with Gregor and the whole coven after Cali’s blood. Who the fuck was the vampire who’d bitten her, anyway?

I needed to find and kill him.

“What Gregor said before he left makes me think they’re going to come back,” I told Xavier. “We have to get Cali out of the pack house. We need to get her to a safe haven, a big city, somewhere we can hide her. Except Big Mac’s spell has made that impossible.”

“I’ve already thought of that,” Xavier replied. “The question is, what do we do about it? Big Mac isn’t here to lift the spell.”

“How do we break a spell without a witch?” I asked, thinking out loud.

Silence fell between us.

Xavier broke it a moment later. “What if we don’t need a witch? What about the Fae? Their magic must be useful for something other than glamouring and healing.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I think you overestimate Astrid and Torin. They each have their specialties, and that’s it.”

“Maren?” Xavier raised an eyebrow.

I sighed. “It’s worth a try. For Cali.”

“For Cali,” Xavier repeated.

I was moving to head inside when Xavier stopped me. There was a smile on his face. A sad smile, a little bitter, but still a smile. “Looks like we agree again. This is turning into a bad habit.”

I snorted. “Perhaps.” I stared at Xavier for a beat too long.

I wished my relationship with him could be more like this moment. Without tension. I wished we could be more like the brothers were supposed to be. There was a huge part of me that appreciated and even admired Xavier. But then, there was an even bigger part that had claimed Cali as its mate. And that part overpowered everything else.

“It’s funny how Cali is bringing us together…”

Xavier shook his head. “You said it, not me.”

We both nodded, staring at each other. We didn’t have to speak—it was a brother thing, even though we were barely that. The *due destini* curse was hanging over our heads and landing heavy on our shoulders. It was a burden to carry—but it was to be cherished as well, like we both cherished Cali.

This was such a fucking mess.

Xavier cleared his throat, breaking the silence. “While you talk to the Fae, I’ll talk to Colton about a witch he met in Idaho. She could also be an option, if we’re lucky.”

“Good call,” I said.

Xavier headed off upstairs to call Colton. I returned to the living room to Cali and the others. It actually physically hurt me to see her like that, pale and sweating and so obviously sick. The bite wound glistened with what had to be venom.

I stood over her. “How are you?” I asked. It was such a dumb question, but I couldn’t help myself.

She offered me a smile, soft but shaky. “Other than the gaping holes in my neck? All good.”

She was lying.

“We’re gonna fix this,” I whispered. Then I kissed her forehead and walked away.

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“I need to talk to you,” I said, pulling Torin and Astrid aside.

“What’s going on?” Torin asked, frowning.

“Is there a way for either of you to use your Fae power to break the barrier spell that Big Mac put on Cali?” I asked. “Xavier and I need to get Cali out of here before the vampires come back.”

Torin looked sad. “I’m sorry, but I’m a healer. That’s my thing. I can’t blow things up or break spells.”

Astrid looked sad as well. “I can glamour things, even a door, but that won’t release Cali. Maybe if Artemis were here…”

But of course, Artemis *wasn’t* here. She was off with Big Mac, the primary person with the ability to break this spell. This was just our luck. Frustration bubbled up inside me. I stared at the two and asked, “So you’re telling me that there’s nothing else you can do? Didn’t you help Cali with a fairy ring or something at some point?”

Torin seemed thoughtful. “Actually, have you asked Maren about this? Dark Fae have all kinds of magic, too.”

“He’s right,” Astrid said with wide eyes.

I paused. I had been hoping that these two could do it and I wouldn’t have to ask her at all. “Sure. Thanks for that.”

“Anything for the Alpha!” Torin said, winking at me. Astrid grinned.

I vaguely registered that these poor Fae really did like us all much more than we liked them. I wanted to feel bad about that, but I was too stressed out about Cali and now the whole Maren thing. Could I really ask for her help?

Things were awkward between us, unresolved. But everything about this was awkward, anyway. I was already working with the brother who’d repeatedly tried to kill me in the past.

But still, protecting Cali was a common goal for me and Xavier; it was the one thing that I knew we could always agree on. Would Maren, though? She had no reason to be invested in Cali’s well-being, other than the fact that Cali was part of the pack that Maren was staying with. Could Maren help Cali as a thank you for the hospitality?

I glanced at Cali. She was looking paler and paler, and no matter how many times Tom told her to eat something, she said she wasn’t hungry. She’d even turned down a waffle. This was really bad. If the vampires came back, thanks to Big Mac’s spell, we could get into a civil war right outside our own house. I didn’t trust that they wouldn’t find a way to break through our barrier first.

This whole fucking situation was giving me yet another reason not to trust witches. Even if my mother was marrying one.

I could hear Xavier upstairs, pacing, talking on the phone with Colton. Maybe he would be able to find a witch, but even if he did, who was to say that said witch would help us? I thought about the witch sisters, but I didn’t trust them at all. Not with what they’d been doing to me with those blackouts, and how they’d involved Cali in the whole thing as well.

After careful consideration, it looked like Torin and Astrid—the two Fae that I should probably start liking more—had had the best idea. I wasn’t going to give Xavier the credit.

I had to ask Maren.

She was in the kitchen, trying to get Fenrir to eat his broccoli. It was clearly a struggle.

The kid’s eyes lit up when he saw me, though, and I got a weird little twinge in my chest when I saw him as well. I smiled. “Thought I’d drop by to see how the dinner situation was going.”

“Everything is horrible,” Fenrir told me seriously. “You’re the Alpha, can’t you save me from the broccoli?”

I glanced at Maren, who had an amused but fed up expression on her face.

I said, “I think, if your mom agrees, that you deserve some French fries tomorrow for alerting us when you saw the vampires. You’re going to grow up to become a great werewolf.”

Fenrir grinned at me before staring at his mom. “Will I get French fries tomorrow for being a good werewolf?”

“Maybe,” Maren said, giving me a look. “If you eat the broccoli now.”

Long-suffering, Fenrir ate the last of his broccoli with two quick bites and stomped out of the room, yelling Astrid’s name with a muffle.

“He’s gonna spit that out somewhere, isn’t he?” I asked Maren.

“Most definitely,” she replied. Then she eyed me, offering a tight smile. “You don’t need to compliment Fenrir or try to have a relationship with him. It’s nice but not necessary.”

“I meant what I said before,” I said honestly. “I like Fenrir. And I want him to learn about being a werewolf.”

Maren stared at me. “But that’s not why you’re here, is it?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“What is it, then?” Maren asked.

Looking into her eyes, I asked, “Can you break Big Mac’s spell on Cali?”

**Episode 1136**

I had a bandage on, but I could still feel the bite underneath.

It was throbbing in sync with my heartbeat.

My dad was fussing over me. He kept rambling, saying: *You need to rest*, and *You’ll feel better soon, don’t worry*, and *I’m so sorry this happened to you, sweetie. Wait till your mom hears about this, she’ll ruin those disgusting vampires!*

I was starting to suspect that my dad had a secret angry side that he rarely channeled.

Oh, well.

“I’ll bring you some chicken soup later,” he finally concluded, tucking me into bed. “I just saw this great recipe in Ina Garten’s book.”

Chicken soup sounded like the last thing I needed right now.

“That sounds great,” I lied, “but I’m really just feeling tired, so I think I’ll take your advice and rest. It’s been quite the day so far.”

Dad stared at me fondly, concern shadowing his features. He kissed my forehead. “You’re right, you should rest,” he murmured. And then, as if he hadn’t heard anything I’d just told him, he added, “I’ll leave you be and bring up some soup later. It looked delicious!”

Feeling torn between laughter and frustration, I let my dad go without another word.

Once I was alone, I sank back into the pillows and covered my face with my hands. I couldn’t believe it had taken both Xavier and Greyson to lick me to get this thing to even *partly* heal. Both Xavier and Greyson’s licks had failed at first, and I had been worried, but it finally seemed to be slowing the bleeding now. Somewhat. Maybe the combo of both my mates tending to me had done the trick. It was all so fucking bizarre and confusing.

Kind of surreal, too.

*And really freaking creepy*, I added to myself, shuddering.

At least I didn’t feel woozy anymore. And I didn’t feel like I was under a trance. I’d had no idea that a vampire could do something like that to a person. I made a mental note to ask my mom about it later. She would know, probably. She knew most things. And it wasn’t like I knew any vampires to ask any questions—

*Oh my god! Mikah!*

I DID know a vampire who I could contact! Mikah had always been really forthcoming with everything about Fae and the supernatural in general. Maybe he could explain all the things that had just happened. Maybe he could explain why the wound was so resistant to healing. I wasn’t sure if his number worked anymore, though…

*Only one way to find out…*

I picked up my phone. Shaking, I texted him a: hi!

And then I hoped for the best.

I was beginning to doze off, feeling exhausted and like someone had tried to eat me, when my phone pinged, startling me awake. I reached for it and grinned. There was a reply from Mikah!

**Mikah:** Cali?

*YES!* I thought. *It’s him! He’ll help me!*

I started typing furiously, shooting one question after the other.

**Me**: hey!!! I had a few questions to ask you, actually, if you don’t mind

**Me:** cause I wanted to ask you all these things that were about a vampire maybeeeeee biting a Fae 🧚 🧛

**Me**: hypothetically

**Me**: one time!!!!!!

**Me**: but what happens if the Fae wants to keep getting sucked on? 🤔

**Me**: I mean you probably know that getting the blood sucked out of you feels kinda sexy and euphoric

**Me**: wait is it sexy for the vampire too???

**Me**: sorry never mind, that’s personal 🤐

**Me**: okay but why does it feel good? lol like what was up with that?! is that a thing? are sexual feelings while you’re dying a thing?! I don’t understand how that works!!

**Me**: \*works in this hypothetical of course situation

**Me**: of course hypothetical hahaha

**Me**: 🙃 🙃 🙃

**Me:** also OMG how rude of me???? I’M SUCH A MONSTER! I haven’t asked how you are, I hope you’re doing well!!❤️❤️❤️

**Me:** back to that hypothetical thing. maybe one time, it happened, maybe, you know?

**Me**: one time, it did. like all things do. but how does that work? why doesn’t the wound fully heal afterwards even if you have the Fae magic of a very powerful healer who heals everything usually????!!!!

**Me**: sorry typing too fast lol 😅

**Me**: maybe you could explain that last part to me but I also have some other questions???

In between my frantic, incomprehensible, typo-strewn texting, Mikah sent back a text himself.

**Mikah:** Cali, slow down. What’s going on?

I wanted to scream into my pillow. I took a deep breath, telling myself to calm down and put my thoughts in order, but then my phone started vibrating. Mikah’s name flashed up on the screen. He was calling me. *Ack!*

This was my opportunity to get some answers, dammit! I couldn’t chicken out.

When I picked up, Mikah said, “Hey Cali.”

“Hey,” I replied awkwardly.

“I’m kind of busy, but your, uh, impressive number of texts alarmed me—what’s up? Everything okay?”

I let out a very unladylike snort. “Everything’s fine.”

Mikah paused. “Your texts say the opposite. Also, you don’t usually text me. At all.”

“Oh my god, fine! You caught me!” I said. “Something terrible happened and I need your help.”

I began to explain everything that had taken place. I started with Gregor and then being bitten by that other unfortunately beautiful vampire, and then the wound not closing.

Once my rambling was over, Mikah didn’t speak.

I heard Gabriel say something in the background, but Mikah shushed him.

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

Mikah took a deep breath. “It’s not great that a vampire coven discovered there’s a Fae nearby. They all must have a daylight item if they’re attacking during the day.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “What’s a daylight item?”

There was a moment of bickering on the other end before Mikah was back. “A daylight item is sort of a… talisman. It protects vampires from the daylight. It can be a ring, necklace, anything,” he explained. “Have they been invited into the house?”

I shook my head, which he couldn’t see. “They can’t get in. Big Mac put a spell.”

“That’s good,” he mumbled. “But it won’t stop them from trying to break it. They tend to... obsess over Fae blood.”

I gasped. I couldn’t afford to lose *more* blood!

“What is that supposed to *mean?*” I spluttered anxiously. “Why do you say that?”

Mikah sighed again. “I don’t want to scare you, Cali. It’s just a risk, especially because you’re not just Fae, you’re Light Fae. And Light Fae blood is addictive to vampires.”

That… did NOT sound good.

“It’s like a magical elixir to them,” Mikah went on. “I’ve heard rumors that some vampires have been driven mad over their insatiable lust for Fae blood.”

I took in Mikah’s words, internally freaking out.

*Insatiable lust?* I thought, alarmed. *I DON’T WANT ANY VAMPIRES LUSTING OVER ME!*

I remembered the vampire who’d bitten me, the way he’d stared at me before telling me that he’d see me again. That was the last thing I wanted. Sure, he was really hot and mesmerizing, but he literally wanted to suck the life out of me, so that kind of put a damper on things.

*Note to self: carry a sharp wooden object at all times.*

“You mentioned something about feeling dazed by him—”

“Yeah,” I interrupted. “The weird euphoric, erm, sexy feelings. It felt like I was hypnotized. I couldn’t do anything to get away.”

Mikah made a sound that sounded like a chuckle, but pained. “That’s the appeal of the vampire species. They can lure you in with their sensuality. Most humans can’t resist it.”

“I get that, but I’m not just human,” I pointed out.

“That makes the lure of your blood even more intense,” Mikah explained. There was a scuffle and Gabriel’s voice came through the phone.

“Hey, Cali,” he said. “Think of it this way: human blood is like going to McDonald’s—*shit!*”

I heard a loud thump on the other end of the line.

“What?” I asked, worried. “Are you guys okay?”

“It’s fine,” Mikah said dryly, returning to the phone. “Sorry, Gabe is being Gabe.”

I had no idea what that was supposed to mean.

Gabriel’s voice came back; I must have been on speaker phone. “So, Cali do you follow? Humans are McDonald’s, but Light Fae blood? You’re talking a three Michelin star restaurant in France.”

I was a restaurant in *France?* With a lot of *stars?* I didn’t even want to go to France! I’d heard that the French were very rude and very beautiful and had various unhealthy everyday habits. They were basically the werewolves of the human world!

*Oh wow, do I* want *to go to France? I feel like I do now?* I wondered.

Then I scolded myself, because I needed to get a grip.

“How does all this link back to the fact that my wound won’t completely heal?” I asked.

“It’s all because you’re Light Fae. Drinking Light Fae blood puts vampires into a frenzy—and their venom prevents your wound from healing, so it stays open,” Mikah said. “That way, they can drain you dry.”

I almost dropped the phone.

“Oh my god! I’m not a juice box!” I gagged, picturing myself shriveling up and collapsing in a dried out heap of withered flesh and bones.

Mikah sighed. “I know you’re not. But a lot of vampires would disagree.”

I touched my bandage, cringing. “Will my wound ever fully heal?”

Before Mikah could answer, I did drop the phone.

The vampire was staring at me through the window.

**Episode 1137**

VIOLET

Marta was on full freak-out mode. She lunged over the seat to grab the wheel from Charlie’s hands. Charlie gasped. I got in between them, pushing her back, fighting to keep her steady because she seemed to be out of control.

“Jesus, what’s wrong with you?” I asked her, my heart pounding.

“Are you okay?” Charlie peered at her, looking bewildered and shocked.

There were actual tears falling from Marta’s eyes now. She looked around, hyperventilating. “Did—did you hit him?”

Charlie and I exchanged a look. “*Who*? There was nobody out there,” I said.

I was starting to suspect that Marta could be losing her mind. She had been in that house for so long—maybe escaping from it had rattled her senses? Charlie had said something about Stockholm Syndrome at some point. Maybe she actually *missed* the house.

Poor Marta.

She wiped her tears and stared at us. “So you didn’t see him?” she whispered.

“We saw nobody,” I told her.

But again, she asked, “You didn’t see the boy?”

This was getting freaky.

“What boy?” I asked. My tone had become lower, hesitant. Marta looked so vulnerable, so freaked out and genuine that I was beginning to doubt my own eyes. But then I told myself that if we’d run over an actual person, we would have felt it. It would have been like running over a log or something. *Right?*

“Marta,” I said quietly, “there was nobody out there.”

She sniffled, shaking her head.

Charlie slowed down and turned on his blinker. He pulled into a gas station, his expression blank.

My eyebrows knitted, I asked, “Why are we stopping?”

Charlie glanced at the back seat, where Marta was staring down at her lap, miserable.

“She’s upset,” Charlie told me quietly. “We need to calm her down. Maybe get some water?”

I knew that Charlie was right; there was something going on with Marta, but I’d been hoping to get more distance between us and the house, between us and Portland, as soon as possible. The farther we got from here, the farther away Charlie’s parents would be. The last thing we needed right now was to run into them. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach, but I couldn’t dwell on it.

I needed figure this out with Marta right now.

“So, I’m confused. You thought you saw a boy in the middle of the road?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t *think* I did. I just did.”

Well. She was either very stubborn or very certain. *Good god.*

“Can you describe this boy?” I asked Marta, turning to face her.

She glanced through the car window. Then she looked behind her, like she was searching for the boy. She paused. Then she stared at me and said, “He was the same age as you.”

I frowned. “Why would a guy our age be walking around in the middle of the road for no reason?”

“He could be high or something?” Charlie asked me sheepishly. “Drunk?”

I took a second to process that. That was a possibility. Well, that *would have* been a possibility if we’d actually had seen a boy. I shook my head to clear it.

“High or otherwise, there was nobody out there,” I told Charlie.

Marta flinched at the tone of my voice, and I mumbled a sorry to her. But seriously, though—I was getting more and more unsettled the more we talked about this. It didn’t make any sense.

“Look, Marta, I’m sorry if I…” I stopped talking when Marta closed her eyes.

She put a hand on her brow, rubbing at it slowly, like she was concentrating.

I mind linked with Charlie. *What the hell is happening right now?*

*Beats me*, Charlie replied. *Not surprised she’s got issues, though. She was locked up for way too long, Violet.*

I had to agree with that.

“I’m sensing something,” Marta murmured. Then her eyes snapped open and she turned to face me. “He says he knows you.”

I flinched back. “Who?” I pointed at my chest. “Me?”

I glanced at Charlie nervously as Marta added, “He says he’s your brother.”

The moment the words left Marta’s mouth, I shuddered.

“Lilac is talking to you?” I asked, stunned and incredulous. I’d thought that Lilac had moved on after I’d released all the ghosts from the pendant, after the battle with Silas.

I looked back to the road, my heart racing.

Was Lilac out there, wandering around? Was he in some kind of trouble? Was he running from something? Questions wouldn’t stop flooding my head. I needed answers. Right now.

Charlie put a comforting hand on my shoulder. He turned to Marta. “How do you know this?”

*She could be making this up, we need to be careful*, he told me through our mind link.

*How does she know I had a brother, though?* I asked Charlie.

*I have no idea*, he replied. *But I saw a documentary on scam artists once. They keep guessing and when they hit on something and see their target react like you just did at the word “brother”, they keep going.*

That made sense. Marta had seen my reaction when she’d mentioned my brother, and now she could be continuing the conversation based on that assumption. I didn’t want that to be true, though.

*But why would she do that?* I asked Charlie, annoyed to have my bubble burst. *She’s not a con artist—she just saved us!*

Charlie got out of the car and started pumping gas, shrugging. *Just be careful, is all I’m saying.*

I took a deep breath, realizing that Charlie had a point. But I did actually want to believe Marta.

Charlie watched us, listening through the open window as I turned to Marta again.

“How do you know I had a brother?” I asked her.

“Because your brother told me,” she said quietly.

I started at her, feeling a pressure in my eyes that made them ache. “My brother is dead. He didn’t tell you anything.”

Marta paused, wiping at another tear. “I know. That’s exactly why I can talk to him.”

This was starting to get painful. I was so confused. “What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

Marta glanced between Charlie and me. “I’m a medium,” she said. “I can communicate with ghosts. That’s why Bert kept me around.”

My stomach dropped.

I stared at Charlie, and he stared back before turning sharply toward Marta. “Are you for real?” he asked her. “You realize how… *weird* that sounds, right?”

Marta’s eyes were dry now. She chuckled awkwardly. “And me talking to two *werewolves* on the run *isn’t* weird?”

Charlie paused there. He frowned. “Okay, she has a point,” he told me, before turning to her again. “But how do we know you’re not trying to trick us?”

A tear escaped me, and Charlie squeezed my hand. I wiped my cheek. “He’s right. How do we know that?”

Marta concentrated again, her eyes closed. And then she opened them and smiled at me. “He told me that your mother used to put two and a half sugars in her black tea—no milk, and that was really important. And when she read the newspaper, she always read the comics first.”

I gasped, freezing in place.

A flash of memory ran through my head. I was a kid, watching my mom add sugar to her tea and then read the funnies. *Always* the comics first. *Never* any milk in her tea. She’d always tease Dad for putting milk in his coffee. There was only one way Marta could know things like that.

I looked over at Charlie, who’d just finished filling the tank. “She’s telling the truth.”

Charlie was clearly stunned, but I was hopeful.

I felt more hopeful than I had in months.

“Thank you,” Marta said. “For listening.”

I nodded. “Thank you for telling me.”

I eyed Charlie, who still looked stunned. “Get back in,” I whispered to my mate. “We have to find out where he is.”

“Lilac?” Charlie asked quietly.

“Lilac,” I said. Saying his name gave me strength.

My brother’s name.

My brother was out there. *Here*. But why?

Charlie gave me one of those sweet, comforting looks of his. He was about to say something when his eyes flickered over our car. The softness in his expression vanished in an instant. The sudden look of pure terror on his face alarmed me. *Charlie?*

He jumped in through the window and hissed, “We’ve got trouble!”

Before I could even ask what the hell had gotten into him, he gunned the engine and peeled away from the gas station, ripping the nozzle off.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, exchanging an alarmed look with Marta.

Then the answer to my question came in the form of a sound.

There was the roar of another car’s engine pulling up alongside us. The windows were tinted. A moment later, though, the passenger window lowered…

To reveal none other than Charlie’s dad.

**Episode 1138**

“Cali? Can you hear me? Cali? Are you still there?”

Mikah was speaking to me through the phone, but I could barely hear him. Every particle of my being was focused on the figure outside my window.

“Cali? Dude, are you there?” Gabriel called. “Maybe the call dropped?”

Distantly, I registered that my phone had slipped from my hands. I bent to retrieve it from where it lay at my feet, never taking my eyes off the vampire at my window.

“Cali? Are you there?” Mikah asked.

I nodded mutely, knowing that Mikah couldn’t see me. The vampire at my window held my gaze, his eyes boring into me with a nearly physical power. I felt possessed by his eyes, and I couldn’t tear my gaze away.

“Cali?” Gabriel asked, his voice concerned. “Are you okay?”

I had to say something. “I have a visitor. I should probably go.”

“What visitor? Where?” Mikah asked, sounding confused.

“A vampire,” I said, the word filling me with a strange thrill. “He’s at my window. Maybe I should let him in.”

The vampire outside my window smiled at me, the expression spreading slowly across his face as I moved toward the window.

“*What?* Cali! NO!” Gabriel said.

“Do *not* invite him in! Cali—” Mikah started.

“I have to go. I’ll call you back. Thanks, guys.” I ended the call and dropped the phone to the floor. I stopped a few feet from the window, my whole body vibrating. I knew what Mikah had said, but he didn’t know the truth—this vampire *needed* me.

And I needed him.

Without thinking, I reached up and pulled the bandage from my neck. It was sticky with blood.

The vampire’s eyes shifted to the wound at my neck and his tongue flicked over his lips. He closed his eyes for just a moment, and I could hear his moan of pleasure through the pane of glass separating us. I could feel it vibrate through me.

He pressed a hand against the window, reaching for me. “Let me feed.”

I took another step toward him.

He nodded. “Open the window,” he said, his smile encouraging me. “Let me in.”

I reached a hand out, then drew it back. I looked down at the phone at my feet. Mikah had told me not to invite him in. Mikah knew about these things. I could feel my hold on logic slipping away, but I tried to hang on. I knew I should listen to Mikah. He knew what he was talking about. He was a vampire.

What was the expression? *Never invite a vampire into your home*.

The vampire at my window smiled at me. “Don’t be afraid,” he said, his voice soothing. “I know you want what I want. You want me to feed on you.” His tongue flicked to his lips again. “Come. Let me in.”

I couldn’t move. I felt locked in place by indecision. The guys had told me not to let him in—I knew I shouldn’t let him in. But… I *wanted* to. I yearned to reach for the window latch and fling it open. The look in the vampire’s eyes made me feel a hunger deep in my belly—dark and feral, something I had never felt before. And all I had to do to feel it again was open the window. All I had to do was invite him in.

The memory of that first bite—that swooping, glazed sensation… The look in his eyes when he’d tasted me… I wanted to feel it again. I wanted to see it again. I knew it was dangerous, but I wanted it.

The vampire looked at me like he knew what I was thinking. He nodded. “That’s right.” He pressed his palm to the glass. “Come to me. Touch me.”

Cautiously, I reached my hand out and pressed my palm to the glass, right against his.

The effect was immediate. My whole body pulsed, and it felt like my heartbeat reset, slowing its rhythm until it was beating in time with his. The wound on my neck gave a powerful throb, right on the edge between pleasure and pain. It felt as though it had opened up again, and I felt a warm trickle of blood on my neck.

The vampire took a deep breath. “I can smell you,” he said, “but it’s not enough.” His eyes burned bright. “I want to taste you again.”

The struggle inside me was powerful. I knew I should walk away from the window—I should go find Xavier or Greyson and pack some more gauze onto my neck wound—but the pull was *so* strong. There was a strange humming in my ears, blocking out every other sound—even the sound of my more logical thoughts. Every fiber of my body was yearning for this being, and he was so, so close. All I had to do was reach for the window latch.

The vampire nodded. “That’s right. Just open the window. Invite me in.”

I knew I shouldn’t. I knew better. But I nodded.

The vampire moved closer to the window—close enough that his warm breath left a fogged trail on the glass. He opened his mouth, just a little, and ran his tongue over his teeth. He was teasing me, and my body responded, tensing and tightening and pulling toward him.

My hand was still on the window, and I could feel his cool skin though the glass. I wanted more. I wanted *him*.

“Just open up the window and let me in,” he said, his voice like music in my ears.

It was so simple. It was everything I wanted. I reached up and unclasped the latch. I put my hands to the seal of the window, ready to push it open, and the wound on my neck pulsed. It seemed to vibrate with anticipation, as though it knew what was coming.

I frowned. The bite, the venom… Was that what was driving me? Or was it true desire?

“Open the window,” the vampire crooned. His eyes were steady on me. “Don’t fight it.”

I cracked the window open. It wasn’t enough for anyone to climb through, but I could feel the cool November wind as it blew into the room. The air skimmed across my face like a kiss.

“That’s right,” the vampire said, his voice somehow both soothing and excited. “You’re so close. Now just push the window open, and say those words.”

I knew I shouldn’t. Deep in my bones, I *knew* it wasn’t a good idea to throw open your bedroom window and invite a vampire inside, but it felt like my brain wasn’t connected to my body anymore. Or at least not the logical part.

My hand on the window was growing slick with sweat. My whole body was starting to shiver, but it didn’t have anything to do with the cool wind. It had everything to do with the heat that was pooling deep in my belly. I couldn’t stop thinking of the tingling sensation I’d felt when he’d bitten me. How amazing it had felt to be in his arms. And I wanted it again.

I pushed the window open.

The vampire’s eyes darkened, and he reached out for me so quickly I barely saw his body move—but then he was forced back and had to brace his feet to keep from sliding down the steep slope of the roof. He was stopped by an invisible barrier at the edge of the window, and he couldn’t penetrate it.

I blinked, remembering. It was Big Mac’s spell. She’d cast it to protect the house from vampires after what had happened on Halloween night—and it had just saved me.

With a gasp, I took a step back from the window, which was now swinging open. My mind reeled. What had I just done? Shit shit shit.

“You need to invite me in, Fae,” the vampire snarled at me.

I stared at him, still unable to look away from his mesmerizing eyes. But I shook my head and took another step back.

“Just say the words,” he crooned, gentling his tone. “Invite me in.”

He smiled again, and I stopped moving away. The fear drained away, and I took a step toward him.

“That’s right,” he encouraged, as I took another step. “This is what you want.”

The wound on my neck pulsed with every beat of my heart as I moved closer to the window. The air was cold, but my body felt warm as I approached the vampire.

“Yes,” I murmured, stepping past my discarded phone.

I reached for the window and had just opened my mouth to invite him into the room when the door burst open behind me. I spun around to see Xavier standing framed in the doorway. He looked at me, then at the vampire, his eyes wide with shock.

“Xavier!” I gasped.

“Cali!” He stepped into the room, rushing toward me. “What are you *doing?*”

**Episode 1139**

I stared at Xavier for what seemed like a long time. It felt like I was stuck in a dream. The moment had that strange, slow-motion, dreamy quality to it. Like he was moving through molasses as he ran toward me.

“Xavier?” I said, almost like I was testing out my voice.

He didn’t answer, just pushed me behind him. He charged the window, delivering a powerful uppercut to the vampire’s square jaw. The sound of the crack made me flinch.

The vampire made a grab for him, but Xavier grabbed him by the shirt instead and yanked him forward, slamming him against the invisible barrier that prevented him from entering. The vampire reeled, but recovered, managing to grab the part of Xavier’s arm that was outside the barrier. They struggled at the window, and I watched, my anxiety rising by the second.

I knew I should help Xavier—this was a *vampire!*—but I also knew that I wanted what the vampire was offering. And to get that, I needed to stop Xavier.

Frantically, I looked around my room. Nothing jumped out at me as a useful weapon—*why* did I have no useful weapons in my room?—so I grabbed the closest thing I could reach and started to hit Xavier with my curling iron.

“Cali! What are you doing?” Xavier demanded, looking over his shoulder at me. “Stop!”

Xavier had the vampire in his grasp, and the vampire was struggling against him, trying and failing to break Xavier’s iron grip. He gave a snarl of frustration, and I watched as he bared his fangs. I must have gasped, because Xavier whipped around just in time to see the vampire lean down to bite the exposed flesh at his wrist.

“For fuck’s sake!” Xavier yelled, releasing the vampire and shoving him away. “Fucking bloodsucker!”

The vampire caught himself on the roof, then shifted his smoldering gaze to me. He stared at me for a moment—though it could have been an hour, I couldn’t tell—then let himself slide off the roof just as Xavier lunged for him. He dropped soundlessly to the ground, and we watched as he moved across the lawn with lightning speed before disappearing into the forest.

“Fuck,” Xavier breathed, running a hand through his hair.

This snapped me back to reality, and I looked around, then down at my hand. “Why am I holding a curling iron?” I asked, frowning. “What the hell is going on?”

Xavier turned to me and pulled the curling iron from my hand. “Are you okay?”

I looked up at him, blinking like I was just waking up. That was what it felt like. Like I’d been asleep, and dreaming about him, but I’d just woken up and was only just seeing him in real life. “What happened?” I asked.

Xavier raised his eyebrows. “You almost let a vampire into your room, is what happened!”

“*What?*” I demanded, growing cold with fear. “Why would I do that?”

Xavier’s eyes flicked down to my neck. “I think it’s got something to do with that,” he said, pointing to the bite. “The bite.”

I put my hand to my neck. Where had the bandage gone? I frowned as I looked around. It was on the floor, next to my phone. I’d called Mikah—

“Oh my god.” I looked up at Xavier as the memories came rushing back. “Xavier! I hit you with my curling iron. Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

Xavier shook his head. “Not with this,” he said, and put it down on my desk. Then he pulled me into his arms. “But you did scare the shit out of me.”

I leaned into him as he tightened his arms around me. I was so rattled by what had just happened, and it felt good to be in his arms. “I scared myself, too.”

I felt Xavier’s fingers on my neck.

“You need to let this close again. Why’d you take off the bandage?”

I closed my eyes. “I couldn’t help it.”

“What do you mean?”

I took a deep breath and pushed back, so I could look up at him. “When that vampire was at the window, Xavier, it was like I was losing control. I—” I hesitated. “I’m not sure you’re going to want to hear this.”

His blue eyes were steady. “I can handle whatever you have to tell me. I want to help you, Cali.”

“I wanted to let the vampire in,” I admitted. “I took off the bandage because I wanted him to feed on me.” Blood rushed to my face and I covered my eyes with my hands. “What’s wrong with me?”

Xavier’s arms went around me again. “It’s got to be the venom.”  
“That’s what Mikah said,” I told him.

Xavier nodded. “It’s powerful stuff. I’d hoped licking it would help heal it, but obviously it hadn’t.” He stepped away from me and slammed the window shut, locking it. “This is why you need to be more careful. I never should have left you alone,” he muttered, shaking his head, clearly angry at himself.

“I’m fine,” I said, though it was only a reflex. It was absurdly clear that I wasn’t fine.

His arm went gently around my shoulders, and he led me to my bed. “You need to get some rest.” He helped me into bed and tucked the blankets around me. Then he disappeared into the bathroom.

When he came back, he was holding some clean gauze and a new bandage. He cleaned off the dripping blood and applied the bandage, then leaned down and sealed it with a kiss.

“Thank you,” I said, smiling up at him. “I’m sorry for…” I gestured to the window.

Xavier shook his head, his expression dark. “It’s not your fault. Which is why I’m going to stay here tonight.” He tossed the used gauze into the trashcan near the desk, grabbed the desk chair, and pulled it up next to my bed.

I rolled my eyes. “Xavier—”

“I’m staying,” he said firmly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t need a bodyguard.”

Xavier pointed to the window. “What if he comes back?”

I looked at the window, remembering the vampire’s face, pressed against the glass, and shivered.

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “I’m not going anywhere.”

With a sigh, I leaned back on my pillows. “Well, then you don’t need to sit in that chair all night. You might as well lie down.”

Xavier looked at me for a moment, then away. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.”

I smiled. “I promise not to bite.”

Xavier raised his eyebrows.

“Oh my god,” I said, putting a hand over my eyes. Such a poor choice of words, considering it was a bite that had put me in this position to begin with. “That’s not what I meant.”

But Xavier just chuckled, and, after a moment, I felt him slide into bed next to me. He settled in, slipping his arm beneath me and pulling the blankets around us both.

“Oh, Cali,” he said, sliding a lock of my hair through his fingers, “why can’t we just catch a break?”

“I don’t know,” I said with a sigh of frustration. “It’s not fair. And now, not only am I trapped here by Big Mac’s spell, I’m practically quarantined in my room.” I shook my head. “It’s just not fair.”

“Well,” Xavier said with a smirk, “at least you’re with me. It can’t be that bad, can it?” He laughed when I scowled, then pressed a kiss to my forehead. “It’s not forever. I can promise you that. You will get out of here. I’m trying to find a way to break the spell—”

“Are you?” I looked up at him hopefully. “Have you figured it out?”

“Not yet,” he said. “But I will. Don’t worry.”

“Okay.” I smiled. “I know you will.” I settled into the crook of his arm. It felt good to be near him. I still felt lightheaded, but I felt safe in his arms. I stroked my hand down his chest, feeling the definition of the muscles beneath his shirt.

He inhaled sharply, and I became suddenly aware of how close we were. How *in bed together* we were. When he turned to face me, our eyes locked.

“Cali,” he murmured, running a finger gently down my cheek. “We never did get to finish our date, did we?”

I shook my head, feeling more lightheaded than ever.

Something in my eyes made him smile, and he leaned in to press his lips to mine. His kiss was hot and immediate, and his tongue pressed through my lips without waiting for an invitation. I opened my mouth to him, and he consumed me, angling himself so that his body hovered over mine. His hands slipped down, running gently down the length of my body, and slipped beneath my shirt. His fingers were cool against my fevered skin, and I shivered at his touch.

“Cali,” Xavier murmured, kissing his way to my ear. His touch was feather light.

“Xavier,” I whispered, closing my eyes and dropping my head back against the pillows.

**Episode 1140**

XAVIER

The way Cali moved beneath me made me burn with want, and I ran my tongue along the good side of her throat, just at the base of her neck, making her shiver. This was the way it was supposed to be: just the two of us. No Torin, no Greyson, no damn Flower Ceremony, no fucking rules.

I was lucky I’d heard the scuffle from her room—and relieved that I’d been the one to stop her from inviting that bloodsucker into the house—but I had to get her out of here. Now that the vampires knew she was here, they weren’t going to leave her alone, and I needed to get her somewhere safe, where that bastard couldn’t find her. But for now—in this moment—I was going to protect her and love her, just like I always had.

And, as I gripped her hips, I had no intention of her going anywhere at all.

She laced her fingers together behind my neck and pulled me back into a kiss, arching against me, pressing her body hard against mine, which nearly drove me crazy.

“Off,” she said, and for a moment I looked at her, confused, wondering if she wanted me off her. But she was grasping at my T-shirt, yanking it. “Get this off right now.”

I grinned, sat up, and pulled it off. She sucked in a breath and ran a hand up my chest, her eyes growing dark with lust. I knew Cali, and my whole body felt alive at what I *knew* was coming next.

She licked her lips and reached for my belt buckle. “Pants. Off.”

I unbuckled my belt and she was just about to slide her hand in when there was a knock at the door.

We both froze.

We stared at each other.

“Who is that?” Cali hissed.

“How should I know?” I said.

“Tell them to go away!” she whisper-shouted at me, like this was my fault. Her cheeks were still flushed and her lips were swollen with my kisses and I glanced at the door, wishing more than anything it had a goddamn lock on it.

The knock sounded again. “Cali?” the muffled voice called through the door. “Cali, honey, are you in there?”

“Oh, shit!” Cali’s eyes went wide. “It’s my dad!”

“Honey, I brought that soup for you to eat.”

I rolled my eyes and barely managed to swallow my groan of annoyance. Nothing like having your mate’s father showing up right in the middle of… well… *this*.

Cali pushed me off her. “*Put your shirt on*,” she hissed, throwing my shirt into my chest. “He can’t see you like this. He can’t see *us* like this!”

Her face was no longer flushed—it was burning bright red with embarrassment. She was way too damn cute. I rolled off the bed and pulled my shirt on. I’d barely buckled my belt when Tom opened the door.

I dropped into the chair and tried to look casual as he peeked into the room.

“Cali? Oh, hi, Xavier,” he said, stopping in his tracks. He was clearly surprised to see me. “I didn’t…” He glanced up at Cali.

“I was just keeping an eye on Cali. She’s still feeling a little woozy,” I said to cover the awkward silence of the moment. We didn’t need to mention the visit from the vampire to her dad.

Tom nodded. I didn’t know if he bought what I was saying, but he was willing to move past it, at least. “I appreciate that, Xavier, thank you. Can’t have too many eyes watching out for my little girl.”

I narrowed my eyes. What was that supposed to mean? Was that a crack about Greyson? Was he less pissed about the virginity thing?

But Tom didn’t look at me as he carefully set down the tray he was holding on Cali’s desk. “I brought you some of Ina Garten’s chicken soup, sweetheart. I would have brought some more if I’d known you were going to have company…” He trailed off.

“That’s okay,” I said, getting to my feet. Tom was kind of tough to read, but he was being particularly chilly, and I got the sense that I’d become a third wheel, and that he’d come up to talk to Cali alone. “I should go check in and make sure we’ve got eyes on the perimeter. We don’t want any more of those vampires making an appearance tonight.”

Cali looked at me a little anxiously. “Be careful, okay?”

“I will,” I assured her. “And I’ll be back to check on you. You just rest, okay?”

She nodded. “I will.”

“And keep the windows closed.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead and, with a thin smile at Tom, I slipped out.

In the hall, I leaned against the wall next to the closed door. I didn’t want to listen to what he was going to say, but I did wonder what Tom wanted to tell his daughter that he didn’t want to say in front of me. But, when I heard the rumble of voices, I pushed off the wall and headed down the hall. I didn’t want to invade Cali’s privacy.

As I headed for my room, I thought about what Cali and I had talked about before things had heated up between us: about how we couldn’t catch a break. That was sure as hell what it felt like—as if we were constantly dodging obstacles, and not always successfully.

I paused at my door as Ava reached the top of the stairs. She looked at me for a moment, her eyes flashing in the dim light of the hall, then moved away toward the room she was staying in. My stomach twisted.

Ava was yet another obstacle in the way of our happiness. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but maybe it was time I sucked it up and had a conversation with her.

“Ava,” I called. “Hang on.”

She turned at her door, surprise evident on her face. And I couldn’t blame her for that. I hadn’t sought her out since I’d brought her back here, after all.

I walked down the hall toward her. “I need to talk to you.”

She looked wary, but she opened her door and I followed her into the room.

Once we were inside, she turned to look at me, her arms crossed. “What do you want, Xavier?”

I could feel a muscle in my jaw twitch as she said my name. “I think it’s time for you to move on,” I said bluntly.

She raised her eyebrows, clearly surprised, but didn’t respond.

I cleared my throat. “I know I brought you here from the diner, but I didn’t intend for you to stay long term, and I think it’s time you left.”

Ava looked at me for a long moment. “So you’re throwing me out?”

“It—I mean, I wouldn’t say it that way,” I said. “Let’s just call it a strong suggestion. One that you have to follow,” I added.

After a moment, she nodded. “I see.” She looked around the room, which was empty of any personal items. “You know, X, I’m not going to pretend like I don’t understand why you’re telling me to go, but I have to ask—what makes you think that my leaving is going to solve any of your problems?”

My stomach tightened. “I didn’t say it would,” I ground out. “But not seeing your face around the breakfast table is bound to make things easier on my relationship with Cali.”

She looked at me, her dark eyes searching my face in that way she had, where it seemed like she was looking through me. “I wonder…”

“What?” I snapped when she didn’t go on. “What do you wonder?”

“I wonder if you’re using me as an excuse,” she finished.

“What does *that* mean?” I snarled. “An excuse for what?”

“You think I’m the one complicating things for you, Xavier, but you’ve been fighting with Greyson to win Cali’s love for how long?” She raised her eyebrows in mock curiosity. “Seems like it was long before I came back into your life—”

“You are not ‘back in my life’,” I snapped. “Let’s get that straight. You’re *visiting*.”

She pressed her lips together. “I don’t think so,” she murmured, shaking her head so her dark hair swung like a curtain behind her back.

I frowned. “What do you mean?” I asked warily. What was she getting at?

She took a step closer to me. “Cali’s been stringing you along for a long time, X. But at some point, she’s got to make a choice, right?”

“Yeah,” I grunted, watching Ava cautiously as she continued to move toward me. Talking about the *due destini* was the last thing I wanted to do with her. “And she’s going to choose me.”

“Say she doesn’t,” Ava said, her voice low. “Say she chooses Greyson.” She tilted her head, looking at me with her deep, dark eyes. “Would you give me another chance?”

**Episode 1141**

ARTEMIS

I watched as a strange mix of emotions crossed Orla’s face after I’d mentioned her first husband’s name—my *father’s* name. Confusion, puzzlement, sadness, then pain.

She shook her head. “We don’t even know if Kadmos is alive,” she said softly. “It was just a rumor, Artemis—”

“I know that,” I said swiftly. “But if the rumor is true, and my father is still alive, could he have been tracking me? Could *he* have taken the Orb from me?”

My mother’s face creased with a frown. “Why would you think that?”

“Because of what you said yourself!” I said. “You said that whoever was tracking me would have to be someone in my family. Which only leaves Hera—who I think we can both agree is a deeply unlikely candidate—and Kadmos.”

Orla bit her lip, thinking. “I don’t think it would have been my mother, that’s true…”

“Which only leaves Kadmos.”

She looked at me, and her eyes were soft with emotion. “I understand why you might suspect your father, Artemis. He’s a big question mark in your life. You never met him, you never had a chance to know what a good, kind person he was—”

“He fought in the war,” I said, my voice hard. “Even if he went in good, war changes people.” I knew what I was talking about. I thought about it all the time—every time I closed my eyes to go to sleep, actually. I’d been on my own for almost all of my life, and I’d done what I had to to survive, but there were a lot of things I wished I could forget about. There were a lot of things I wished I’d never had to do. I tried not to think of them, but there were certain things that just stuck with you, no matter how hard you tried to forget. I gritted my teeth as I looked at the mother I’d never known and tried hard not to think about how my life might have been different if I hadn’t been robbed of my childhood.

Orla studied my face for a long moment. “You might be right,” she said slowly. “The fact is, Artemis, your father was Dark Fae. That doesn’t mean he was a bad or evil person, but things may have affected him differently. In ways I couldn’t predict.”

I nodded, though I wondered at how quick she was to point out that he *wasn’t* bad, just because he was Dark Fae, as though she thought that would be my assumption. Astrid and Torin had thought the same thing, when we’d traveled through the Fae world. The Light Fae seemed to think all Dark Fae were evil, just as the Dark Fae thought Light Fae were all bad. I was half and half, which made me wonder where the fuck I fell on the good/bad spectrum.

I looked up in surprise as Orla took my hand.

“Artemis,” she said soothingly. “This is all wild speculation. We all wish Kadmos were still alive, but until we have proof—real, verifiable proof—I think it’s best to assume that this is nothing but a rumor. Okay?” She looked at me, clearly waiting for me to nod.

So I nodded.

She gave my hand a squeeze. “Let’s get into the car. I’m freezing.”

We hurried across the snowy ground, and I slid into the back seat. Orla got in after me, so I was squeezed between her and Rishika, but I was cold, too, so I didn’t mind. With a sigh, I leaned my head back against the seat, thinking that I would be glad to get back to the pack house—though I was disappointed that this trip had been such a bust. I’d set out *determined* to hide the Orb, and I’d failed.

“Took you long enough,” Nneka grumbled as Orla pulled the door shut. She turned the key and started off down the curving mountain trail again.

“Everything good?” Rishika asked quietly, looking over at me.

“Yep,” I said, forcing my face into what I hoped was a natural-looking smile. But everything was *not* okay. Not even close. And as we drove away from the mountain, my anxiety seemed to grow more pronounced. I had felt so *certain* when I’d started out, and now where was I? All these questions about the Orb and the portal, and now Kadmos… It was all very unsettling.

The car was quiet for a while as Nneka navigated down the mountain, but the silence was broken when Orla’s phone rang.

“Oh! It’s Cali!” she said, surprised. “Hi, sweetheart. You’re on speaker!”

“Mom.” Cali’s voice filled the car. “Take me off speaker phone, please. I called to talk to you.”

“Artemis is here,” Orla chided. “I want her to talk to you, too. What’s going on there? Fill us in.”

Cali hesitated, and I could almost hear her roll her eyes. “Whatever. Well, you’ll hear this when you get back, so I might as well tell you now. We had a little… *incident,* tonight.”

“What happened?” Orla asked quickly.

“Vampires,” Cali said, her voice grim.

“*What?*” Rishika demanded, shocked. “How many?”

“I’m not sure,” Cali said. “I was sent inside before I got a head count, but it was an ambush.”

“What else?” Orla asked, narrowing her eyes. “There’s something else, Caliana. What is it?”

“Um, well, I might have been bitten a little bit—”

I gasped. “You were *bitten by a vampire*?”

“Yeah,” Cali confirmed.

The blood drained from Orla’s face, and the hand holding her phone started to shake. “Okay,” she said, trying to sound calm. “Well, we’re heading back now, so we’ll see you soon.”

“What about the Orb?” Cali asked. “What happened to it?”

Orla and I exchanged a look.

“Don’t worry about that right now,” Orla said evasively. “We’ll explain everything when we see you. You just take care of yourself until we get back. And make sure you clean that wound, okay?”

“Okay,” Cali promised. “And don’t worry about me. Dad’s practically pouring Ina Garten’s chicken soup down my throat to get me feeling better.”

“Good. We’ll talk soon, honey,” Orla said.

“Bye, Mom. And Artemis. And whoever else is there,” Cali finished. Then she hung up.

Orla frowned at her phone. “This is why we want Cali to come back to Minnesota, where we can keep an eye on her,” she grumbled. “There are no vampires in Minnesota.”

Rishika glanced over at me, her eyebrows raised.

“Cali doesn’t need you to keep an eye on her,” I said. “She an adult. And even if you were babysitting her day and night, it wouldn’t matter; she always just does what she wants anyway.”

“All the more reason to keep her close,” Orla said, turning her gaze out the window.

“You should just accept Cali for who she is,” I said, feeling a little reckless. “Either support her, or leave her alone.”

Orla looked at me, surprised, then turned to look out the window again.

I looked at her, wondering if she felt the same concern for me as she did for Cali. Would she insist that *I* came back to Minnesota, too? Or was it just Cali she was concerned about?

Pressed against bodies on both sides, I suddenly felt very, very alone.

The only home I’d ever known was now closed to me, and the realization that I couldn’t get back into the Fae world if I wanted to hit me like a crashing wave. *Where did that leave me?*

In limbo.

I didn’t belong here in the human world. Orla was my mother, but her family wasn’t my family—not really. And I didn’t seem to belong anywhere else in the human world, either. Not yet, anyway. And what if I never found my place? I’d managed to find one in the Fae world, but I’d spent years carving it out for myself. I bit the inside of my cheek, thinking. If I gave the human world the same chance, would I be able to find my place here?

I glanced at Rishika, then over at Orla. There were things here that I would miss, but it was obvious to me now that I couldn’t keep going on in the same way.

They weren’t saying it—no one in the car was saying it—but they were all thinking it. The air was thick with it. They blamed me for losing the Orb. I blamed me, too. I had taken it because I’d been *sure* I knew what to do with it, and it was my fault that I’d lost it in the portal at Haystack Rock. And it was clear that my mother was only concerned with Cali—her *real* daughter.

As I looked forward at the road ahead of us, I made up my mind; once we got back to the pack house, I was going to leave. I didn’t know how I was going to do it, but I was going to find a way back into the Fae world and recover the Orb the only way I knew how—by myself.

**Episode 1142**

GREYSON

“So, do you think you can do it?” I asked Maren as I followed her outside. “Break Big Mac’s spell?”

She shrugged. “Like I said, I’m not sure. It’s worth a try, but no guarantees.” She stopped on the lawn and looked around, her hands on her hips.

“And?” I asked.

She looked up at me. “And what?”

I raised my eyebrows. “And what are you going to want in return?”

She frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“In exchange for your magic, are you going to want something in return?” I asked slowly.

She stared at me for a moment—long enough to make me feel uncomfortable beneath her gaze. “No,” she finally said. “No strings attached.” She went back to looking around.

I ran a hand through my hair. “Fenrir’s knocked out for the night?”

“Yeah,” she murmured, not looking at me, “I made sure he was really asleep before I came out here, so he didn’t start wandering around looking for me. Mrs. Smith is keeping an ear out for him.”

I nodded. “What are you looking for?” I finally asked. “Do we need to get something?”

But Maren was shaking her head. “No, I just need some charcoal.”

“Oh, we can get that from the barbecue pit,” I said, tipping my chin toward it.

“Great, will you grab some for me? I need to make a triangle with it.”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging. “Whatever you need. How big?” I asked, digging through the fire pit.

“Big,” Maren instructed. She smiled as I started laying out the charcoal. “Bigger than that. And I need it to be equilateral.”

“Why?” I asked, looking up.

“If it’s not, it’ll throw off the balance.”

“All right,” I said. I kept at it, moving the charcoal around on the damp grass. “Is that better?”

Maren shook her head. “No. Side B is all wonky. Can’t you see it?”

I chuckled. “Maybe I’m too close.”

She stepped forward and bent to adjust the line of charcoal I’d laid, just as I bent to do the same. Our hands touched, brushing against each other.

She glanced at me, her dark eyes intense, and I yanked my hand away.

She stood and cleared her throat. “That’s fine. So, what I’m going to do is draw on the power of the fire to burn away Big Mac’s barrier spell.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. Then I shrugged. “I’m just going to have to trust you on this. Fae magic isn’t really my thing.”

She smiled at me. “Well, sometimes it’s best to just leave things to the experts.”

When she laid a hand on my chest, my breath caught and I looked down, surprised. I looked up into her eyes.

“Why don’t you take a step back?” she said, giving me a gentle push.

I did as she instructed, but her hand lingered on my chest for a moment longer. Then she dropped it and turned toward the charcoal triangle I’d created. She dropped her head so her chin rested against her chest for a moment, and took a deep breath. She began to speak, but her voice was so low I could barely hear her. Then, even when her voice gained volume, I realized she was speaking another language, and I couldn’t understand her anyway. It had to be a Fae language, because it wasn’t like anything I’d ever heard before. The sound was light and musical, almost like an incantation. The only word I recognized was Cali’s name, which I heard her say a few times.

As she spoke, the charcoal at her feet began to smoke, and then it caught fire. The fire grew quickly, the flames licking higher and higher. The heat intensified, feeling particularly jarring against the cold November night. I took a step back as the fire grew and grew, much larger than I would have thought possible with just that small amount of charcoal on the wet ground.

I cast a nervous glance over my shoulder at the house. Maybe we’d set this triangle too close to the porch. We should have gone farther away, closer to the lake. What if this thing grew out of control? What would happen then? It wasn’t like we had a volunteer fire department around the corner.

Maren’s voice was loud now, filling the night, and she raised her hands into the air. Like it followed her command, the fire rose up, snaking high into the sky. It flattened and spread when it hit what I assumed was Big Mac’s barrier. It raced across the invisible surface of the barrier, forming a dome of fire, surrounding the house and the property.

The heat coming from the monstrous flames was nearly unbearable now. Sweat was pouring down my face. “Are you sure you’ve got this under control?” I called to Maren.

But she didn’t answer me. She was looking at the fire, her attention laser-focused on it. Which I guessed was probably a good thing.

The heat kept increasing, growing hotter and hotter. Just when I felt like the entire place was going to spontaneously combust from the soaring temperature, there was a blinding flash so bright I covered my eyes. I opened my eyes again when I felt something hit my shoulder. It was a glowing ember, and as I looked around, I saw that they were raining down on me, on Maren, across the lawn, and onto the house.

“Shit,” I breathed, staring up at the house, hoping to hell it wasn’t about to catch fire, but then I noticed something strange. As soon as the embers hit the ground, they stopped glowing and turned to black dust. I touched one with the toe of my boot, and it turned to cold ash on the lawn.

I looked over to Maren just as she lowered her hands. “Did it work?” I asked.

Maren looked around. She looked a little dazed and very tired, like what she’d just done had taken a lot of out her. Then she shrugged. “I don’t know, Greyson. I gave it my best try. We need Cali to find out if it worked.”

I turned toward the house. “I’ll go get her.”

“Hang on,” Maren called after me. She was shaking her head when I turned back. “It’s too soon. If it worked, the magic needs time to dissolve the barrier. Give it a second.”

I looked up, into the night sky, where the fire had raced across the invisible barrier. “How can you tell when it’s been long enough?” I asked.

Maren raised an eyebrow. “Are you afraid to be out here with me, Evers?”

I chuckled. “Should I be? You’re not going to turn me into a frog, are you?”

“I’m not a witch.” She tipped her head. “And you know that’s not what I mean.”

I cleared my throat.

“I’m just wondering if you find it difficult to spend time with me,” she said.

“I—I guess it’s a little… unusual,” I admitted. “Asking you to help my mate. I think that’s why I thought you were going to ask for something in return.”

Maren looked at me with her steady gaze. “You saved my son,” she reminded me. “You helped me out of a difficult situation with Aiden. And I didn’t expect to be welcomed here without making some kind of contribution.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Not that I’ll ever really be welcome here.” She smiled, the expression wistful. “But we still make a good team.”

“Yeah,” I said, “we do.”

If Fenrir did turn out to be my son, I was going to step up and be his father, and Maren and I would continue to make a good team—in whatever form that family arrangement took.

“It’s time,” Maren said, pulling me from my thoughts.

“What?” I said, looking over at her.

She eyed me beadily. “We can test the barrier now. You can go get Cali.”

“Right,” I said quickly. “Yeah. I’ll go get her.” I turned toward the house but had only taken a step when everything around me faded away—except for the pine forest, which stayed clear as day, though it drew closer, like someone was zooming in on a picture.

Seized by sudden panic, I looked around. Was this another vision, or had Maren done something to me? I hadn’t heard her say my name, but she had been speaking a language I didn’t know—she could have been saying anything. My heart was starting to pound wildly when I saw three figures emerging from the trees.

It was the three sister witches, and they were speaking to each other as they walked toward me.

“What are you doing here?” I called to them.

Posie looked over at me, a smile growing on her face. “Greyson,” she said. “Don’t tell me you were impressed by that little parlor trick with the fire.”

“Fae magic,” Lauren said, shaking her head. “All smoke and mirrors.”

“It’s embarrassing, really,” Posie said.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

Lauren looked at me. “Isn’t it obvious?” She glanced at her sisters, then back at me. “Your time is almost up.”

**Episode 1143**

I stared at my dad, trying my best to focus as he paced the length of my room. I could tell by the somber look on his face that what he wanted to say was important, but I was having a hard time paying attention. My mind was spinning in a thousand different directions. My body was still buzzing from Xavier’s touch, and I was thinking about where our little make-out session might have taken us if we hadn’t been interrupted.

But also, in the back of my head, I was thinking of the vampire at my window. Every time his face swam into my mind, I was overcome with this strange wave of emotions. I felt scared and guilty, but oddly excited, too. I just couldn’t stop thinking about the desire I’d felt when he’d looked at me and I’d looked back at him. And, even though I knew Xavier was right and it was probably the venom that was causing these strange feelings, I couldn’t help but feel terrible whenever I thought about him.

“Have some more soup, Caliana,” my dad said, pushing the tray closer to me.

The last thing I wanted was to be force-fed chicken soup, but there was something steely about my dad’s eyes that told me he wasn’t going to be taking no for an answer.

“Thanks,” I said, spooning up a sip. “Oh!” I said in surprise. “It’s really good.” And it was. I took another bite. And another. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. Ina Garten made fantastic soup.

My dad smiled, looking relieved. “I can make this for you anytime you want, Cali.” He raised his eyebrows. “When you come back to Minnesota.”

With a sigh, I dropped my spoon into the bowl. I should have known this was coming. The look on his face, the steely glint of his eyes… I’d been waiting for this for a while, I just hadn’t expected the ultimatum was going to come with a side of soup.

“We’ve already gone over this, Dad,” I said firmly.

“Cali—”

“I know you’re worried,” I said, cutting him off before he really got going, “and I understand what you’re saying. I appreciate your concern, but I *belong* here.”

My dad shook his head. “I’m not so sure about that.” He looked at the bandage on my neck. “You don’t get attacked by vampires in Minnesota.”

He had me there. Though, having met Xavier and the rest of the Redwood pack, my eyes had been opened in a big way, and I now knew there were supernaturals everywhere. Charlie’s family was a perfect example of that.

“Listen, Dad,” I said with a sigh. “No matter where I live, I’m always going to be part Fae, and I’m always going to have to deal with *due destini*. Moving isn’t going to change any of those things.”

“I know that,” my dad said gravely. “But at least if you were home, your mother and I would be able to look out for you.”

“I have the pack to look out for me here,” I pointed out. Xavier *had* just saved me from giving myself to a vampire, but I didn’t mention that. My dad looked tense enough as it was.

He was shaking his head. “I don’t know. I’m still on the fence about the whole idea of a pack.” He paused, thinking for a minute. “Do werewolves *have* to belong to a pack?”

I’d just opened my mouth to answer when there was a knock on the door and Lola popped her head in.

“Lola!” I said. “What’s up?”

Her face was flushed with excitement. “Cali, Mr. Hart—Artemis and Mrs. Hart are back!”

My dad got to his feet. “We can talk more about this later. Let’s go say hi to your mom.”

I nodded. “I’ll met you down there. I’m going to change. Kinda don’t want to be in the clothes that I was bitten in anymore.”

After he left the room, I stared after him, thinking for a moment. I was trying to put my finger on how my dad had seemed… different. Like he’d wanted to talk to me about something but hadn’t gotten around to it. Could he have possibly known about the vampire at my window? But no. How could he?

I had to remember to tell Xavier to keep that incident to himself. The last thing my dad needed was *more* reasons why I needed to return to Minnesota.

I hauled myself out of bed and pulled on a fresh set of leggings, sports bra, and sweatshirt, then hurried downstairs. Big Mac was already inside, hugging Mrs. Smith. As I reached the bottom of the stairs, Rishika, Artemis, and my mom came through the door.

From outside, there was the sound of squealing tires and a shower of gravel.

Rishika rolled her eyes. “That’s Nneka. She couldn’t get out of here fast enough.”

I frowned. “Why was Nneka here?’

She shook her head. “It’s a long story.

My mom pulled me into a hug. “Hi, Cali. How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” I said, my voice muffled against her shoulder.

She pushed me back and looked critically at the bandage on my neck. “How is it?”

“Fine.” I shrugged. “Like a bee sting, only much worse.” I ignored my mom’s frown and looked at Artemis. “Any luck?”

Artemis, who hadn’t said anything since she’d walked in the house, shook her head. “Didn’t work out like I’d planned,” she said shortly.

There was a tight sadness about her, but before I had a chance to say anything else, my dad appeared and pulled my mom away from me, wrapping her in a hug.

“Hiya, honey. Glad you’re back. I missed you.”

I ducked away from the display of parental PDA and pulled Artemis aside. “Are you okay?”

“I’m tired,” she said, in that same clipped tone. “It’s been a long day.” And without another word, she moved past me and headed toward the stairs.

I stared after her, baffled. “What’s up with her?” I asked, as Rishika stepped up next to me.

She looked grim. “I think she’s blaming herself for what happened with the Orb.”

I wanted to go talk to Artemis, but first I had a bone to pick with a witch about a spell, so I turned to Big Mac.

She’d just turned from Mrs. Smith and, seeing me coming, narrowed her eyes.

But before I had a chance to say anything, Greyson walked through the open from door. “Cali! I need you to come outside with me.”

“What? Why?” I asked, confused. I looked around. “Have you seen who’s back?”

Greyson glanced around. “Yeah, that’s great. But I really need you to come outside.” He reached for my hand and towed me toward the door.

I looked back at Big Mac, who gave me a cold stare. Which didn’t bode well.

“What do you need?” I asked, as Greyson pulled me down the porch steps. I looked across the yard and was surprised to see Maren standing a few feet away. I stopped. “What’s going on?”

“Maren may have found a way to break Big Mac’s spell on you,” Greyson explained.

“Really?” I asked, confused. “She volunteered to try to break it?”

“Well, not exactly,” Greyson said. “I asked for her help.”

I felt a twinge of jealousy just below my heart, but it was immediately followed by a wallop of guilt. Not an hour ago I had been upstairs, making out with Xavier, and here Greyson was trying to help me, and I was feeling jealous because he’d asked another woman for help with it?

“We just don’t know if it worked or not,” Greyson said. “Maren and I need you to find out.”

“Okay,” I said. My interest piqued, I started walking toward Maren, but I stopped again just as suddenly. The wound on my neck throbbed, and I looked past Maren, into the darkness of the trees beyond. There were vampires out there, and one vampire in particular—the one who had been at my window. A thrill of mingled excitement and fear coursed through me.

“Cali?” Greyson’s voice floated into my thoughts. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah,” I said, snapping back to reality. It was just my imagination. The bite mark on my neck felt fine. “Hi, Maren,” I said as I drew closer, greeting her with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. Which wasn’t much. “Is the barrier gone, then?”

“Because it only affects you, there’s only one way to find out,” she said.

I looked out at the darkness beyond the house, the memories of the barrier still painful enough to make me cautious.

“It’ll be okay,” Greyson said encouragingly. “Just try walking toward the woods. I’m right here.”

I took a step. Then another. Just for safety, I held my arms out in front of me, so I wouldn’t get knocked back on my ass again. I braced myself as I crossed over where I remembered the barrier being—but nothing stopped me.

“It worked!” I shouted, spinning around to look at Greyson. “I’m free!” I ran back toward Greyson to thank him, but then I hit something and was knocked back onto the grass.

My head was spinning as I looked up, trying to process what had just happened. The barrier hadn’t been removed—it had just flipped.

I’d been able to get out, but now I couldn’t get back in.

**Episode 1144**

CHARLIE

“Charlie! Pull over! Pull over, son! CHARLIE!”

I tried to ignore the shouting from my father, tried to keep my eyes on the road, but it was hard when my father was yelling at me from the passenger seat of his speeding car.

“Charlie!” he called again, his voice buffeted by the wind whipping down the road. “Pull over!”

“Don’t do it, Charlie,” Violet warned. “Don’t pull over!”

My heart was pounding in my chest, and my breath felt ragged. I had no idea what to do.

“Who is that?” Marta asked from the back seat. In the rearview mirror, I could see that her eyes were wide with fear and confusion. “What’s going on?!”

“It’s my parents,” I said.

“*Huh?* What do they want?” Marta asked.

Violet shot a look at me. “They want to kill us.”

Marta’s mouth fell open in shock. “Oh god. That totally sucks.”

My dad was still yelling at me, waving his hands, and my mom’s driving was getting more erratic. She started swerving toward us and I had to concentrate on keeping my car away from her.

“What are you going to do?” Violet asked me.

“We just want to talk!” Dad shouted.

I glanced over, looking at Dad’s pleading face.

“Don’t listen to him, Charlie,” Violet urged. “They want to kill us, remember? They think we’re monsters!”

“I know,” I muttered. “But maybe… maybe they’ve reconsidered?” I glanced over at Violet. “He said they want to talk. Shouldn’t I give them that chance? They’re my *parents*.”

Violet’s eyes were wide with fear as she shook her head. “We can’t trust them, Charlie. You know that.”

“Shit.” I swerved to avoid an oncoming truck that appeared from around a bend. When I looked back at my dad, I almost peed my pants. He was lifting a fucking crossbow!

“Watch out!” Violet screamed, grabbing my shoulders and tugging me down, trying to get me out of the line of fire.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. All my hopes that my parents no longer saw me as a threat were dashed as I looked at my dad aiming the crossbow. But then, as I watched, he lowered the weapon and fired, and I felt a jolt as one of the tires popped.

“*Dammit!*” I yelled, gripping the steering wheel as the car veered crazily. It took all my strength to get it over to the side of the road.

“What are you doing?” Violet cried.

“I have no choice!” I said. My chest was tight and the pressure was mounting, clawing its way up to my throat. “I can’t drive on that tire, Violet.” I pulled the car to a stop and pushed my door open as my parents pulled up behind us.

Violet lunged across the seat, grabbing my shirt and trying to pull me back into the car. “Don’t go out there,” she begged. “Stay inside. Roll up the windows. Don’t get out of the car!”

But I shook my head, tears starting to prick at the corners of my eyes. “I can’t keep running, Violet. I can’t run from them. They’re hunters. They’ll never stop.”

Violet stopped pulling at me, but she didn’t let go. She stared at me for a moment. “Then I’m going with you.”

“And I will stay here, thank you very much,” Marta said from the back seat, sitting back and folding her arms primly across her chest. She was pale with fear and looked like she was regretting coming on this little road trip with us.

I ignored Marta and leaned over to kiss Violet. My whole body felt hollow, but her support was like a tiny little fire in my heart, and it warmed me more than she could know. “Thank you,” I murmured against her lips.

She nodded. Then, with a deep breath, she turned and pushed her door open.

As we stepped out of the car, my mom and dad stepped out of theirs.

Violet walked around the front of the car to stand next to me. “Be careful,” she murmured.

I nodded, studying my mom’s face. I was trying to read it, but it was strange—it was familiar to me, but also like looking at a stranger. She looked hard and remote. Was it possible that the woman who’d raised me really wanted to kill me?

“You said you wanted to talk,” I said, my voice sounding so hard and angry it surprised me. “I’m listening.”

They exchanged a look, then started forward.

Violet reached for my hand and squeezed it. She was scared.

“Stop,” I commanded. “Just stop where you are. You’re close enough. Just say what you’ve come to say.” They were quiet, and a cold wind blew around us on the empty road. “Are you planning on killing me?”

The words sounded so strange—so surreal—coming from my mouth. Like I was reading from a book, or acting in a play. This couldn’t be real. How many children asked that of their parents?

My mom was first to break the silence. “We don’t want to hurt you, Charlie.”

“We love you very much,” Dad said, nodding in agreement.

I looked at them, searching their faces, trying to decide if they were telling the truth. “And what about Violet?”

They exchanged a speaking glance. They used to do that a lot when I was a kid—look at each other in a way that communicated something I couldn’t possibly understand—but it had never filled me with the kind of dread it did as they looked at each other now.

My mother looked back at me. “We don’t want to hurt either of you.”

And then, as one, they both pulled crossbows from harnesses behind their backs and raised them, pointing them directly at Violet and me.

Violet gasped, but I was beyond fear, beyond sadness, beyond feeling. I stared at them, numbed by the crushing tide of emotions rolling through me.

Violet was yanking hard on my hand. “We have to get out of here,” she was saying to me. “Charlie!”

But I didn’t move. I couldn’t. It felt like I’d been turned to stone. My eyes moved back and forth between them. My father had been hesitant—he hadn’t wanted to kill me—but clearly he’d been persuaded by my mother. “What changed your mind?” I asked him dully.

The pain was evident in his eyes. “We’re hunters, Charlie. I’m sorry.” His hands shook as he leveled the crossbow at me.

I looked at my mother, and I could see tears shining on her face, but it was set—determined. She was going to do what she thought she had to.

Then, without warning, Violet shoved me against the car and stepped in front of me, shielding me with her small body. “You can take me, but leave Charlie alone!” she screamed at them.

“Violet,” I said, baffled. “What are you doing?” Her actions had shocked me out of my fugue state, and I grasped her shoulders, trying to move her out of the way

But she planted her feet and fought back. “You’re my mate,” she ground out. “I won’t let them hurt you.” She shoved me into the car. “Stay there,” she commanded. And then she started toward my parents.

Her shove had caught me off-guard, and I scrambled for my footing for a moment. I reached for her, but she was already a few steps ahead of me.

“You leave her alone!” I yelled at my parents. “Don’t you touch her! Just let her go and you can do whatever you want to me! Mom! Dad!”

My mom shook her head. “We can’t do that, Charlie.”

I looked around at the empty road. Why were there no cars driving by, wondering why two adults were pointing crossbows at two kids? If there was ever a time when I could have used some intervention, it was now.

But there was no one. It was just the four of us, and the wind.

I swallowed hard as I watched my mom and dad tighten their fingers on the triggers of their weapons.

“Mom,” I said, desperately. “*Dad*—”

Suddenly, the rear door of my car swung open and Marta stepped out. In the chaos, I had basically forgotten about her, so I stared in shock as she stepped onto the road. My parents looked equally surprised by her appearance as she stepped between the two of them and Violet and me.

They looked at her, then darted a quick look at each other, clearly unsure how to proceed.

“Who are you?” Dad asked. “Identify yourself!”  
 Marta turned to him, and when she spoke, it was in a voice that was most definitely not her own. The voice that came from her mouth was old and reedy—not her own—and it rang out across the windswept road, but somehow seemed to echo inside my head as well. She narrowed her eyes and looked right at my parents. “You leave my peanut alone!”

My parents both gasped and dropped their weapons onto the cracked pavement at their feet.

**Episode 1145**

As I lay on the cold, wet grass, I stared up at the brightly lit house, stunned.

“What the hell just happened?” I muttered. I gave my head a shake and got back to my feet, looking around dazedly. It was dark out—I must have just tripped over something on the grass. That must have been it. So I started forward again, but once again, I hit something. Something invisible, but something very, *very* solid. I was sent stumbling backward. “*Dammit!*” I cried out.

Greyson and Maren were looking at me, confused.

“Stop kidding around, Cali,” Greyson said warily.

“I’m not *kidding around*, Greyson,” I huffed, irritated. “There’s something stopping me from moving forward. It’s just like it was before, only now I’m trapped out here, instead of in there.” I swung my glare to Maren, who was standing at Greyson’s side. “Did she do this on purpose?” I snapped.

“Excuse me? Did I *what?*” Maren asked.

I narrowed my eyes. “Because if you did, I *swear* I’ll make you pay—”

“Maren,” Greyson said, turning to her. “Do you know what’s going on?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t. The spell I performed was intended to *remove* Big Mac’s spell, not move it, or switch it.”

I looked at Maren’s face in the darkness, trying to read her expression. Either she was a cold-blooded liar who was plotting against me, or… she was telling the truth. “*Did* you do this on purpose?” I asked, jabbing a finger at her.

“No,” she said, looking taken aback by my question. “Of course not. Why would I?”

I rolled my eyes. “I can think of one reason,” I sneered, looking at Greyson, “and he’s standing right there.”

“You’re *wrong*,” Maren snapped, her voice going icy cold. “Greyson asked me to help you, and I tried to do just that. That’s it.”

I shook my head, unconvinced, but before I could say anything, Greyson’s eyes focused on something over my shoulder and then went wide with shock and fear. “Cali!” he shouted. “Watch out behind you!” And he started sprinting toward me.

Before I even turned to look, I knew what it was: it was the vampire. He was coming for me.

It felt like I was moving in slow motion as I turned toward the dark woods. There was nothing but blackness for a moment—Greyson must have scented him, not seen him—but as I watched, he emerged from the shadows, a smile on his narrow face. When he saw me watching him, his lips parted, and his fangs glistened in the dim moonlight.

The sight of him made the wound in my neck throb, and all at once I remembered the feel of his hands on my shoulders, his fingers digging into my flesh as he bit down on my neck. I remembered the pull I’d felt as his fangs had punctured my skin, and the strange, buzzy feeling that had surged through me as he drank my blood.

His eyes were fixed on me as he moved toward me. It felt like they were holding me in place—I couldn’t have moved if I’d tried. The pounding of my heartbeat was loud in my ears, making all other sounds seem distant. Dimly, I heard someone shouting my name. *It must be Greyson*, I thought to myself, though even the thought was foggy.

“Cali!” Greyson cried, his voice a little nearer, a little louder. “Cali! Get out of there! Cali! *Run!*”

Using every ounce of strength I had, I turned toward his voice. He was running toward me—sprinting, but suddenly he hit something and was knocked back with a sickening thump. It was the barrier! He was trapped inside. Maren ran to the barrier as well, but it pushed her back. They were all trapped inside.

Leave it to Fae magic to have a fucking horrible sense of humor.

Greyson recovered quickly and scrambled to his feet. He tried the barrier again, pounding on it. “Cali! Cali! *CALI!*”

But I couldn’t get to him, and he couldn’t get to me. Even without turning to look, I could sense the vampire approaching me. His quiet footsteps stopped, and he took a deep breath, like he was breathing me in.

I turned to face him, and the corner his mouth quirked up, as though he was amused at what he saw in my face.

“You didn’t invite me into your home before.”

“No,” I murmured.

His smile widened. “So I’m inviting you into mine.”

There was something about that smile that made me smile back. It wasn’t warm or friendly, but it was inviting, and it made me want to return it. His eyes were steady on me, smoldering like a banked fire.

Greyson’s frantic shouts were fading away—the vampire was all I could see, all I could hear. It was like everything in my world had tunneled down to just him. He wanted me, that much was clear, and I was drawn to him. It was like before, only this time, there was no window in the way, keeping us apart. He was hungry—*ravenous*—and he needed my blood. Needed *me*. And I needed to satiate him.

“—against him! Your magic on him!” Greyson’s voice filtered into my consciousness, the sound a distant hum. “Use your magic, Caliana!”

I blinked, and for an instant, I snapped back to myself. A vampire was standing in front of me, one who was about to use me as his dinner buffet, and I had to fight him. Greyson was right. I had Fae magic—and now was the time to put it to use.

The vampire—still certain of his hold over me—reached for me, his long, cool fingers extending toward my neck. He leaned his head back, revealing his long, lethally sharp fangs, and I knew it was now or never. I took a step back and thrust out my hands. A surge of energy shot through them into him, pushing him back with tremendous force and throwing him against one of the ancient pines.

The wound on my neck gave a throb, and I almost rushed to his side.

“*Dammit*,” I said, putting my hand to the bandage. It was the venom, just like Xavier had said. The vampire’s venom was an invader in my body, a traitor from within, betraying me and turning my own mind against me. But I wasn’t going to let this vampire win.

The vampire recovered quickly and got back to his feet. The smile that had transformed his handsome face had been replaced with an angry sneer. He was still handsome, but now he looked dangerous—like the kind of guy you’d avoid at a bar. “You can fight all you want, little one, but it will be futile.”

A cold wind blew from within the forest, bringing with it the smell of late autumn decay, and it made me shiver. “Oh yeah?” I asked, trying to sound brave. “Why is that?”

“Because you want to please me,” he said, his voice soft and musical. He smiled. “And you will.” He moved toward me—and *shit,* he could move fast.

I never stopped being surprised by how fast vampires were. One second he was next to the tree across the lawn, and the next he was practically on top of me. But I was ready for him. I focused my energy into my hands and sent him shooting back with another blast of my Fae power.

It worked, and he shot backward with the force of a cannon blast, but he was on his feet again in a heartbeat, looking at me hungrily.

How long was I going to have to keep this up? The wound on my neck ached and throbbed, sending shooting pains down my neck and into my spine. I could feel blood trickling from the soaked bandage and into the collar of my shirt. My thoughts were a mess—I couldn’t focus or figure out a next move. All I knew was that I had to keep the vampire away from me, but how long could I do that? Using my powers always wore me out fast.

I was going to have to get way from him, but how? My mind was reeling, and I could barely think one step ahead, never mind the four or five it would take to formulate an escape plan.

Panic was starting to settle in as the vampire started toward me again, but then, from behind me, I heard a sound that made my pounding heart feel light. It was an ear-splitting, angry growl, and it was coming from Greyson’s wolf.

I spun around to see him, his grey eyes fixed on the vampire. A surge of hope went through me just by seeing him. Big Mac was there too, standing next to Maren. She raised her hand and nodded at Greyson. Immediately, he leapt through the barrier and slammed into the vampire.

**Episode 1146**

Greyson tackled the vampire to the ground and reared back to bite—to rip the vampire’s throat out—but the vampire moved out from beneath him with his preternatural speed and jumped onto Greyson’s furry back. Greyson snarled and twisted around, trying to pull the vampire off.

I watched anxiously, stepping out of the way when they came too close, but I wished I could do more. I wished I could do something to help—get the vampire with my magic, maybe—but they were moving too fast. I’d never be able to aim properly, and I didn’t want to hurt Greyson.

Finally, with a swipe of his massive paw, Greyson was able to get the vampire off his back. He threw the bloodsucker to the ground, bit down on his leg, and wrenched, tossing the vampire high into the air.

This was my chance. Following the vampire’s progress through the air like a pop fly at a baseball game, I focused my energy and sent a blast of energy toward his flying form.

But, at that very moment, Greyson jumped up to grab the vampire again and was struck with the full force of my power.

“Oh my god,” I gasped, as Greyson crumpled to the ground.

The vampire was on his feet again, and he was staring at me. I met his eyes and watched as his mouth curved into a smile. “You will come to me,” he said silkily. And then he slipped away, into the shadows of the forest.

Shaking myself out of my stupor, I rushed to Greyson’s side. “Greyson, are you okay?” I asked, reaching for his hand as he shifted back to human.

“I’m okay,” Greyson grumbled, pushing himself upright. He looked around. “Dammit. The piece of shit got away.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. And I was sorry. But I was also worried. The vampire kept telling me that I would come to him. He seemed so certain. It made me anxious.

There was the rumble of angry voices from behind me, and I turned around to see Big Mac glaring at Maren.

“What did you think you were *doing?*” she demanded, looking furious. “You shouldn’t be playing around with your magic. You had no idea how your power was going to interact with mine!”

I couldn’t blame Big Mac for being angry—I had a few things to say to Maren, too. I still wasn’t convinced she hadn’t somehow twisted the barrier on me on purpose.

“Are *you* okay?” Greyson asked, bringing my attention back to him.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “I assume Big Mac neutralized her spell and took the barrier away?”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah. Just in the nick of time, too. She wasn’t happy about it, mixing Fae magic with her witchcraft.”

“Well join the club,” I snapped. “I’m not happy about any of this. I was almost vampire chow!” Anger flooded through me, and I got to my feet. I stormed over to Maren and Big Mac, wondering which of them I wanted to scream at first. Mrs. Smith had joined them and seemed to be trying to calm Big Mac down. Unsuccessfully.

“I just cannot believe you tried something so foolhardy. And you used a *triangle!* What did you *think* was going to happen, girl?” Big Mac raged. “Fae powers are notoriously unpredictable. You’re lucky I got here in time.”

“Look, I did exactly what I was asked for,” Maren said, her dark skin looking flushed. “You’re the one who trapped her in here in the first place, so don’t go pointing the finger at me now.”

“MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said, her voice soothing. “You need to calm down. Stop screaming.”

I cut in. “About the spell.” I turned to Big Mac. “Did you even think about what could have happened? I was trapped me in here when we were attacked by *vampires*.” I pointed at the bandage off and turned, so Big Mac could see the wound on my neck, which was still as fresh as ever. “That’s where one bit me. I could have been killed!”

Big Mac seemed unmoved. “I did what I had to do. The Orb had to be dealt with. I won’t apologize for that.”

“Yeah?” I goggled at her. “*So?* You didn’t have to imprison me to deal with it!”

“So I should have just like you meddle then?” she snapped. “Like you always do?”

“I don’t *meddle*,” I said, haughtily. “I *help*.”

“Like your Fae sister,” Big Mac snarled.

I narrowed my eyes. “You leave Artemis out of this.”

Big Mac’s eyes glinted dangerously. “She’s the one who lost the Orb, trying to *help*. She tried to take things on that she didn’t understand. Guess that runs in the family.”

Fury was growing inside me like a living thing as I glared back at Big Mac.

Mrs. Smith stepped in between us. “This isn’t helping anyone,” she said firmly. She turned to Big Mac. “MacKenzie, you need to apologize to Cali for putting that spell on her.”

Big Mac scoffed and shook her head. “Sure. I’ll apologize. When hell freezes over.”

Mrs. Smith looked stern. “I appreciate that you felt an obligation where the Orb was concerned, and you were right to want to protect everyone from its powers, but you should have talked to Cali—explained things to her, instead of reacting the way you did. You put her in danger, MacKenzie.”

Big Mac thought on this for a moment. “Fine,” she finally huffed.

“Fine?” Mrs. Smith repeated, looking surprised.

“Okay,” Big Mac said, glaring at her. She turned to me. “Cali, I’m sorry. I may have—” She stopped herself and took a deep breath. “I overreacted. I’m sorry.”

I stared at her, stunned. Did that really just happen? Had Big Mac—the orneriest witch I’d ever known—really just *apologized* to me?

“O–okay,” I stammered back.

She nodded, once, then turned to leave, glaring at Maren as she went.

“See?” Mrs. Smith said to her as they walked away. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Maren laid a hand on my arm. “I really was only trying to help.”

I looked down at her hand.

“You’d be wrong to think she was doing anything but that, Cali.” Greyson had walked over, and he was looking down at me. “I went to Maren for help, and she tried. She told me she didn’t know if it was going to work, and I told her I wanted to try anyway. She was trying to help us.”

It sucked to admit it, but—like Big Mac—it looked like I might have overreacted as well. I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” I muttered to Maren.

She nodded.

I still felt some anger flowing through me, and seeing Greyson so quick to defend Maren rubbed me the wrong way. I needed to get away, so I started walking back toward the house.

“I’ll come with you,” Greyson said quickly, falling into step next to me.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No, I need some space right now. Just give me a while, okay?” I didn’t look back to see his face before I headed up the porch steps and into the house. The whole night had been a shit show. But it shouldn’t have been. My mom and my sister were back. I should have been happy. But I wasn’t. I didn’t feel happy, or relieved, or anything else I’d been expecting to feel upon their safe return.

*Why?*

Avoiding the living room filled with people and happy voices, I headed upstairs and into my room. As I dropped down onto my bed, the irony hit me like a ton of bricks: I had been so pissed about being trapped in the house by Big Mac’s stupid spell, and what had I done the moment I was finally free? Gone straight back inside and into my room.

I let myself fall back onto my pillows and looked up at the dark ceiling. I was really embarrassed about getting so mad at Maren and accusing her of trying to harm me as a ploy to get Greyson back. It made me look petty and ungrateful. Both she and Greyson had told me she was only trying to help, but… was that true? Could I *really* trust her? I still didn’t know.

With a sigh, I closed my eyes. This day felt like it had started a year ago, and it felt good to lie in my bed. Maybe I’d just be able to go to sleep.

But then, a slow, melodious voice filled my head. The vampire’s voice. It was so clear, like he was sitting next to me in the bed.

*You will come to me. You will come to me. You will come to me.*

I sat up, staring straight into the darkness. My heart was pounding, but my mind was clear for the first time in hours. The phrase echoed in my head on a loop.

The vampire was right. I would go to him.

**Episode 1147**

GREYSON

Cali disappeared into the house, leaving me alone on the lawn with Maren.

I turned to look at her. “I’m sorry about that. She’s just—”

“You don’t have to apologize for her, Greyson,” Maren said evenly. “She’s upset. People are allowed to get upset. She’s going through a lot right now.” She took a deep breath. “And it’s clear that she’s not thrilled about my being here.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Not thrilled” was kind of an understatement.

“She’s going through some stuff, and I think my presence here is making it harder for her.” Maren looked at me, her dark eyes black in the low light. “I appreciate what you did, Greyson, bringing me and Fenrir here. I know you were just looking out for us, but I think the best thing would be for me to leave.”

My whole body reacted to this statement. Just a total, complete, visceral *no.*

“Maren,” I said, shaking my head. I bit back what I *wanted* to say, which was that that couldn’t happen under *any* circumstances. “What about Fenrir?”

“What about him?” Maren asked, raising an eyebrow. “You can’t think I’d go anywhere without him?”

“No, of course not. I know you wouldn’t,” I said. “But what about the test? The DNA test?”

She dropped her head back to look up to the night sky with a sigh. “You shouldn’t get your hopes up about that. I already told you the truth: Fenrir’s not your son.” She looked at me sharply. “And I don’t want Fenrir to have false hope either. He likes you, Greyson. I know you wouldn’t say anything to him, but—”

“Of course I wouldn’t,” I assured her. “But, listen—can’t we wait to talk about you leaving after we get the test results back? Just so we’re all on the same page?”

Maren gave me a long look. “Sure.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling relieved. “Are you heading inside?”

She shook her head. “I’m going to stay out here for a while. I need some fresh air.”

“Okay. Goodnight, then,” I said, and headed toward the front porch.

Inside the house, I was met with the sound of agitated voices. I looked over and saw Xavier, Big Mac, Sabine, and Orla all standing in the living room. Their expressions ranged from angry to worried, but every one of them looked tense. They hadn’t noticed me coming in, so I stood in the doorway for a moment, listening to the conversation.

“—I just think we should see what Cali wants to do,” Sabine was saying.

But Orla was shaking her head. “No, this has gone on far too long. And the danger keeps growing. The Orb, now these vampires, and there was that trouble with your father that I just found out about,” she said, glaring at Xavier. “No, Cali needs to come back to Minnesota with Tom and me, where we can keep an eye on her.”

The thought of Cali leaving Oregon and the pack made my stomach feel tense with anxiety, and I stepped forward.

“What good would going to Minnesota do?” I asked, as everyone looked at me. “If they’re looking for her, the vampires will find her there, too.”

Orla looked startled by this. “Of course they wouldn’t. Not all the way in the Midwest.”

“I hate to break this to you,” I said. “But there are plenty of vampires in the Midwest.”

“Greyson’s right,” Xavier said, though it looked like it pained him to do it. “And if these ones want her, which it looks like they do, they’ll come back. They always do,” he added grimly.

Orla looked around pleadingly. “Then what are we supposed to do? How can we protect her? No offense to you, MacKenzie,” she said, glancing at Big Mac, “but that spell you put on her seemed to be more trouble than it was worth.”

Big Mac bristled. “Only when your kind started messing with it,” she snapped.

“It’s not going to help to start pointing fingers,” Sabine said. She looked out through the living room windows at the dark night outside, clearly thinking hard. “Can we put her somewhere else? Somewhere safe? Away from the pack house, until the threat has passed.”

“You mean until we stake those bastards one by one?” Xavier snarled. He glanced out the windows, too, looking into the forest beyond the pack house property line. Then he walked over to the couch and fell onto it, looking frustrated.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked Sabine. “Where is this mythical safe place where a vampire can’t track her?”

Sabine looked at Big Mac. “MacKenzie?”

Big Mac looked at her for a moment, a questioning look on her face. Then, as realization dawned, she shook her head. “No.”

“*MacKenzie*.” Sabine’s voice was firm.

“What?” I asked, looking between them. “What are you talking about?”

“What about your house?” Sabine asked.

Big Mac folded her arms across her chest. “It might work,” she admitted grudgingly.

“What good would that do?” Xavier asked from the couch.

“What?” Big Mac snapped, looking offended. “What’s that supposed to mean?”  
 “It means,” Xavier said, standing again, “that even with all your magic and your concealment charms and whatever, Mikah was able to find your house. It *means* that other vampires would be able to do the same thing.”

I looked at Big Mac and Sabine with my eyebrows raised, but Sabine didn’t look concerned.

She shrugged. “Perhaps, but only if they know where to look and were clever enough.”

There was silence following this, and we all thought about it for a moment, mulling over the possibilities.

“I like the idea of her going somewhere safe,” Orla said quietly, almost like she was talking to herself. “And a concealment charm sounds good. At least for a little while.”

“Now that the barrier is gone, we could get her out of here,” I said, thinking. “We could do it during the day, when the vampires are less likely to be around.”

“First thing in the morning,” Xavier added. “That’s when they start heading back to whatever caves they live in. That might be the best time to get her out of here.”

“You should remember,” Sabine said, “that Cali wasn’t happy about being forced to stay here because of MacKenzie’s spell. It might be that she’s not going to be that interested in hiding in another house either—even if it is in her best interest.”

Xavier and I looked at each other.

“I need to talk to Cali,” we both said, speaking at the same time.

Silence. Big Mac, Sabine, and Orla all looked at us, wide-eyed.

“We need to ask her what she thinks about all this,” Xavier said tightly.

“I agree,” I said, just as coolly. “I’ll go talk to her.” I wanted to talk to her anyway. I didn’t like the way we’d ended things after she’d gotten mad at Maren. And maybe she’d had enough *space*. I turned toward the stairs, but Xavier put a hand out to stop me.

“Haven’t you done enough already?” he asked, his blue eyes flashing with anger.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I demanded.

“Oh, nothing at all,” Xavier said sarcastically. “Just, you did a really great job back there. You and Maren make quite a team. You almost got Cali killed.”

“I was trying to save her,” I shot back, anger flaring up.

“By locking her outside a boundary wall with a vampire?” Xavier asked. “Really great job, then. Top notch.”

Xavier knew how to push my buttons, and he was going after every single one right now. I ground my teeth as I looked back at his angry face. “I was doing what we talked about. I was trying to find a way to break Big Mac’s spell to get her out of here and away from that vampire.”

“Well, you did a helluva job, then,” Xavier crowed.

I rolled my eyes. I didn’t even know why I was standing here listening to him. I was the Alpha of this pack, and I didn’t need his permission to talk to Cali. I started toward the stairs, but Xavier was at my heels.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” he demanded.

“I’m going to talk to her,” I said, stomping up the stairs.

“*I’m* going to talk to her,” Xavier said, shoving past me. “The last thing she wants to hear is that she has to go hide out in Big Mac’s creepy old house—but if she has to hear it, she’s going to want to hear it from me.”

“Give me a fucking break,” I muttered, pushing past Xavier and reaching the top of the stairs before him.

“I’m telling you, man,” Xavier growled, as we elbowed each other down the hall, “get lost.”

We stopped in front of Cali’s door and I turned to look at Xavier, feeling mingled anger and frustration. “Xavier, take off. I just want to talk to Cali alone.”

He shook his head. “Not a chance in hell, man.”

I blew out a breath. “Fine. If you’re not going to leave, fine.” I knocked once and pushed the door open, but what I saw nearly made my heart stop.

The window was open, and the cold wind was blowing in, making the curtain billow out. The sheets had been pulled off the bed and knotted together like a rope, then tied around one of the bedposts. The makeshift ladder trailed out the open window.

Cali was gone.