**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 11**

**Episodes 1148-1247**

**Episode 1148**

I needed him. I needed to see him. To be with him.

I limped through the woods just on the edge of the pack house. My desperate and daring climb down from my window using my bedsheet had worked pretty well—until I’d lost my grip and gravity had taken over for the last few feet. Naturally. I was no stranger to jumping out windows.

My ankle had absorbed most of the impact, but I was certain it would be fine in time. It wasn’t important now, anyway. The important thing was that I got away from the pack house and found *him*.

I had to.

After my less than spectacular escape, I hurried into the woods. I knew that with Greyson and Xavier keeping such a protective eye on me, it wouldn’t be long before one or both of them stopped by my room to check in. I turned to look back at the pack house, which was partially obscured by trees. I could just make out movement from inside my bedroom window.

Was it Greyson or Xavier? I ducked a bit farther into the tree line and spun around as fast as my wounded ankle would allow. Werewolves were fast, and once they realized I was gone, it wouldn’t be long before they followed me out into the woods and tried to track me down. Tried to stop me and lock me up in that pack house again. I had to make sure I was too far away for that to happen.

Nothing could get in the way of seeing *him* again. He wanted me, needed me. And I needed to be with him.

Quickening my pace, I did my best to ignore the pain flaring up my leg with each step. The darkness and my clumsy haste had me stumbling left and right, and I gasped when my foot caught under a tree root and my entire body pitched forward. I landed hard on my hands and knees, dirt and twigs and rocks scraping under my palms.

“Dammit,” I muttered.

*Come on, Cali! Pull yourself together! At this rate, you’ll never get to the vampire before Xavier and Greyson catch you!*

I stumbled to my feet, hissing at the scrapes on my hands and my bruised knees—not to mention my hurt ankle.

*Okay, being a half-human, half-Fae is officially The Worst.* Here I was, running through the dark woods, tripping over everything in my path, and hoping to outrun a pack of werewolves for my secret meeting with a vampire. Everything hurt, I was out of breath—despite the fact that I was stumbling far too often to put on a decent amount of speed.

Something rough scraped down the side of my arm, and I jumped to the side. *Oh my god! How did I not notice an entire tree?*

This would’ve been so much easier if I were a werewolf. My Fae powers couldn’t help me in the dark—at least as far as I knew, which wasn’t saying much. But if I were a werewolf, I’d have night vision and would be able to run so much faster—in both my human and wolf forms. I wouldn’t have hurt myself jumping out of the window, and even if I had, it would have healed by now.

*If I were a werewolf, I’d already be with the vampire by now.*

I thought of *him*. How fast he moved, how effortless everything seemed for him—even more so than other vampires I’d seen. Was there something special about this vampire? Maybe my Fae blood had something to do with it?

I reached a clearing, blessedly free of treacherous rocks and roots, and stopped.

*Where am I? And how far have I gone?* I turned in a slow, limping circle, trying to get my bearings. Nothing looked familiar, in that everything looked exactly the same. Dark, shapeless trees and bushes and probably the occasional boulder. I looked up at the sky, thinking maybe I could find my way from the direction of the moon or the constellations—people did that, right?—but the treetops obscured the night sky.

A twig cracked behind my foot, and I spun around. *Is someone here?*

I listened as hard as I could, but the only thing I could hear was my own pounding heart. The sound seemed deafening in the silence of the forest. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I just barely made out some shadowy movement along the tree line—maybe the direction from which I’d entered this clearing?

A low growl broke through the silence, and I backed up. *Is it a werewolf? Nobody from the pack house would scare me like this, so maybe it’s a Rogue? Did it pick up the scent of my wound?*

Then it came closer, emerging from behind a tree, and I was finally able to make out its shape. It was a bear-like creature, but its head reminded me of an overgrown ferret, or maybe a skunk?

*What the hell is* that*?*

The creature bared its teeth and snarled.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.* I had no clue what this creature was, but it looked like it was looking forward to turning me into a little Fae snack, regardless. Should I try to outrun it?

*Yeah, right. I wouldn’t make it out of this clearing, much less through the forest.*

The angry bear-skunk was advancing. I needed to make a decision—fast.

And then I remembered… *Wait, I’m a fucking Fae. What am I doing just standing here?*

I thrust out a hand and blasted it with my power. The bear-skunk went flying and slammed into a tree, hissing and snarling the whole way. I was already in motion, sprint-stumbling through the woods as fast as my ankle and the terrain would allow. I had a feeling I’d pissed the creature off more than I’d actually hurt it, which meant it was probably going to try even harder to kill me once it recovered.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I muttered. My foot caught on a large stone at the edge of a stream, and I face-planted into it, cold, clean water running down my body as I spluttered and clambered to my feet once more.

I splashed to the other side of the stream and paused. *Where do I go?*

At that moment, a wisp appeared right in front of me. It floated and dipped in the direction I’d come from, guiding me back toward the pack house.

In the back of my mind, I knew I should follow it. There was the angry bear-skunk to deal with, but the wisp wouldn’t lead me somewhere I wasn’t supposed to go.

But the vampire… He needed me.

The bite on my neck was practically buzzing with energy, my link to the vampire who had created it. He needed my blood, and I needed to give it to him.

*Is this wisp trying to trick me?*

I took a step toward the wisp, following its lead, but then I remembered the bear-skunk. I was cold, dripping wet, bruised, and bleeding. I couldn’t fight it again.

A sudden sense of loneliness washed over me. I was in the middle of the woods, far away from the pack house—from Xavier and Greyson.

I blinked slowly. Some of the haze was slipping from my mind—whether out of fear, or my injuries, or something else—and I felt my mind wrapping itself around the stark reality of my situation.

“What am I doing out here?” I asked out loud.

Panic thrummed in my chest, and dread slipped down my spine. I looked around the forest, only slightly illuminated by the wisp hovering in front of me.

I was lost. Hurt. Completely vulnerable.

The wisp bobbed and flickered at me, then darted off in the direction it was trying to lead me. I took a limping step toward it. It would guide me back to safety, to the pack house. Back to my mates—where I belonged.

But then I stopped.

*No, the wisp is tricking me. I shouldn’t follow it.*

My wound kept buzzing, and I felt flashes of hot and cold bursting through my body, bringing goosebumps to the surface of my skin. And there, simmering and pulsing just beneath that cold heat, was an insatiable need to see *him* again.

I needed him. And he needed me.

I turned away from the wisp and started deeper into the woods, trying not to look back at the creature. I needed to stay focused on my goal. I needed to find that vampire and let him feed. He needed me.

I reached another clearing, and there he was. Right in front of me. So close I could finally touch him, finally give him what we both wanted.

He opened his arms. “Welcome, Cali.” His eyes locked onto mine, and another surge of icy heat pulsed through me. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

I stepped toward him, smiling as I tugged the bandage from my neck.

**Episode 1149**

CHARLIE

My parents dropped their weapons, but I was only vaguely aware of the thud they made when they hit the ground. I was too fixated on Marta and the words that had just come out of her mouth.

*What the heck is going on here? Why is Marta calling me “peanut” like my Grandma Billie used to?*

I looked from my mom to my dad. Both of them were staring at Marta in shock. Mom, in particular, had gone a greyish shade of green.

“Wh-what did you just say?” Mom asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I told you to leave my grandson alone!” Marta’s voice was strong, defiant, and layered with the echo of another voice I hadn’t heard in far too long. It was my Grandma Billie’s voice, and hearing that tone again outside of my own memory sent a pang of nostalgia through me.

My mom gasped. “Is this some kind of trick? You called him ‘peanut’—only my mom ever called him that.”

“Your mother died twelve years ago,” my dad reminded her. “This must be a trick. They told her.”

Mom shook her head wordlessly. She eyed Marta with desperation, like she was looking for something logical to explain the impossible. But even I didn’t know how to explain the distortion to Marta’s voice.

I knew better than most that she wouldn’t find it. Things like logic and impossible didn’t exist in this world, and Mom knew enough about all the things that went bump in the night that she should have realized that too. Both my parents should have.

“She’s a medium,” I said, pointing at our new companion. “We *are* talking to Grandma Billie.”

Mom shook her head again and stepped back. “No, that’s not… That’s not what’s happening here. This is some kind of trick. You’ve been coaching her, telling her what to say. You probably told her all about your grandmother. You’re trying to fool us. This is some kind of ruse to get us to stop—”

She cut herself off, probably because the words “trying to kill you” were a little too heavy to force past her tongue. It was one thing to attack in the heat of the moment, but it was something entirely different to admit it so boldly. Honestly, just living through it was bizarre and terrifying enough.

I looked at my dad. “Don’t you believe me?”

He looked helplessly from my mom to me, but he didn’t say anything. And that was answer enough. Neither of them believed me, or Marta. I didn’t know why they were so stubbornly insisting that this was a trick. Surely they had crossed paths with a medium once or twice in their line of work? Or, at minimum, the Defenders knew about them.

Were they so prejudiced against what I had become that they weren’t willing to listen to me, even on this?

“Why don’t you two ask Marta something Charlie wouldn’t know? That way you can definitively prove whether not Marta is who she says she is,” Violet suggested.

I threw her a grateful look. At least I could count on my mate. She might have been the only person in the entire world that I could confidently say that about, but it was far better than nothing.

My parents exchanged a look. Finally, Dad turned to Marta. “What did you tell me when I told you I wanted to marry your daughter?”

Marta chuckled, but her laugh didn’t sound like her own. It sounded just like my grandma’s throaty laugh. “I told you not to screw things up,” she said, in that same layered voice. Dad’s eyes widened, and she continued. “And clearly, seeing that you’re trying to kill my only grandson, you didn’t listen to my advice—or the Land O’Lakes code.”

Marta leveled my mom with a stern look. “Why’d you marry this dunderhead anyway?” But before Mom could stop spluttering long enough to form a coherent response, Marta added, “Not that you’re any better. What kind of mother wants to kill their own son?”

Mom’s face turned an angry shade of pink, and she turned to me with a scowl, her nostrils flaring, her lips twisting into a sneer. “He’s not my son! He’s a werewolf! He has to be destroyed. *All* supernaturals must be destroyed—that’s the Code.”

The medium scoffed, waving away my mother’s words like they were the ramblings of a child. “The Code was created to protect the world from harm. Is that what you’re doing, Iris?”

I was absolutely speechless. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that I’d receive this kind of help when I so desperately needed it. Not only was my grandma *here* (sort of), but she was defending me. She was one family member who didn’t see me as some kind of abomination.

Hearing her voice again—even infused with some of Marta’s—sent me back to the happier days of my childhood. I remembered sitting in her lap, listening to stories about fighting monsters. I’d always thought she was just a great storyteller. But now… Well, maybe those stories had been real. Maybe Grandma Billie had been telling the truth all along. Maybe every single one of those strange, riveting tales she’d told me was true. Tears pricked my eyes.

*Grandma Billie’s here, and she doesn’t hate me like Mom and Dad.* This was everything I’d wanted since Mom and Dad had found out the truth about me—and everything I hadn’t known I needed. Violet was perfect and wonderful, and there would never be words enough to show my appreciation to her pack for being so welcoming to me.

But these people were my family. They’d loved and raised me for eighteen years. They’d given me and taught me everything that made me who I was. And it was killing me that I’d lost their love so fast. That they no longer saw me as their son, but as a threat to be eliminated.

*Thank you, Grandma.*

My mother’s eyes narrowed. “This *is* some kind of trick. Now get out of our way, or I’ll go through you.” She reached down to grab the crossbow she’d dropped.

My heart began to race. “Mom, what are you doing?”

My dad grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back. “Iris, stop this.”

“That’s the smartest thing you’ve ever said, Paul,” Marta-Grandma drawled.

My mom tried to break out of Dad’s grip, but he held on tight. “He’s our *son*. Your mother—or whatever she is—is right. No matter what, he’s our son.”

My mom’s eyes slammed shut and she took a deep breath. The crossbow clattered to her feet once more, and my mother finally broke down. She fell to her knees, her face in her hands. Her shoulders heaved with her sobs. “My baby,” she wept. “My baby…”

I didn’t think twice. I rushed over to her and knelt down next to her. “Mom?”

She just kept crying, and I slowly reached out and put my arms around her. She held onto me tight, and soon my dad joined in and made it a full family hug.

My mom kissed my forehead. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m so sorry.” She dissolved into tears again.

I cleared my throat, blinking back the tears brimming in my own eyes. “It’s okay. You didn’t know what you were doing. You were just trying to follow the rules…” I trailed off. Honestly, even in my desperation for love, I couldn’t find a string of words that would excuse what they’d done. What they’d tried to do.

But it didn’t matter. Not anymore. Because I had my parents back, and that was all that mattered. I lifted my head to glance over at Violet. She was still standing by the car, watching us. She wiped a tear from her face and gave me a watery smile—and a thumbs up.

We were going to be okay. All of us.

Mom pulled back to look at me. “Did I hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “You… you scared me, but that’s about it.”

“I don’t know what came over me, how I could have done that…” She looked utterly lost. Her gaze drifted down to the ground. “How can you ever forgive me?”

I took her firmly by the shoulders. “Look at me.”

She lifted her eyes to mine.

“See?” I pressed. “I’m still the same boy you raised and loved. Me being a werewolf doesn’t change that.”

“You’re a hunter too,” Dad reminded me.

“I know. In fact, I’ve already killed some pretty nasty vampires.”

“He was amazing!” Violet piped up. “You should be proud of him.”

I smiled, my chest swelling with pride.

“Always remember and cherish this moment,” Marta-Grandma said from behind us. “Your family always comes first, before the Defenders, before everything. And don’t make me come back to the land of the living again. It’s a pain in the caboose, and I don’t like the smell.”

And then Marta stumbled forward, and it was only Dad’s and my quick reflexes that kept her from hitting the pavement.

Marta’s eyelids fluttered. “What happened?”

“You were channeling my grandma…” I glanced over at Violet and noticed that my mom was whispering something to her. What was she saying?

Dad looked over at me and caught me staring at Violet. “So,” he said. “If she didn’t turn you, who did? And why?”

**Episode 1150**

Staring into the vampire’s eyes, it felt like one layer of fog in my brain had been replaced by another. Now that he was *here*,standing in front of me, I was no longer spurred by the urgent need to leave the pack house and find him at any cost.

Now, this new fog rolling in over my senses was nothing less than pure *want*. His eyes shifted from mine down to my neck, focusing on the newly exposed wound. Even in the darkness, I could make out his pupils dilating in hunger. His nostrils flared, no doubt drinking in the scent of my blood. His lips curled back and his fangs slowly elongated.

And yet he kept the distance between us and didn’t swoop down on me to drink. I let out a tiny whine, remembering the way it had felt when he’d drunk from me, the pleasure-pain sensation of his fangs sinking into my skin, the way his lips had felt as soft and gentle as a lover’s kiss. I wanted more—more of him. And he was teasing me.

“Why are you waiting?” I demanded. “Just do it.” I craned my neck to better expose the bite and reached for his face to pull him toward me.

He was immovable as stone. The moonlight reflected off his blond hair as he stared down at me, his sinful lips pulling up into an indulgent smile. “Aren’t you curious?”

I blinked. My desire-fogged mind was too far gone to understand anything beyond the maddening fact that my vampire was standing in front of me, his fangs out, and he *wasn’t* *drinking from me*.

“Just take my blood!” I demanded.

He reached for me, and I thought for one exhilarating second that he was finally going to give me what we both so desperately wanted. But instead, he brushed a lock of hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ear. It was so gentle and affectionate and so *not* what I wanted, that I just stood there, my mouth open in shock.

“We don’t know each other’s names,” he mused. “Don’t you want to know mine?”

“Okay…” Now that I thought about it, I supposed it made sense. Though his name could have been Fabio for how much I cared. “Who are you?”

His tongue flicked over the edge of one razor-sharp fang. “I’m Sabyr—with a ‘Y’.”

“I’m Cali. With an ‘I’.”

His eyes sparkled. “Your name is as delicious as your blood.”

I stared at his lips, waiting, watching, and maybe considering whether or not it was possible to throw myself onto his fangs so I could finally get what I’d come here for.

“Okay, we’ve met. What are you waiting for?”

He gently stroked a single finger down my neck, and a gasp tore from my lips when the pad of his finger dragged over my wound. It sent a zing of pain and adrenaline down my spine.

He raised the bloodied fingertip to my mouth. “Go ahead. Taste it. Then you’ll understand.”

My gaze lifted from his finger to his dark eyes. He was easily the most beautiful man I’d even seen. I couldn’t look away.

Those full, gorgeous lips twisted into a smirk, and he dragged his bloodied finger over my bottom lip. “Taste yourself, Cali.”

The sound of my name on his lips made my stomach clench. I opened my mouth and allowed my tongue to peek out and swipe over my bottom lip, tasting my own blood—and then I staggered back in shock.

Just like that, the fog clouding my senses lifted, and I looked around, blinking rapidly, my heart thrumming so fast I could feel fresh blood starting to leak down my neck. I was far, far from the pack house, far from help. Alone and vulnerable.

Just like the vampire wanted.

*What the fuck am I doing here? Sabyr isn’t some romantic hero—he’s a bloodthirsty vampire! I need to get away before he drains me dry!*

I curled my fingers into a fist and pulled my arm back, but I was too slow. Too weak. Too human. In a blur of movement, he had one arm wrapped tight around my wrist. He spun me around, my hand caught behind my back, while his other hand wrapped around my throat. His front was pressed against my back, his breath warm on the shell of my ear. I shuddered when I felt his lips moving against that sensitive patch of skin just behind my ear.

“Now you know just how luscious you truly are,” he murmured.

I screamed and struggled with every ounce of fight inside me, but it was no use. I was a ragdoll trapped against stone, for all the power I had.

Sabyr shushed me. “You’ll feel much better soon.” And then his fangs sank into my neck, and that pleasure-pain euphoria flooded through me.

Whatever magic or hormones existed in Sabyr’s bite scrambled my brain and shifted my perception of the situation from terrifying and “oh my god I’m going to die”to sexy and “oh my god give me more”. My heart thrummed, falling into rhythm with Sabyr’s once again. I felt so close to him, so intimately connected, and yet I still wanted more.

I had no clue when he’d stopped restraining me, but I took advantage of the new freedom and reached back, twining my fingers in his hair and pulling him tighter against me. This was good and perfect and mind-blowing, but it wasn’t enough. I wanted the full pressure of his bite, his soft lips moving against my vulnerable throat, the dose of pain that grounded the pleasure and created something truly toe-curling.

My head lolled to the side, and my eyes landed on Greyson.

*What the…*

He was watching me, watching Sabyr and me, while standing in what looked like a hotel room with Scandinavian-style furniture. Greyson smiled, his eyes burning with desire. He liked what he was seeing, and the thought sent those sparks of cold-heat zinging over my skin.

I took a sharp breath, and my head lolled the other way—where Xavier was watching me as he emerged from the ocean. He gave me a sultry smile as he walked up the beach, the waves lapping at his chest, his stomach, his hips—

*Oh my god. He’s naked!*

How could they both be here, but in different places? Who was I with now?

Greyson was slowly pulling back the sheet on the bed, and I tried to call his name, but my mouth had forgotten how to form the word.

On the other side, Xavier beckoned me close. “Come on in, tiger. The water’s warm.”

I felt myself drifting between them, experiencing them both at the same time. Two bodies pressing in on me from either side.

*Isn’t this how it was always supposed to be?*

Xavier’s lips dragged down my neck, leaving me breathless, burning. Greyson pressed in on my other side, his mouth following a similar trail down my spine.

My head was spinning. How could this be happening? It was all too much and not enough.

Then I felt a sharp pinch, and a metallic scent hit my nostrils.

Blood. *My* blood.

My arm felt like it weighed ten tons when I lifted it to my neck. There was a mix of fresh and dried blood there. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so weak. I tried to speak, but nothing came out. I couldn’t open my eyes. My lids were far too heavy.

*I need to sleep.*

Belatedly, I realized I was moving. But how? And then I was aware of that heartbeat thumping just below my ear. I was being carried. By Sabyr. The world blurred around me as we moved; he had to be moving vampire-fast.

*Where is he taking me? And how long have we been on the move? How far have we gone?*

I was too weak, literally too drained, to protest.

*I wish I had a stake. Maybe my Fae powers can help…*

I reached into that well of power inside me—and my body went limp. I felt my connection to consciousness weakening. And even the slight sensations I’d been able to make out were muted. I was cocooned, warm in the darkness, for what felt like forever.

I woke to the scent of pine. Had I… Had I passed out? From trying to use my Fae powers?

*What has he done to me?*

Sabyr’s pace slowed, and I forced my eyes open. I could barely make out a small cabin tucked away among the trees. I shifted ever so slightly in his arms, the first physical sign of protest I’d been able to muster since he’d drained me.

“Where’re we?” I slurred, finally finding my voice.

Sabyr carried me over the threshold and into the cabin, closing the door behind him. The sound of the lock echoed in my semi-conscious mind.

“Welcome to your new home,” he said.

**Episode 1151**

GREYSON

I’d lost Cali’s scent.

As soon as Xavier and I had realized what she’d done, I’d shifted and leapt out her window, following her scent through the woods as worst-case scenarios haunted my every step. She’d been easy enough to follow so far—if her scent hadn’t been enough of a giveaway, the upturned roots and leaves and dirt sure were. It looked like she’d tried to drunk-walk her way through the forest… Or maybe she was injured.

Dread dropped like a stone into my stomach, and I looked around with my night-vision wolf eyes, then put my nose to the ground and inhaled deeply for any sign of my mate. Tracking her *had* been easy—until I’d made it to the stream.

From there, her scent had disappeared. It had been like running into a brick wall. A dead end. I’d searched out in a big loop from the stream and had found exactly jack shit for my efforts. Even her footfalls, so obvious on the way to the stream, were nowhere in sight.

I never should have lost her.

When Xavier told me about the vampire at her window, I was furious with him for not killing the fucking bloodsucker immediately. He should’ve done it when he had the chance, then maybe none of this would have happened. How had I not sensed what was happening too?

If Gregor and his coven wanted to fight an Alpha, he was going to get his fucking wish.

The fact that there was a vampire desperate for another taste of her blood was exactly *why* I was so worried. Why panic was slowly clawing its way up my spine, destroying my ability to think rationally, to plan, to strategize, to act—or do literally anything except feel the thin thread of my control snapping at the thought of *my mate* alone with a bloodlust-crazed vampire.

He had to have done something to her. Why else would Cali risk leaving the pack house—at night—by herself? Under normal circumstances, there was no way she would try to sneak away from me or Xavier when there was a vampire out there who wanted her specifically.

As I combed the riverbed another time, I was hit with a horrible thought: what if this had nothing to do with the vampire? What if she left on purpose? I hoped like hell it didn’t have anything to do with Maren and her disastrous attempt to break the spell. Was Cali still upset with me? Did she blame Maren? Or me?

Maybe she’d left because she didn’t believe I could protect her anymore. It wasn’t like I’d been doing a very convincing job of it lately.

Shaking these thoughts from my head, I walked in slow circles around the stream. My limbs ached, and I felt a haze of bone-deep exhaustion settle over my senses. I was worn out—and even if I’d possessed the energy to keep searching as long as it took to find Cali, I still had no idea where to search next.

Ignoring the exhaustion clawing at my body and the inside of my mind, I spread out my senses, looking desperately for any clue to where my mate had gone. I tried not to think about how long ago the trail might have gone cold, or how those vampires had a knack for covering their scents. Instead, I focused on my mate. Her scent. Her face.

God, I needed to get her back. I needed to bring her home. To hold her in my arms and see for myself that she was all right.

And then I was never letting her out of my sight ever again.

I poured all of my love, my longing, my fear and grief and dread into looking for that fine thread that would lead me to Cali.

And in return I found absolutely nothing.

She was gone. And I had no fucking clue how to get her back.

My claws dug into the dirt, and my wolf let out a feral snarl, which turned into a mournful howl.

*Where is my mate?*

Silence.

I took a deep breath. *Get yourself together, Greyson. You’re of no use to anyone like this.*

I wasn’t the only one out searching the woods tonight. Maybe some of the others had had better luck. I turned to head back to the pack house, and then paused.

I reached out to Cali through the mind link, once again putting everything I had into sending the connection out as far as possible.

*Cali, love. Where are you?*

Again, nothing but silence.

I was getting really fucking tired of silence.

I wearily headed back to the pack house, doing everything I could to ignore the anxiety gnawing at my gut. My instinct told me that something was very, very wrong, that my mate was in mortal danger, but there was nothing I could do beyond hope that someone else had found her.

It was out of my hands for now.

But when I reached the pack house and saw the rest of the search party all clustered together on the lawn and no Cali, I felt that fine thread of control go taut.

I shifted back to my human form and beelined for Xavier. Cali might have been the source of our strife, but she was also what connected us. “Nothing?” I asked.

He shook his head, looking absolutely murderous. Was he angry at me for not finding her? Well, he’d have to get in line. I hated myself too.

“The vampires must still be masking their scent the way they did on Halloween,” he said.

I frowned; so he did have nothing. “You should have killed him when you had him,” I said. Somewhere in me I knew it was unfair to say. “How could you have let him get away?”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “I never meant for any of this to happen, brother,” he growled. “I did my best, he got away, but Cali was *safe*.”

My fists clenched. “You should have trailed him immediately.”

“When would have been a good time? Things got a little crazy after the fire dome and the rest of that shit.”

I huffed out a breath. “I don’t want to argue. I just want to find Cali.”

How could Xavier and I ever have left her alone? With all the weird shit that had been going on lately—all the weird shit Cali herself had done, like nearly inviting a vampire into the pack house—why had we ever thought she could be left without supervision? We should have watched her, protected her—even if that meant protecting her from herself.

Xavier scoffed. “You think I don’t?”

“I said I don’t want to argue. Now tell me about this vampire you didn’t kill.”

My brother scowled. “He’s tall, blond. I don’t know his name, but he must be part of Gregor’s coven.”

So our mate was under the compulsion of a vampire and was out somewhere in the woods with him. “Okay, I’m going back out there. We need to find her before it’s too late.”

Xavier stepped forward. “I’m going with you.”

Sabine held up a hand. “You two are no good to Cali in this state. Look at you! You’re both run ragged. You think you can fight an entire coven of vampires like this? At least get a few hours of sleep, please.”

“Absolutely not!” I said at the same time that Xavier replied, “I’ll never stop. Ever.”

Sabine just shook her head at us. I glanced at Xavier, who looked like he was itching to try to track down Cali and crack some vampire heads. I could relate.

I briefly wondered if I should order Xavier to stay here with the pack while I continued the search, but even as the thought crossed my mind, I knew he’d never go for it. He’d go Rogue before he’d stay here while Cali was missing. And the truth was, I’d take Xavier finding Cali if it meant she was safe.

“Okay, we’ll both keep looking. Let’s head to the stream, where I lost her scent earlier, and we can split up from there.”

Xavier nodded, and we both shifted and headed off into the woods. It felt like it took no time at all to reach the stream, and we diverted in opposite directions to continue the search. I put on one burst of speed after another, pausing every so often to listen, to smell, to search for any kind of clue.

But I didn’t find anything, and the longer the search went on, the more exhausted I felt. Too soon, the first hint of dawn was peeking over the horizon.

*How long have I been searching?*

I shifted back to human and slumped down beside a tree.

*I just need a moment’s rest to regain my strength.*

I closed my eyes, picturing Cali, trying to tell her with my mind and heart that I wasn’t giving up. Just resting for a second.

“It’s okay, Greyson.”

Cali’s voice made me jump upright, and my eyes peeled open. Cali was standing in front of me, smiling. Joy and relief rushed through me so quick it made my head spin.

“You’re okay,” I said. “You’re here.”

And then another voice whispered, “Greyson.” It was Maren.

I turned to see Maren approaching. She was here too? Had Maren been the one to find Cali? I turned to my mate, surprised, and then I felt Maren’s warm, full lips pressing against my own.

**Episode 1152**

ARTEMIS

By the time we called it quits on the search for Cali and dawn was beginning to peek over the horizon, I was in a foul mood. I’d searched for my sister all night long. I was sleep-deprived, frustrated, hungry, and so, so worried about where she’d run off to.

And in the midst of all of those very reasonable feelings, there was something else. Something less tangible, less logical, something raw and sickening that had me ignoring the rest of the search party as I stomped up the stairs and slammed my bedroom door behind me.

I’d searched for Cali high and low and had found *nothing*. It fairly boggled my mind that I’d been able to survive as a bounty hunter back in the Fae world, but when tasked with finding my half-human sister after her midnight jaunt through the woods, suddenly I couldn’t find a trail.

I’d never been one to allow for self-pity. In my experience, you could feel as badly for yourself as you wanted, but it wouldn’t keep you fed when you were starving, and it certainly wouldn’t keep the bigger, meaner monsters from taking advantage of you in one way or another.

And yet, seeing all these people gathered together to look for Cali… I couldn’t help comparing it to my own experiences and feeling pretty damn sorry for myself. Everyone cared about Cali being gone—even when we still didn’t know for sure how or why she’d left in the first place—but I’d been gone for *years* in the Fae world, cut off from my real family, and no one had come looking for me.

Cali wasn’t even a werewolf, a true pack member, and yet every werewolf in the entire house *including Ava* had been out there searching. Maren had even joined in after she’d put Fenrir to bed. How awful was my luck that the two women in the world who had the most reason to want Cali gone had still participated in the search, and yet everyone had given me up for dead pretty much the moment I was born?

Beyond the failures of my birth family, I couldn’t help wondering how the pack would react if I were the one missing, not Cali. After all, I’d fought alongside them in their war against Silas. I’d saved and protected them. I’d partied with them.

And yet when I’d taken off to hide the Orb in the Fae world, most of the pack had stayed behind. Well, that wasn’t entirely true, I supposed. Orla had come after me… But was that because she was concerned about me? Or the Orb?

Lately, it seemed the only person who cared about me at all was Rishika.

I wanted nothing more than to smash everything in my room, and then maybe have a nice long cry, but I allowed myself a small smile.

*Rishika cares.*

Then, as if proving my point, there was a knock at the door, and Rishika popped her head in. “Hey, can I come in?”

My throat suddenly tight, I nodded.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “How are you doing? We didn’t really get a chance to talk after we got back from Mount Rainier. Are you all right?”

Ugh, that was something I didn’t want to think about right now—my epic failure in losing one of the most powerful artifacts in the entire world. I shrugged. “I’m not feeling too great, honestly.”

She crossed the room and took my hand. “I hope you’re not blaming yourself.”

“It’s hard not to.” I let out a shuddering breath and shook my head. “But that’s not even the worst part.”

“What’s wrong?”

Even now, knowing that I could trust Rishika, that she wouldn’t hurt me or use me, it was hard to put a name to my feelings. I’d learned the hard way that vulnerability—any kind—was akin to offering yourself up on a platter.

But Rishika’s eyes were kind, accepting. She cared.

“I just…” My voice broke, and I cleared my throat. “I don’t feel like I belong to my own family. For a while I thought maybe I did, but not anymore. And maybe I never fit to begin with. Like, the family has always been Orla, Tom, and Cali. And it’s not so much that there’s not room for me. It’s just that even if I insert myself into the picture, I still don’t fit. One of these things isn’t like the others…”

Rishika made a soft noise in the back of her throat and then leaned in to kiss my cheek. “Sometimes it’s hard to find your place.”

The ghost of a smile tugged at my lips. “Yeah.” I leaned back so I could look at her. She really did care. She wasn’t trying to tell me how to feel. She just listened and accepted and believed me. I leaned in and brushed my lips against hers.

*This is the one person who cares about me. Rishika came to help me when I ran off with the Orb…* Gratitude didn’t even begin to cover the feelings that unfurled in my chest.

And then a mean little voice whispered, *She only came because Greyson told her to. She was obeying her Alpha, not protecting you.*

I frowned a little bit against her lips and shoved that voice to the back of my mind. I cupped her face and kissed her harder, nipping at her full bottom lip just hard enough to toe the line between pleasure and pain.

She gasped against my lips and I deepened the kiss. God, she tasted so good.

When we came up for air, her eyebrows were raised, and she was grinning from ear to ear.

“What?” I asked, breathless.

She shook her head. “Nothing. You’re just gorgeous.”

My face flushed. “Take your clothes off.”

“Please?”

“*Please*.”

Biting my lip, I watched her undress, starting with her shirt and then her leggings, removing them agonizingly slow. When she was in her underwear, I sucked in a breath. How was this woman standing in front of me real?

And then Rishika wasn’t standing in front of me, but straddling me on the bed. Her thighs squeezed around my hips, and I could’ve died. Sliding both hands up her legs, my breath shook as she leaned forward to kiss me again. I deepened the kiss as I dug my hands into her skin, moaning as her hips began to grind against me.

“Off,” she growled, sliding a hand under my shirt before pulling it over my head.

“Anything else?” I asked, biting her ear.

With another growl that made me shiver, Rishika shoved me down onto the bed. In one swift motion, she did away with the rest of my clothes. Before I could sit up, she had fit herself between my legs and slid a hand under one of my knees.

“What are you doing?” My focus should have been on her face, but it was on the curve of her neck, slowly trailing down to the valley of her breasts.

“What does it look like?” She pressed a kiss to my inner thigh and I gasped when her teeth teased the sensitive skin. Heat built in my core as Rishika draped my knees over her shoulders. I was already shaking from anticipation. I knew exactly where I wanted her swollen lips to go.

Twining my fingers in her hair, I couldn’t hold back the moan when she took my clit in her mouth. I squeezed my eyes shut, losing myself completely in the sensation. It was too much, too good having her swirl her tongue the way she was.

“Come here,” I panted. Just the thought of kissing her, reaching between her own thighs was making my head spin.

“No.” She blew cold air on my core and I whimpered, seeing stars.

“*No*?”

“I’m not done with you.” Then she slid two fingers in and out of my slick folds, in time with the flick of her tongue on my clit.

“Fuck,” I moaned out. My head fell back, and I couldn’t stop meeting her rhythm with my hips. It was greedy, it was too much, it was too good. She held me in place, clearly taking pride in the nonsensical words and sounds that escaped my lips as I climaxed against her tongue, riding each wave and aftershock.

She climbed up next to me, and I pulled her into a deep kiss. “Now it’s your turn.”

\*\*\*\*

Rishika had stayed after we’d finished and had drifted off to sleep snuggled into the crook of my arm. I kind of loved having her there. But despite having been up looking for my sister all night and then kissing Rishika until I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t find it in myself to rest.

I peeled myself away from her and slipped into the bathroom. I felt good, much better than when I’d come back to the pack house after my fruitless search, but there was still something nagging at me.

Had my mother come after me because she’d been worried about me, or had it really just been because of the Orb? With Cali missing and Orla and Tom wanting to take my sister back to Minnesota anyway, was there room for me in the Harts’ family life? And what if my father truly was still alive?

Hope flickered in my chest at the thought. Would he accept me into his life? Should I go find him? And if I did, would my mother even care? Would it matter to anyone, even Cali, if I just up and left?

I washed my face, hoping to shake away some of these poisonous thoughts, but then I was hit with a wave of dizziness. I caught myself on the counter before I hit the floor. My head felt like it had just been clubbed by a troll.

*You don’t have to do any of this alone*, a voice whispered.

I shook my head. What was going on?

*Think of what we could do together. You don’t need anyone—not Cali, not Orla, no one.*

I struggled to respond and slowly sank to the cool bathroom floor.

Then the voice spoke again. *Artemis, would you like to see what you’re capable of?*

**Episode 1153**

Sabyr’s words took a long time to sink into my disoriented mind. Too long.

*Welcome to your new home.*

My heart skipped up into a new rhythm, beating against my ribcage like a feral animal. *My new* what*? This psychopath vampire is going to keep me here? Why? As what?*

The answer came immediately and was driven home by the dull throbbing of the bite wound on my neck.

I was here as a live-in Fae for him to drink from whenever he wanted—a captive food source. I started to tremble, and it had nothing to do with the blood loss. The confusion and desire I’d felt before was fading, replaced by raw terror.

I was alone in a cabin in the woods. And nobody except the blood-crazed vampire who had abducted me knew where I was. *I* didn’t even know where I was.

*You are so stupid, Caliana.*

I wanted desperately to go back in time and fight myself when I’d reached for that window. To beg Xavier and Greyson to not leave me alone—even in the seemingly safe confines of the pack house.

Because the truth was, I had never been safe in that house. Not from the moment Sabyr’s teeth had first sunk into my neck. Any and all attempts to convince myself—and my mates—otherwise had been nothing more than an illusion.

I knew that now. Far too late.

The wound on my neck was caked with dried blood, but at least it had finally closed. For now. Until Sabyr decided he wanted another drink. My teeth began to chatter to match my shaking body.

*Keep it together, Cali. Don’t you dare lose it now.*

Sabyr smiled at me affectionately. He was either completely oblivious to my distress or he didn’t care. Considering what I was to him, and what he’d already done to me, I assumed it was the latter.

He began moving around the cabin, yanking the curtains shut as he went. The cabin itself was nice enough. The interior had an open floor plan with lots of antique furniture, designed to feel like a cozy, if rustic, getaway in the mountains. Despite its homey design, I noticed several stainless steel appliances glimmering at me from the kitchen. I wondered if Sabyr had ever used any of them. Did vampires ever cook?

*Not now, Cali!*

“Do you like the place?” Sabyr asked. “I hope so, because you and I are going to be spending a lot of time together here.”

I couldn’t help the violent shudder that raked down my spine.

Sabyr made a little hum of sadness and moved toward me. I skittered back a couple of steps and threw my hands up in front of me. “Back off!” I snapped. “Don’t you dare touch me again. You don’t want to make things worse for yourself!”

His lips twisted like he was trying very hard not to laugh. “Worse for myself?” he echoed, his head cocking to the side. “Whatever do you mean?”

“You’ve kidnapped me, drunk from me, and used your vampire mind tricks to get me to leave the pack house and come to you. After all that, my mates and their pack are going to want to hunt you down and tear you to pieces.” I imagined Xavier and Greyson in their wolf forms, death on swift paws, tearing the vampire in front of me in half.

A bitter smile tugged at my lips at the thought.

Sabyr smirked. “If your pack already wants to kill me, then what do I have to lose by doing whatever I want to you?”

Oh. Yeah, he had a point. I thought fast. “If you let me go, I won’t tell anyone what happened. We can go our separate ways.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. Now that I’ve drunk from you, I fail to imagine a future without that flavor on my tongue. Besides, I highly doubt anyone is going to come to your rescue—they’ll have to find you first, remember? And that’s not going to happen. I personally made sure of it. You, my dear, delectable Cali, are my dirty little secret.”

I snarled and lunged for him with all the thoughtless desperation of a feral animal. He’d hurt me, and he was going to hurt me more. And worst of all, beneath all that anger and panic, I had a feeling he was right. Nobody was coming to save me. Which meant I had to save myself.

My body lurched to a sudden stop in midair, and I hit the wood-paneled floor with a groan. Something cold and solid and unforgiving was wrapped tight around my ankle, which throbbed from the sudden jerking motion.

I looked down at my foot and gasped. Sabyr had chained me down! I followed the metal links to a bolt on the wall. I had maybe six feet of motion in any direction. How had I not noticed him chaining me up? I must have been more in shock than I’d originally thought.

“Darling,” he purred. “There’s no need to be upset—”

“Fuck you!” I spat, my eyes wide and full of hatred. I raised a hand to blast him with my Fae power—really well, this time. But nothing happened. My arm shook with the simple gesture of holding it out in front of me.

I was too weak to fight him. Too weak to escape his chains. Too weak to ignore the compulsion that had led me to jump out of my bedroom window and find him in the middle of the forest.

I was his perfect little pet.

Hot, desperate tears pricked at my eyes. “What have you done to me?”

“I’ve kept you alive,” he said mildly. “You should be happy with that.”

I shook my head and forced myself to my feet. My bruised, aching body barked at the motion, and my watery, weak muscles trembled. He was lying, my vampire captor. He’d done something to me—cast some kind of spell, maybe. Something that put me under his control. What else explained me sneaking out of the pack house in the middle of the night—through a window, no less—when I’d known there was a vampire lurking around? I’d been drawn to him somehow.

“Tell me the truth,” I said. “Why are you doing this?”

He moved closer to me—too close. I stepped back, and he caught my wrist, pulling me into him. My ankle throbbed as the chain went taut. Sabyr leaned in and breathed deeply, letting out a long, pleasured sigh. “Your blood. It’s all I’ve ever wanted, all I’ve ever needed.”

His eyes lifted to mine, and just like that I felt the pull once more. He was using vampire magic on me again!

I spat in his face. Triumph roared through me as I watched the glob roll down his cheek. Sabyr, however, didn’t even flinch. Without breaking eye contact, he wiped the spit from his face and then licked it off his finger.

“Hmm. I think I prefer your blood.”

“Dude, gross!” I raised a hand to slap him—maybe a more forceful approach would be better, here—but he was too fast. Before I could blink, he caught my wrist and slowly brought it to his mouth. He flexed it back to better expose my wrist for his use, and his full lips pressed against the bluish veins there.

I went completely still. *Is he going to bite me again?* Dread and revulsion crawled over me, but somewhere, deep in the pit of my stomach, there was something like anticipation bubbling at the thought of his lips, his teeth, on my skin.

Sabyr hesitated, then lowered my wrist. “As tempting as you are, I must not rush things. You are like an expensive, rare liquor that must be savored slowly.” His teeth flashed, and he gave me a dark grin. “Best not to drink it all at once.”

I felt myself go even paler than I already was. “R-right.” I wasn’t *not* going to agree that he shouldn’t drain me. Maybe if I could hold him off long enough, my Fae power would return. “Um, the longer you wait, the sweeter I’ll be. Just like wine.”

Sabyr leaned in close to the wound on my neck and inhaled deeply. I looked wildly over his shoulder for some kind of way out—a weapon, a handy-dandy extra-large toothpick, anything to help me get out of here.

Maybe if he fell asleep, I could sneak out. *Wait, do vampires sleep?* I’d seen old movies where they slept in coffins, but Sabyr was a modern vampire, and I didn’t see a coffin anywhere.

*Think, Cali!*

He’d used his vampire wiles to seduce me—maybe I could turn the tables on him? But the mere thought of trying to seduce him made me feel sick to my stomach.

Sabyr suddenly pulled back. His eyes crinkled, and he shook his head. “If you try to escape, they will discover you are here and kill you. Gregor made it clear that he wants you dead for killing his brother Raul at the Renaissance faire. And I don’t want you to die. You’re my personal blood bag. I want to keep you alive forever.”

I couldn’t keep myself from gagging. I would gladly die a thousand times over before spending the rest of my life as a vampire feeding trough.

The door flew open, and a tall, angry vampire stalked in.

“Sabyr, Gregor’s looking for you—” He stopped when he saw me. “What is she doing here?”

**Episode 1154**

GREYSON

I pulled away from Maren, shock freezing me in place. “Maren, you can’t—”

Cali’s lips pressed against the side of my neck. “It’s okay, Greyson.”

This felt like a trap. “But, she’s not—I’m not—*we’re* not together. And you’re my mate…”

Cali gently cupped my face in her hands and turned me to face her. She was smiling at me, her eyes heavy with love and something that looked a whole lot like amusement. “I am your mate. And I’m right here.” She took one of my hands and wound it around her waist. “And Maren is here too.”

Maren took my other hand and slipped it around her waist, mirroring Cali’s motion. She leaned in and pressed a line of open-mouthed kisses to my bare chest.

“But…” I protested weakly, even as I felt myself growing hard from Maren’s simple touch. How could I be feeling this way now? And with Cali, of all people, standing here watching? I was the worst kind of person for enjoying this, wasn’t I?”

“Greyson, relax,” Cali whispered before giving my earlobe a little nip that made a groan slip through my lips and sent all the blood in my body running straight to my cock. “I want this, and Maren does too. Do you want this? Do you want *us*?”

“Let’s show him.”

Delirious, I watched the two women lean into each other in front of me. Cali kissed Maren, sliding a hand into her hair and tugging, making the other woman moan. My cock twitched as I watched the two of them, making out as if I wasn’t even there.

Then they broke apart and Cali pressed kisses to my neck. Maren’s mouth began trailing lower, now grazing over the vee of my hips and running lower. “Fuck,” I breathed. I couldn’t look at Maren, not right now. Not when I had a sense of exactly what she was about to do next, and I was trying like hell to find some semblance of control.

I looked at Cali instead, my mouth moving wordlessly. In a plea or a question, I wasn’t sure. It sure as shit wasn’t a refusal.

“It’s okay,” she said again. Then she leaned in and pressed her lips to mine at the exact same moment that Maren’s lips brushed over the hard, weeping head of my cock. A simple kiss, that was all either woman had given me, and yet it was a miracle that I hadn’t come from that alone.

“Do you want us?” Maren asked from her place on her knees.

I made the mistake of looking down at her, her lips shiny and her eyes dark with lust. I glanced back up at Cali, who was watching me with a very similar expression.

“Yes,” I groaned.

Cali and Maren both grinned brightly and shared a knowing look. Then my mate pushed me down onto my back on the forest floor—and Maren picked up exactly where she’d left off. Her warm, wet mouth wrapped around the head of my cock and my strangled groan echoed through the forest.

Fortunately, Cali found a way to keep my mouth occupied while Maren worked her magic. I wasn’t entirely sure when she’d stripped off all her clothes, but suddenly Cali was kneeling over me.

“Is this okay?” she asked.

My mouth watered at the mere sight of her, naked and wet for me. I’d never been more on board with anything in my entire life.

“Get over here,” I growled, grabbing her hips and lifting her the rest of the way. The second her pretty pink pussy came into contact with my tongue, we both moaned.

Cali’s fingers dug into my hair and tugged. “Greyson!”

Maren’s mouth began working me harder, faster, her hand wrapping tight around the base of my cock where her mouth couldn’t quite reach, moving in tandem with that clever tongue of hers. God, it was like she was trying to swallow me whole.

Just when I thought I was moments away from losing myself, her tongue found the long, thick vein running down the underside of my cock and she backed off from the head, slowing her hand movements and focusing on pressing her tongue against that vein, up and down. It was incredible and maddening, but it was simple enough to keep me from falling over that edge.

Still, a bit more of even this treatment and I was going to lose it. I was sure she’d be able to feel my heartbeat against the flat of her tongue. And then Maren started moaning, her mouth adding just the slightest vibration to every sweep of her tongue.

I moaned desperately, loudly—right against Cali’s clit.

Cali cried out and tugged my hair again, harder this time. She was riding my face now, swiveling her hips this way and that, looking for just the right amount of pressure and friction.

I could feel our mutual climaxes building—Cali’s was so close I could literally taste it— and the sensation low in my stomach told me I was moments away from spilling into Maren’s mouth. Just a little more. Just a little—

I jolted upright and looked around wildly. I was still leaning against the tree, disoriented. Had I… Had I fallen asleep?

As soon as I thought it, I felt like a complete and utter ass.

*Of course it was a dream you piece of shit.*

A dream I would never, ever tell Cali about.

*Cali.* She was still out there, in the clutches of a mad vampire. The realization left me gutted. I stood up, ready to continue my search. I was about to shift into my wolf when I heard the sound of footsteps coming nearer. Could it be Cali?

Maren emerged from the trees.

*Is this a dream again? Why is she here? She wasn’t part of the search.* I couldn’t help the mental barrage of images and sensations from my sexy dream, and I looked down at the ground. I couldn’t look at her without imagining those full lips wrapped around me again.

“Maren?” I asked. “What are you doing out here?”

“Greyson! I’ve been looking for you all night!” Before I could stop her or even string a response together, she closed the distance between us and threw her arms around me. “I have good news.”

She pulled back just long enough to kiss me—firmly, deeply. And before I could process *that*, she pulled back. “I couldn’t be happier, Greyson. I’m so glad that we’re going to raise Fenrir together.”

I blinked. “I… I don’t understand.”

Her smile could have lit up the forest. “The test results are in,” she said slowly. “Fenrir is your son.”

My overwrought mind shuddered to a halt. *Fenrir’s my son?*

Maren threw her arms around me again. “We’re going to be a family, like we were always meant to be. Like you’ve always known we would be.”

I was stunned; the emotions churning inside me shifted too fast to feel like anything but too much. Was I even meant to be happy about this?

She moved in for another kiss. “We’re a family.” Her lips pressed against mine and—

Then I felt a firm touch on my arm, along with, “Greyson? Wake up.”

I jolted upright, my heart racing and my eyes blinking rapidly to focus. I was… back in the forest. Maren was kneeling next to me, looking concerned.

My mouth was dry, and my body and mind felt off-kilter, both from the exhaustion still pulling at my eyelids and limbs and the unsettling lack of certainty. Was this real? Or another dream?

I pinched myself. Hard. It sure felt real.

A crease appeared between Maren’s eyes. She’d no doubt caught the movement. “Are you okay?”

I cleared my throat and licked my dry lips, trying to push the ever more maddening dreams away, trying to ground myself in reality—if that was truly what this was.

“Why are you here?” My voice was rough from sleep.

“We’ve been looking for you.”

I couldn’t stop myself from reaching out to touch her. “Is this… Are you actually here?”

She cocked her head. “Are you okay? You were passed out when I found you.”

Reality—the true, bitter, desperate, sobering reality of our situation—hit me square in the chest. Cali. The vampire. I lurched unsteadily to my feet. “How long have I been out? I only meant to rest for a moment.”

Hot shame slid down my spine. What the fuck was I doing? Napping in the woods and having wet dreams about my mate and my ex-girlfriend, or—somehow worse—crazy wish fulfillment dreams about Fenrir being my son? Cali was still out there, still missing, still trapped with that psychotic vampire! I was letting Cali down. I was letting the whole goddamn pack down.

What kind of Alpha fucking *fell asleep* while his mate was probably in danger? Even if it was from exhaustion?

Maren’s lips pursed. “I’m not sure how long you’ve been out here,” she said softly, “but we should get back to the pack house.”

I shook my head. “No. I need to keep searching.”

“Sorry, I should have started with that.” Maren took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. I couldn’t help flashing back to my dreams, and I jerked out of her grip.

Her eyebrows lifted at the rejection, but she didn’t comment on it. Instead, she straightened her shoulders. “Xavier found something,” she said. “You need to come now.”

**Episode 1155**

VIOLET

I felt cold inside, watching Charlie’s mom return to Charlie and his dad, a bright smile on her face. Her words were still ringing in my mind.

“Charlie is part of our family,” she’d whispered to me, her voice raw and so infused with hate it made me flinch. “We’ll make things work for him—somehow. He’ll always be welcome in our family, and he’s still one of us. But you’re not. And you never will be.”

My mouth went dry. I’d thought we were finally making progress. That maybe, just maybe, Charlie’s parents could look past their own prejudices and see both of us as people, not monsters. And while I was beyond relieved that they seemed to have changed their tune about Charlie, I couldn’t help feeling hurt that I hadn’t made the cut.

*I’ve only ever loved Charlie and supported him. Why can’t they see that I love him as much as they do?* And then, another thought that had tears pricking my eyes. *When will I get to have a family again?*

It took me a moment to find my voice. “Do you still blame me for what happened to Charlie?” My voice broke on his name, but Iris didn’t soften in the slightest. She seemed completely unaffected by the emotion I knew had to be playing across my face.

Her eyes narrowed. “Why wouldn’t I blame you? You may not have been the one to turn my son, but you put all of this ‘*mates’* nonsense in his head.”

And then she walked away to rejoin Charlie and her husband. The Kim family seemed to finally be pulling back together, but I’d never felt more alone.

I tried to pull myself together, tried to focus on the positives. For one, Charlie had his parents back. And that alone was amazing—my mate deserved to be happy, to have the love and support of the people who had raised him. People he loved with all his heart. We also no longer had two hunters on our trail. That alone had to be worth any amount of heartache on my part, right?

But if I were being honest, I wanted Iris to accept me. I wanted to be part of Charlie’s family. To feel the love of having parents again, even if they weren’t mine. But now that seemed impossible. And what was up with that not-so-veiled threat Iris had made? I wasn’t exactly afraid that she would hurt me—I felt pretty certain that I could take her. What mattered more was Charlie. Was she going to try to take her son from me?

I shook myself. Would there be any future where she didn’t hate my guts just for being a werewolf?

*Charlie’s my mate. And nothing is going to change that. His parents are an important part of his past, but I’m his future.* I just had to get through the next little while, allow them to reconcile, and then Charlie and I could figure out where to go from there. It wasn’t like his parents would be hanging around indefinitely…

I was only dimly aware of Iris and Paul questioning Marta nearby.

“Can you channel my mother again?” Iris asked.

“So, can just any ghost pop into you and start speaking?” Paul asked. “Or do you have to let them in, so to speak?”

“Hey.”

Charlie’s hand landed on my shoulder, and I jumped a bit. “Oh, hi. Sorry. I’m just, um, lost in thought a little bit.”

He watched my face. “What did my mom just say to you? You seem kinda upset.”

I fought to keep my face impassive. How was I supposed to answer that? It would just stress him out to learn that his mom hated me so much. He’d only just gotten his parents back. Did I want to throw a wrench into things so soon? What good would that do?

I forced a smile. “Your mom loves you very much.” Then I leaned in and kissed him. I felt him smile against my lips, and some of my anxiety and heartache melted away.

This was what mattered. Me and Charlie together. We pulled back and grinned at each other for a moment, and then Charlie leaned in and gave me another quick kiss. “I knew once my mom realized how awesome you are, she’d welcome you.”

*If only.*

He put an arm around me and led me back to his parents and Marta. I tried to keep a smile on my face, to act like nothing had happened, but I couldn’t help avoiding Iris’s gaze as much as possible.

“I can’t do that,” Marta was saying, shaking her head. “I can’t start questioning spirits to find out why Charlie was turned. It doesn’t work like that. And… because I was used by Bert for so long, my abilities are a little rough around the edges.” She blushed. “It was all still pretty new to me when he trapped me, too.”

My eyebrows rose. Wow, they really weren’t going to take our word for why Charlie had been turned, were they?

Charlie frowned. “Why is it so important to you guys to learn more about the werewolf who turned me? He’s dead. Violet and I killed him. I told you that.”

Iris’s eyes flicked over to me, and I looked away.

“Yes, but that still doesn’t tell us *why* he attacked you,” she said. “What was his motive?”

My mate shrugged. “He liked to turn people and then kill them—it was his creepy serial killer thing.”

His parents didn’t seem satisfied by that answer. “Did it ever occur to you that this werewolf might have singled you out because you come from a family of hunters?” Iris asked. “I know you’re still adjusting to this new information, but there are forces, alliances of dark creatures out there who will stop at nothing to kill us just because they fear us.”

I wrinkled my nose a bit at that. *That’s ironic, coming from the same people who hunt creatures they’re afraid of… and who are convinced I’m one of them.*

I really hoped now that his parents had turned off the kill switch, they might have an opportunity to change for the better, but the way they were talking about supernatural creatures, about *my family*, wasn’t giving me much hope.

*Maybe I should have hunted them down when they turned against Charlie. Killed them before they could hurt him or any other werewolves. Things would be so different if they were out of the picture.*

But Charlie never would have gone for it. And he probably wouldn’t have ever forgiven me. Just look at how a very similar situation had gone for Ava and Xavier—that had blown up in their faces and torn their bond to shreds.

*Maybe it’s better this way. His parents can go their way, and Charlie and I can go ours.*

Charlie looked troubled by his mom’s assertion that his bite was all part of some conspiracy, but before he could respond, Paul cut in.

He smiled at Charlie and Marta. “How about I help you change that tire?”

We moved on quickly after that, and after driving for a few hours we decided to stop at a motel for some rest before figuring out our next move. We’d gotten a room with two queen beds, but Marta had decided to stay in the car because she didn’t want to go into a building. Considering how things had gone the last time she’d set foot inside a building, I didn’t blame her.

I collapsed gracelessly onto the lumpy mattress—only somewhat aware of Charlie lying down next to me and curling his body around mine—and pretty much fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow.

I awoke sometime later to find myself in Charlie’s arms. He was awake, staring at me and gently stroking my hair.

“It’s creepy to watch people sleep,” I murmured, a sleepy, teasing smile tugging at my lips.

He smiled back. “Did you get some rest?”

“Mm hm. I guess I didn’t realize just how tired I was.” I curled a little closer to him, burying my face in his neck. He kept stroking my hair, seeming content to just hold me.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, eyes closed, still half-asleep. “You’re kind of quiet.”

“Honestly? I’m not sure.”

Dread slipped down my spine, and my eyes snapped open. I moved back so I could see his face.

“I want to talk to you about something,” he said.

My mind filled with a million scenarios, everything from him leaving me to go be with his parents to deciding to cut them out of our lives to us running off into the sunset and getting married. The hope and dread were too much to hold onto at once.

“You can tell me anything,” I said. “You know that.”

“I know.” He made a soothing noise in his throat and kissed my forehead. “My parents say it’s time to come back to Minnesota.”

“Oh.” *That’s not so bad. I’ll have to steer clear of Iris, but otherwise it could be worse.* “If that’s what you want to do next. I liked Minnesota. When are we leaving?”

Charlie grimaced. “That’s the thing. My parents want me to come alone.”

**Episode 1156**

AVA

I stood outside the diner, glancing at the entryway and peering inside to see the mostly empty dining room. I glanced down at the plunging V of my shirt, and my tight jeans. *If this doesn’t work, I’m going to feel like a complete ass.*

Of course, if my plan didn’t go the way I was hoping, a little embarrassment would be the least of my worries.

Mabel, I noticed, was leaning against the side of the building, smoking a joint. I wondered how long she’d been taking her break, and whether or not any of the people I saw inside were waiting on their food. When I’d worked here, I’d easily made double the tips Mabel had, and I hadn’t even tried all that hard. It was comforting in a way—given that I’d gone from loner to werewolf blood bag and now I was back—to know that some things never changed.

My palms had started to sweat, and I wiped them on the front of my jeans.

*It’s a good plan. It’s going to work*. And I believed it; I really did. Still, the thought of coming face to face with Iñigo again made my stomach flip-flop. After all, he’d tried to drain me. But Iñigo was nothing if not smart. He knew a good deal when he saw one, and since Xavier had made his feelings all too clear, this was my only option.

I cringed as I recalled my conversation with Xavier, and his answer when I’d asked whether he’d give me a second chance, if Cali chose Greyson.

Xavier had practically laughed in my face. Now *that* had been humiliating—and infuriating. But I’d survived it. No matter what Iñigo threw at me, it couldn’t be worse than my own mate essentially telling me he considered us a bad joke. And it didn’t even make sense.

If Cali were out of the picture, Xavier would want me back in a heartbeat. We were still mates; our bond hadn’t died with me. Or, if it had, it had been resurrected right along with me. So the solution was simple: I needed to erase Cali from the picture.

Once she was gone, Xavier would mourn, sure. But in time he’d realize that the true love of his life was his first mate, his only true mate.

It had been laughably—pathetically—easy to slip away while I’d been out in the woods pretending to help search for Cali with the others, but even then, my plan had been forming. I was so sick and tired and living in Cali’s shadow. Even in her absence, nobody noticed me. My own mate couldn’t care less what I did when his precious Fae-mutt was missing.

It was time to fix things. Once and for all.

I walked to the front doors and nodded to Mabel, who watched with raised eyebrows. Then I took a deep, calming breath, and yanked the door open with authority and confidence. I ignored the customers and a waiter I didn’t know who was standing at the kitchen entrance, loading up a tray full of plates, and headed for the office.

The door was partially open, just like I remembered. It was strange, in a way, to see a place that had changed me so much remaining so unchanged itself. I knocked on the doorframe.

“Knock, knock.”

Iñigo looked up from his desk. His eyes widened, and his eyebrows almost reached his hairline, but he smiled broadly. His eyes scanned over my frame, lingering on my breasts for an extra beat before returning to my face. Good. This shirt was doing its job. “Hello, Ava. I have to admit, I’m surprised to see you here,” he said. “I’m impressed you had the guts to show your face here again.”

I leaned against the doorframe and crossed my arms over my chest, which only amplified my cleavage. “You’re not scared, are you?”

He laughed. “You’re a werewolf; I’m a vampire. We’re supposed to be wary of each other, but frightened? Not unless you give me reason to be.”

I had plenty of reasons to want to frighten the man in front of me. Even now, the memories of being trapped in his basement, the blood being slowly drained out of me, itched at my mind. He’d hurt me, used me, left me devoid of hope, trapped like a wild animal…

I pushed the memories back and forced a sultry smile to my lips. I’d return the favor in kind one day. But not today.

“I didn’t come here to frighten you,” I said. “I had something else in mind.”

His eyes roamed up my body again, completely unashamed. Despite myself, I felt my cheeks heat. He sat back in his chair, put his pen down, and interlaced his hands behind his head. “Why did you come here, Ava?”

This was my chance. Aware of his eyes on me, I approached his desk and cocked a hip on the edge of it. He seemed to enjoy the show, since he was making no attempt to hide it. I didn’t mind the tension myself. Even though he was a vampire who’d nearly killed me, he was incredibly hot.

And it had been far too long since an attractive man had looked at me the way Iñigo was looking at me.

“I’d like to put what happened behind us, if you’re willing,” I offered.

His lips twisted into a sexy little smirk, and he watched my face for a moment. “Hmm… Why dwell in the past?”

I couldn’t quite read his expression, but he seemed intrigued.

He got up and walked around his desk to stand right behind me. His breath ghosted over the shell of my ear. “We should always be looking to the future.”

I tried to rein in my racing heart. I was vulnerable now, teasing a predator. He could attack me at any moment, bite me again. Hell, he could even drain me completely this time. He did seem to have a taste for my blood. And if he tried it, would I be able to stop him?

*Oh god. Have I made a terrible mistake?*

“So,” he murmured, his fingers running down my arms. “You haven’t told me why you’ve come back.”

I gulped and turned to face him. We were so close, our noses were practically touching. The tension that had been simmering between us earlier seemed more sinister now. Beneath those full lips was a set of fangs that could tear me apart.

*No, don’t wimp out now. You can do this. He’s really not all that different from other men, maybe a bit more dangerous, but he’ll be just as easy to play. You’re a werewolf for fuck’s sake.*

I leaned in close and placed a hand against his oh-so-firm chest. In a movement almost faster than I could catch, he grabbed my hand, his fingers wrapping tight around my wrist. Our eyes locked, and I froze, caught in his gaze.

One beat passed, and then another. He didn’t take his hand away, or step back. I smiled triumphantly and then leaned in to kiss him.

Iñigo met me halfway. His lips were just as soft and full as I’d thought they’d be, but the way they moved against my own, firm and commanding, taking complete control, was a surprise. He deepened the kiss, his lips and tongue working in tandem to drive me wild.

I’d never been so terrified or turned on in my entire life.

*He’s falling for it.*

Suddenly his hands wrapped around my shoulders and he shoved me against the wall, pinning me in place. My heart was fluttering a million miles a minute. His strong chest pressed up against me, molding his body into mine. The tips of his fangs grazed over my lip, and I gasped as he pinned my arms to my sides.

Iñigo pulled back, and my heart beat quickly. My gaze was still on his lips when he said, “Surely you don’t think I’m that stupid?”

I froze, then tried to jerk out of his grasp. But Iñigo’s grip was just as immovable as the wall against my back.

“Tell me why you’re here, Ava,” he said. “Because it wasn’t for this.”

I opened my mouth, not sure what to say. Finally, he released me and stepped back to his desk. He grabbed a small hourglass from his desk and flipped it over. “You have one minute.”

My eyes riveted to the tiny grains of sand slipping through the hourglass, I took a deep breath. My voice was surprisingly steady when I finally spoke. “There’s this girl who was taken by a vampire—I think his name is Gregor. Do you know him?”

He pointed to the time. “Yes. Forty-five seconds.”

“I need to get her back,” I blurted out. “It’s for someone important to me.”

Iñigo yawned and I barreled through. “She’s Fae; couldn’t that be good for your blood business? That’s why you took me, wasn’t it? You want your little side hustle to have all the different flavors.”

“And what’s stopping me from going to get her myself?” he asked. “You’re not making this worthwhile for me.”

There were only a few grains left in the hourglass. “What if I can get you two Fae?”

**Episode 1157**

I reeled back a bit, my chained foot making a clanking sound as I cowered. I couldn’t help the response—this vampire looked scary AF.

There was something very harsh and unforgiving about him. Not just his appearance, but his aura too. I was no Astrid, but this guy gave me a bad feeling. Considering I’d been abducted, taken captive, chained up, and partially drained by the other vampire in the room, but didn’t find him half so scary, that was really saying something.

A long, gruesome scar slashed its way across the vampire’s cheek. It had the effect of making him look even more angry than he probably already was, only deepening the lines in his face when his lips curled back into a snarl.

“What the hell is *she* doing here, Sabyr?” the vampire demanded.

“Don’t you ever knock, Laszlo?” Sabyr hissed, stepping smoothly in front of me. I hated that some small, stupid part of me felt comforted by this. This was the vampire whose master plan was to keep me tied up as his personal blood bag for the rest of my life—which probably wouldn’t be very long, at the rate he was draining me.

*Sabyr’s not my protector. He’s just guarding his food like any other animal.*

“You’d think in all the long years of your life you might have picked up a few manners at some point,” Sabyr drawled.

The deflection didn’t work. Laszlo’s head cocked to the side, and our eyes met. His eyes narrowed, and his scowl deepened. “She killed Raul. Why didn’t you bring her back to the coven? Gregor wants to kill her personally, along with that other werewolf.”

“Gregor’s just being greedy,” Sabyr said mildly. “Why waste such a valuable commodity?”

“You’re a traitor! She’s Gregor’s to kill for revenge. You should burn for defying the coven leader,” the other vampire spat. Then he took a deep breath in and stiffened. When Laszlo opened his eyes again, they’d lost some of their fire. He looked dazed. “She’s… she’s Fae, isn’t she?”

Oh shit. This was… somehow worse? I couldn’t even effectively defend myself against Sabyr, much less another bloodthirsty vampire with a taste for Fae blood.

Sabyr stood his ground. “Leave now, Laszlo.” His voice had taken on a sharper edge, less relaxed and mild, more threatening. It seemed like he didn’t want to share any more than I wanted to be shared. “This doesn’t concern you.”

But it was too late. Laszlo was staring right at me, a hungry desperation etched into his scarred face. Our eyes met, and I knew deep in my bones that he wasn’t going anywhere. Now that he’d gotten a whiff, he wasn’t going to just let Sabyr have me.

Yay?

“Stand aside,” he said, his eyes glazed, his voice practically monotone. It was like he was in a trance. Like *I* was the one compelling *him*. Or my blood was, anyway.

“Get out!” Sabyr snapped.

And then everything happened very fast. Laszlo’s eyes narrowed with focus, and then he lunged for me. I screamed and stumbled back, tripping over my shackles and landing right on my ass as the two vampires crashed into each other. I needed to get the fuck out of here!

They moved so fast I could barely see them, but the sounds they made were awful. Deep, feral snarls that made the hair rise on the back of my neck, the sound of teeth tearing into flesh, of their superpowered, superfast bodies colliding with everything in the cabin. Yelps and growls and animal cries.

I’d never seen two vampires fight like this. Werewolves, sure. Thousands of times at this point, and that was practically Greyson and Xavier alone.

But this was unlike anything I’d ever seen before—which, I felt, was saying something. I’d seen werewolves and Fae and trolls and all sorts of magical creatures fight. I’d seen the primal savagery of werewolves fighting other werewolves. I’d seen werewolves fighting vampires. But I’d never seen two vampires fighting to kill. It was beautiful and gruesome and awesome and terrifying all at once.

Maybe it was a cliché, but I’d always thought of vampires as the most hyper-civilized of all the scary supernaturals. But there was nothing civilized about the way Laszlo gripped Sabyr by the throat and slammed him into the hardwood floor.

Realization struck me. All the time that Sabyr had been playing with me, trying to get me to let him into the house, trying to get me to follow him into the woods, even the way he’d drained me and taken me captive… he’d been being gentle. He’d been treating me with kid gloves. If he’d ever actually wanted to hurt me, he could have crushed my spine with half a thought.

The wood floor crunched and cracked from the force of the impact. *Oh, maybe I’ll get lucky and they’ll both stake themselves on a floorboard…*

Laszlo advanced on Sabyr, his fangs out. Was he going to rip out my captor’s throat? I certainly wouldn’t mind—

Sabyr lifted his legs at the last second and kicked Laszlo in the chest with both feet, sending the vampire flying across the cabin. Tables, lamps, and even the couch were upended with the speed and force of the flying vampire. Laszlo hit the mantle with a sickening crunch, and half of it crumbled to the floor.

My captor climbed to his feet. His clothes were mussed, and his face was swollen and bloodied. He was so intent on Laszlo, who looked somehow even worse, that he didn’t notice the bracelet slip off his wrist and fall to the floor. The clasp must have been smashed when Laszlo tackled him.

There was something about that bracelet, something I couldn’t quite place…

And then it hit me. It was just like the one Xavier had picked up from Raul at the Renaissance faire. After he had been turned to dust, the bracelet had been all that was left of him. The bracelet that had fallen off of Sabyr’s wrist—was it *exactly* the same as Raul’s?

Wait, was it a daylight item like Mikah had told me about? When I’d been actually listening to him.

I glanced over at Laszlo, who was wiping a glob of blood from his scarred cheek. He was wearing one of those bracelets too! And he’d come into the cabin after the sun rose. It had to be some kind of daylight protection charm. I crawled forward until I hit the end of my chain. I was just barely too short to reach it. I strained against my shackles, but still it was out of reach.

And then, with an echoing boom, round two began, and the bracelet was kicked closer to me in the struggle. I shoved it into my pocket—and then screamed when Laszlo lunged for me again. This time Sabyr wasn’t there to guard me. I scrambled back, just dodging the weight of his powerful body. He landed on my chain with a snarl, and then I felt it give way. He’d broken my shackles!

But my victory was short lived, because Laszlo was still coming for me. I threw a hand up and managed to gather just enough of my Fae power to blast him back into Sabyr, who grabbed Laszlo by the throat. And then, with a twist and a *crunch* that made my stomach heave, Sabyr ripped his fellow coven member’s head right off. Blood spurted from the neck stump, and the body fell to the floor. Sabyr still held the severed head tight.

My jaw dropped, and then I gagged. As it turned out, vampire blood smelled metallic and cloying. Like something decaying. Once this was said and done, I never wanted to revisit this smell ever again.

Sabyr, of course, drank the blood spurting from Laszlo’s head like it was some kind of grotesque water fountain, and then he tossed it aside. Blood stained his mouth, chin, and neck. I gagged again.

“I’m so sorry I had to kill Laszlo,” he mused. “It’s never a good thing to kill one of your own coven, but he *was* a prick. And he did try to take what’s mine.”

I trembled with fear and disgust, unsure if I was going to throw up, scream, or just pass out. Sabyr’s eyes were darkening to a hungry shade of red. He looked deranged, rabid. Like a demented clown. A vampiric version of the Joker.

Sabyr chuckled a bit. “He put up a good fight, though. It was quite draining. But that’s why you’re here isn’t it? I need some of that delicious Fae blood to replenish me.”

I swallowed roughly and backed up against the wall, near the window. At least I’d been freed from my shackles—and Sabyr no longer had his trusty daylight bracelet.

Sabyr’s fangs descended as he moved toward me.

I reached for the curtain, grasped it tightly, and yanked it off the curtain rod. Daylight poured in, and my captor hissed, shrinking back in horror.

I held up his bracelet with a smirk. “Missing something?”

**Episode 1158**

XAVIER

I clenched my fists as I felt my heart pound frantically in my chest, squeezing my eyes shut. I tried to do my best to calm myself. The deep breaths I was attempting to take were doing nothing to soothe the cold fear that seemed to have taken up permanent residence in my core.

Cali was still missing, and we were no closer to finding her. *I* was no closer to finding her.

I’d been searching for her all night, hoping to catch her scent. Instead all I’d found was her… I didn’t want to think about it; it only made the overwhelming panic bubble to the surface that much faster. What if Cali was dead? What if she was severely hurt? What if I never found her?

I felt the rare presence of tears in my eyes as the thought of losing Cali spurred my emotions into a frenzy. Though the lack of sleep was likely not helping matters.

I took a shuddering breath, forcing myself to regain control. I would be no use to Cali—or my pack—as a blubbering mess. I roughly wiped the tears away and quickly made my way back to the pack house.

As I edged closer, I could feel the exhaustion finally catching up to me. My eyelids felt heavy as my body ached with each step, every movement weighed down by the lack of sleep.

At the sight of movement within the pack house, a tiny flame of hope flared up inside me. I couldn’t help but hope that Cali was back, safe and sound in the pack house. I didn’t care if it meant I had searched fruitlessly all night for no reason, as long as it meant that Cali was back and safe.

I opened the door, my heart practically racing. My eyes widened in anticipation as I stepped into the room. But instead of Cali’s beautiful face, I was greeted by the somber, tired eyes of the pack—it was clear not a single one of them had gotten a wink of sleep either, too busy searching for Cali.

The urge to sink into despair was strong, but so was my need to put on a show of strength for the others. I may not be their Alpha in name, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t in spirit.

“I found Cali’s blood,” I told the others. I heard sharp intakes of breath at that. “But nothing else.”

“Where?” No surprise the first panicked shout that mirrored my own mood was from Greyson. Now was not the time for jealousy, not when I knew at the very least, he would move heaven and earth to get Cali back safe, and that was all I needed. “We’ll send scouts; I’ll lead them myself.”

I shifted my gaze to Greyson, noting how worn out he looked. His skin looked tired and pallid. His mouth was settled into a permanent frown, his furrowed brows creating deep creases in his face. His eyes were dull and flat, as if the very essence of his life had left with Cali.

I wondered if I looked the same.

“I’ve already searched all over,” I told Greyson. “But I couldn’t pick up her scent.”

A nagging thought popped into my head as I eyed Greyson curiously. “How come you didn’t pick up on Cali’s blood?” I asked, my voice nonchalant as I narrowed my eyes at him slightly.

Greyson looked away. “I didn’t come across it,” he mumbled.

I cocked my head, curious as to what had actually happened, but decided to let it go for now. We had much more important things at hand. I turned toward the others.

“If it *was* the vampire who lured her away,” I continued, “I wasn’t able to pick up on his scent, either.”

The room got loud as people talked over each other, arguing about what to do now.

“If Xavier found Cali’s blood, then that vampire must have hurt my daughter!” Tom cried out, apparently on the verge of hysteria.

I glanced at Tom. He was chewing on the edges of his fingers as he rocked back and forth on his heels. His deathly pale face made for a ghastly contrast with his bloodshot eyes.

I grimaced. Secretly, I was hoping the blood was from Cali’s old neck wound. I couldn’t allow myself to think otherwise.

I swore, if that fucking vampire even *touched* Cali, I would—

“If the vampire harms Cali any further,” I vowed, my voice low and intense, “I will destroy him and all of his coven.”

“Maybe we should regroup,” Rishika offered, her eyes glinting with bloodthirsty anger. “Instead of tracking Cali we move to Gregor’s coven. Find them and rip their heads off.”

“While that would be pleasurable,” I said, tipping my head toward Rishika in acknowledgement, “we need to find Cali first.”

Greyson paced the center of the room. “I agree,” he said, turning to address everyone. His voice took on an authoritative tone as he stared at each person, his cool grey eyes stormy. “Revenge can come later. But right now, getting Cali back is our number one priority.”

I felt myself bristle at Greyson’s tone. I knew Greyson was right, but I didn’t like that he was trying to assert his Alpha status.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, lifting my face toward the ceiling, trying to refocus.

What we needed was a plan, but I was finding it harder and harder to think rationally. For me, matters involving Cali tended to be driven more by my emotions.

My eyes flitted to Greyson, who was standing there with his arms crossed. His mouth was pressed into a flat line as his eyes took on a faraway look, like he was lost in thought.

I knew Greyson was probably just as emotionally torn as me, but maybe together we could think rationally.

I made my way to him, pulling him aside.

“We need to figure something out,” I said to him, my voice urgent. “And fast.”

Greyson immediately stiffened. “You think I don’t know that?” he snapped.

I held up my hands, taking a small step back. “Easy,” I said. “I’m not fighting with you.”

Greyson sighed, rubbing his hand across his face. “I’m sorry,” he said, dropping his hand to his side. “It’s been a rough night.” Greyson surveyed the room, taking in the worried faces and sleepless eyes. “For everyone,” he added.

I nodded. “Now, what can we do to find Cali?” I asked Greyson, peering into his eyes, hoping for some sort of answer.

Of course, I wanted to be the one who rescued her, but if Greyson could help make that happen, then I was willing to try anything.

Before Greyson could even open his mouth, we were interrupted by Orla. She was clearly emotionally on edge—her eyes were glassy, and her features were schooled into an expression of strained worry.

“Perhaps merely running off into the forest to track her down is the wrong way to go about this. If I could suggest a non-werewolf solution? I think I might be able to help find my daughter,” she said, her voice quivering slightly with unshed tears.

I wasn’t sure I could fathom a “non-werewolf solution”—my problems could almost always be solved with the right tracking, teeth, and claws. But right now I was willing to listen to any suggestions, and Cali would kill me if I dismissed her mother.

“What do you need?” I asked.

A few minutes later, Greyson, Orla, and I were standing around a fairy ring with Torin and Astrid. Tom was standing beside us, biting on his nails.

One by one, Orla and the other Fae linked hands and began chanting Cali’s name.

I looked around, not sure what was supposed to happen, but still hopeful that something would. I just wanted to find Cali. I wanted to know she was safe—I ached to hold her in my arms and never let her go. God, not knowing where she was and whether or not she was all right was fucking *killing* me.

As I surveyed our surroundings, I locked eyes with Greyson. As much as I hated to admit it, he seemed just as upset as I was about Cali. It was obvious that he cared about her, too.

I was yanked out of my thoughts by a sudden appearance of a wisp. I watched wide-eyed as it hovered above us, darting around—almost as if it was searching for something.

“There!” Tom shouted, pointing at it.

The wisp started to move away from us.

“We have to follow it,” Orla instructed. “It will lead us to Cali.”

That was all I needed to hear. I broke into a run, shifting as I went. In an instant, I was on four paws, with Greyson—also in wolf form—close by. We went bounding through the woods, right on the tail of the wisp.

I tried not to get my hopes up—when Cali had tried to use a fairy ring to find Artemis, it had failed horribly… I looked up at the wisp. But this had to work.

A wave of relief crashed into me as I was hit by Cali’s scent. She was here!

I mind linked with Greyson. *Do you smell her?*

Greyson turned toward me, his wolf eyes gleaming.

*Yes*, he replied.

All of a sudden, we both were pulled to a stop as the wisp slowed down. I stared at the creature, confused. Why did it stop?

Just then, the familiar metallic smell of blood filled my nose—Cali’s blood.

I followed the scent until I found a tree, smeared with her blood. My heart pounded as cold fear ran through me.

Were we too late?

**Episode 1159**

Sabyr shifted his red eyes from the bracelet to me. There was an almost regal aura about him as he stalked toward me, hands wanting to reach out for the bracelet again.

“Give that to me.”

But the moment his hand came into contact with the bright light of the sun, Sabyr immediately recoiled, baring his fangs at me in disdain.

I glanced at the door—it was my only way out, but the sunlight didn’t cover the entire distance. I knew the second I stepped away from the sunlight, I would be exposed and Sabyr wouldn’t hesitate to get me—and the bracelet.

Sabyr followed my gaze to the door, realizing what I was planning.

“If you even think about leaving here,” he said, his voice icy, “you’ll be captured by the other coven members.”

Sabyr pointed to Laszlo’s body, which was emitting smoke as the sun burned through his skin.

“There are more of him out there,” Sabyr continued, turning his voice sickly sweet. “But if you give that little trinket to me, I can protect you.”

I forced myself to look away from the corpse; the sight of it turned my stomach, and the last thing I needed was to throw up while that vampire was watching. *Wouldn’t make for a very intimidating threat, that’s for damn sure.*

As I stood frozen but protected underneath the sunlight, I wondered if the coven was going to blame me for Laszlo’s death. It would honestly be crazy if they did—I mean, I most definitely wasn’t capable of just *tearing someone’s head off.* They’d have enough sense to know that, right? But it wasn’t like these vamps had acted with much sense to begin with. Maybe Mikah was an anomaly in the vampire world.

I shook my head, refocusing on my current situation. Whether or not Gregor’s coven thought I was capable of beheading a vampire, I couldn’t stay here and spend eternity feeding Sabyr. I needed to find a way out, now.

Maybe I could make a run for the door? I squinted, gauging the distance. I doubted that I would make it out in time. I had seen how fast vampires were, and Sabyr—fueled by my Fae blood—was now even faster.

I glanced back at Sabyr. He could be bluffing about the other coven members, but if he wasn’t, I knew I would be in worse trouble. I mean, before Sabyr had ripped Laszlo’s head off, Laszlo had said that Gregor wanted me dead.

I let out a long breath. God, how the fuck was I going to get out of here?

I locked eyes with Sabyr, who was pacing around like a caged animal, trying to figure out how to get to me.

*Animal*…

My eyes widened as an idea slowly took form in my mind. I remembered how, when I was young and playing catch with my neighbor’s dog, we would fake the dog out by pretending to throw the ball. And the dog, not taking the time to notice whether the ball was actually there, would run off after it, as if it was thrown.

I glanced down at the bracelet. Could that work on Sabyr?

I took a deep breath. It was worth a shot.

Pasting an artificial smile on my face, I dangled the bracelet in front of Sabyr, making sure to remain within the safety of the sunlight.

“You want this?” I taunted, shaking the bracelet in front of him mockingly. Sabyr’s red eyes seemed to glow with anger and anticipation. “Then, here. Go get it!”

Winding my arm back, I pretended to throw the bracelet away from the door. Sabyr’s head whipped over to where he thought it was, and he proceeded to jump for it. *You’d think werewolves would be more susceptible to the bait-and-fetch routine.* Maybe I could test that… *Focus, Cali!*

As Sabyr dove away from me, I leapt for the door. I dashed through the area where there was no sunlight, too afraid to look behind me. I felt my heart beating erratically as nausea rolled through my abdomen. I was so close to the door… Almost there…

I jerked forward, stumbling on an unknown object that I hadn’t noticed. For a moment, I hovered in midair, my arms flailing as I fought for my balance. In the end, gravity won, causing me to fall to the ground—hard.

I winced, my knees aching from the impact. Behind me, I heard Sabyr scream, likely realizing I hadn’t actually thrown the bracelet.

I realized I’d probably just made a vampire very, very angry—and I was still on the ground, completely exposed.

Sheer panic propelled me forward as I scrambled to the doorway on my hands and knees. I felt Sabyr closing the distance between us, but just as he reached out to grab me, I was able to jump up into safety.

I stood there, my chest rising and falling heavily as a thin shaft of sunlight separated Sabyr and me. My hands trembled as cold relief swept through me. Holy hell, I couldn’t believe that had actually worked. I was by the door—and in one piece!

Sabyr stalked the length of the room, trying to find a way to get to me. However, he quickly realized he couldn’t go any further. Instead, he fixated his red eyes on me, giving me a deceptively innocent smile.

“You’ll be safer with me,” he crooned, desperately trying to convince me to stay with him. “The minute you walk out of the door, I won’t be able to protect you from Gregor.”

Sabyr tried, once again, to see if he could stomach the sunlight’s pain, dipping his toe forward. In an instant, he pulled back his foot as the sick smell of sizzling flesh filled the room.

“You heard Laszlo,” Sabyr continued. “Gregor will kill you when he finds you. I can prevent that from happening, but only if you stay here and do exactly as I say.”

I groaned inwardly, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. I didn’t have time for Sabyr’s overbearing bullshit—I just wished I had a stake to finish him off. It would make my life so much easier.

I surveyed the room, hoping there would be some sort of sharp and pointy wooden object. The ripped up and jagged floorboards made for a tantalizing idea, but I’d never be able to fully pry them off in time to make use of them as a weapon. I settled for flipping him off, taking immense glee when I was met with an angry hiss.

Without another word, I hustled out of the house, hell-bent on getting out of there. But before I made my way fully outside, I paused. The rest of the vampires from Gregor’s coven could be anywhere.

I twisted my head over my shoulder, looking back. Sabyr was pacing just beyond the doorway, out of reach of the sun, glaring at me, his eyes promising revenge. He reminded me very much of a caged tiger. But I was out here while he was still trapped in there.

Yes, Gregor’s coven was still a threat, but the alternative was being one very overdramatic vampire’s personal blood bag while I sat around waiting for a rescue. And that was not something I had time for.

I turned away from Sabyr, forcing myself to take a calming breath. *Don’t panic, Cali. You just need to think this through.*

As long as the sunlight had him trapped, Sabyr couldn’t get to me. And although I didn’t know which direction to go, the farther I got from Sabyr, the better. All he needed was for the sun to disappear, and he would be able to leap back into action and take me out.

Just then, a large cloud passed over the sun, eradicating the small shaft of sunlight that was keeping Sabyr trapped.

*Oh, you have* got *to be kidding me.*

I glanced back, my spine tingling with cold dread, already knowing what I was going to find. Sabyr was going to get Laszlo’s daylight bracelet.

I whipped my head back around and started running away from the house, other vampires be damned. I knew that within a couple of moments, Sabyr would be close behind me. Every second counted right now, could be the difference between life and death.

As I made my way through the woods, I considered whether or not I should run in a zig-zag pattern. Did that confuse vampires?

I let out a little squeal of surprise as I ducked, narrowly avoiding a branch to the face.

Well, then. It looked like that method wouldn’t work this time. There were too many trees, and I was bound to trip or run into one. I didn’t need to make things worse for myself.

My feet pounded against the ground as I ran. The trees became a blur around me as I tried to think about what to do. Should I grab a broken branch to use as a stake? Did I have enough Fae power to stop him now?

My breaths became loud and heavy as a metallic taste filled my mouth. I knew I couldn’t keep running forever, not with Sabyr close behind. Obviously, I didn’t have time to stop and break off a tree branch—but it had been a few hours since Sabyr had drunk my blood. Maybe I’d have enough power to stun him, like I had with Ava?

I skidded to a stop, spinning around. Almost immediately, Sabyr froze in place, looking pleased with my decision to stop running. He looked at me with smoldering eyes.

“Why don’t you just come back,” Sabyr purred, his voice taking on a sultry quality, “and we can forget all this nastiness?”

As Sabyr stared into my eyes, I started to feel that pull again. But this time, I was aware enough not to fall into his trap.

I shoved my palms out toward Sabyr, blasting him with my Fae magic. To my delight, Sabyr was slammed back and fell to the ground in a heap, seemingly unconscious, although how long that would last I had no idea.

“Ha!” I cried out smugly. “Take that, you fangy bastard!”

I pivoted around, intending to leave, but then I came into contact with a rock-hard chest. As I saw who I’d run into, my smug smile—and my heart—dropped.

*Gregor*.

**Episode 1160**

VIOLET

I blinked back the tears that threatened to spill over. Not wanting anyone to see, I tilted my head slightly forward in order to allow my hair to cover my face. I quickly wiped away the tears, taking silent breaths to calm my emotions. Charlie did not need the added guilt of my sobbing. He didn’t need to know how hurt I was by the notion of him going back to Minnesota alone.

I plastered a smile onto my face.

“Well,” I said, my voice soft. I tried hard to speak steadily, but I couldn’t help the slight quiver that seeped into my words. “If that’s what you’d like to do, then you should do it. I don’t want to stand between you and your family—not when you’ve had such a rough go of it recently.”

And it made sense that Charlie would want to go. I understood the importance of family. Losing so many of my own family members had shown me that. Even thinking about Lilac brought on a new wave of sorrow. *Keep it together, Violet.*

I looked up at Charlie, a sad smile on my face. I refused to be responsible for driving a wedge between Charlie and his family. Doing so wouldn’t make me a very good mate.

Charlie peered into my eyes, like he was searching for something.

“No,” he said after a couple moments, squeezing my hand. “I can tell that you’re upset, Violet. I don’t want to leave you.”

My mouth turned down into a frown as I thought back to what Iris had told me. *Charlie is a part of our family. But you’re not. And you never will be.*

*You never will be.* My eyes started watering again. I’d been starting to think of Charlie as my family, but that was just a foolish fantasy. His real family was back in Minnesota, and I would never be a part of it.

“You’re so sweet, Charlie,” I said, reaching out to cup his cheek. “But you should go back if that’s what you want.”

Charlie blew out a frustrated breath and leaned into my touch, stroking his thumb across my hand that rested against his cheek.

“I just don’t understand why my mother is insisting I come alone,” Charlie sighed, his brow furrowing. “After all, they know how important you are to me.”

I opened my mouth, then quickly closed it. I knew exactly why Iris wasn’t inviting me—she hated me, unfairly blaming me for Charlie becoming a werewolf. And, quite honestly? Iris would probably kill me, given half a chance.

I lifted my eyes to look into Charlie’s. Should I tell him what Iris had said? If I did, it would ruin whatever fraction of a relationship Charlie still had with his mother.

“I don’t know what to do,” Charlie groaned, releasing his grip on my hand. He roughly rubbed his face and released a heavy sigh. “I know you and I belong together, Violet,” Charlie said, his voice thick with emotion at the thought of leaving me behind. Suddenly, he dropped his hand, his eyes wide with an idea. “Maybe you can come to Minnesota, and we’ll just keep it a secret from my parents?”

He looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to say something.

*I hadn’t really thought of that.* I pursed my lips as I considered this. I glanced at Charlie, who now had seemingly permanent dark circles underneath his eyes from all of this drama. I had no problem with hiding from Iris, but I didn’t like the idea of putting Charlie in a situation where he’d basically be lying to his parents.

He was already practically walking on eggshells with them. I didn’t need to add another layer of difficulty to this whole situation. That just seemed wrong.

Plus, if Iris ever found out, she’d definitely blame me for it. And that would only make things worse. I didn’t much like the idea of my head being mounted on the wall of some hunter’s house.

Charlie glanced at his phone, doing a double take at the time. Without waiting for my response, he took my hand, leading me out of bed and toward the bathroom.

“We have to get going,” Charlie urged, shooing me to get ready. “We agreed to meet my parents for breakfast.” Charlie glanced back at me, giving me a small smile. “Maybe I can even convince them to let you come to Minnesota.”

I gave Charlie a stiff nod, then busied myself with getting ready for breakfast. I knew that Charlie didn’t stand a chance at changing his mother’s mind. I already knew that once Iris set her mind to something, she rarely deviated from it. And, in this case, Iris was dead set on the idea that I was only a hindrance to her son’s well-being. There was nothing Charlie could do about that.

I met Charlie by the door of our room, where he was waiting for me. I gathered the last of my things, then reached out to open the door. As I was about to leave the room, Charlie stopped me.

“You never told me what my mom said to you yesterday,” he said, unblinking. “When my dad and I were helping Marta.”

I paused, my hand frozen on the doorknob. Should I tell him the truth?

“Your mom thanked me for helping her son,” I lied, as I stared straight ahead, unable to meet his eyes as I opened the door and stepped out.

Charlie swept past me, grinning, as he let the door fall shut behind him.

“I knew she’d come around,” Charlie said, clearly thrilled with what I told him.

I could barely muster a smile in response.

We made our way outside, silent. When we got to the car, we found Marta asleep, sprawled across the back seat. Charlie unlocked the car, and I opened the door. Gently, I leaned over Marta’s seat and shook her awake.

Marta blinked rapidly, wiping the sleep from her eyes. She looked around for a couple moments, completely disoriented. As I waited for her to regain complete consciousness, I couldn’t help but notice how she still looked relatively put together, considering she’d slept in the car all night.

“What’s going on?” she asked, yawning.

“We’re going to meet Charlie’s parents for breakfast,” I said. “And you’re coming.”

At the mention of food, Marta became instantly wide awake and focused. She straightened in her seat, excited.

“Great,” Marta said, a smile on her face. “The vending machines are all busted, and I’m starving!”

Right on cue, Marta’s stomach let out an audible growl. She shrugged her shoulders a bit sheepishly. “See,” she exclaimed, “if I wait any longer to eat I’m going to become a ghost myself.”

I chuckled, unable to produce a full laugh—I was too preoccupied with the thought of seeing Iris again, to the point where my stomach felt queasy with anxiety.

“All right, buckle up,” I said. “We’re going to head out now.”

Marta obliged, putting on her seat belt. I joined Charlie in the front, settling in the passenger seat.

Once Charlie was satisfied that we’d both put on our seat belts, he put the car in reverse, backed out of the lot, and drove the rest of the way to the restaurant.

Upon our arrival, Marta hopped out before Charlie had even fully parked the car. She eagerly entered the restaurant, obviously beyond hungry. Quickly, Charlie and I exited the car and followed her.

Inside, we found Charlie’s parents already seated. Charlie made a beeline for them, but I held back for a quick moment, taking a couple deep breaths. I could get through this.

I made my way to the table, uncomfortably aware of the way Iris followed me with her eyes.

“Oh,” she said innocently, pasting a smile on her face. “I didn’t think you’d be joining us. What a pleasant surprise.”

It was clear that the lady was lying through her teeth. I shifted on my feet, unsure. Maybe coming here had been a mistake.

At his mother’s words, Charlie broke into a big grin.

“Of course I brought Violet along,” Charlie said happily, oblivious to the obvious iciness in his mother’s eyes. “We’re mates.”

I noticed Iris cringe a little, but I quickly looked away when she gave me a frosty look. Marta eagerly took a seat, opening up the menu to scour the options.

“What foods are popular now?” she wondered out loud, blissfully unaware of how strange her statement was. Oh, this wasn’t going well, was it? Marta’s eyes darted around the menu before surveying the room. Suddenly, her eyes went wide. “Pies! Look at all those pies.” She jumped up and ran to the display case, pressing her face against the glass in wonderment.

As we watched Marta visually undress the pies, there was an awkward, tense silence at the table. I started feeling nauseous underneath all the tension. “I’m going to go to the bathroom,” I mumbled, using it as a chance to escape. Then, without a backward glance, I pivoted around and hurried away.

Once I was inside, I sagged against the wall, trying to catch my breath. I closed my eyes briefly, trying to calm myself. I wanted to make this work. I wanted to let Charlie enjoy his family—but why was it so hard? After everything I had faced—Silas, vampires, the Manus Cruentae, poltergeists—why was my mate’s mother so intimidating?

She was just one woman.

Yeah, that’s right, I’d faced worse and come out the other side. And I didn’t even have my mate for those struggles yet!

She was just one woman who I could face—not only for my mate, but for myself.

Keeping my head held high, I pushed away from the wall, finding some resolve. Just as I was about to exit the bathroom, the door opened, revealing Iris. She glared at me, a cold look on her face.

“We need to talk,” she said, her voice icy and even.

**Episode 1161**

I tried to jump back to escape Gregor’s reach, but he had a firm grip on me. Struggling, I swung my arm back, hoping to catch him off guard, maybe scratch out an eye or at the very least get him very, very annoyed. No chance of that; this was an old vampire I was dealing with.

Releasing a muffled scream of frustration, I lifted my palms toward him, ready to blast him with my Fae power. But as I tried to rally the force within me, my arms started trembling as a weakness I had never felt before seeped into my bones. Whatever energy had been building in my palms fizzled into nothingness.

I must’ve used up all my powers on Sabyr, which wasn’t that surprising. I mean, I had been drained of my blood and kept awake for a long time. On top of that, I hadn’t eaten anything in *hours*.

“So,” Gregor said, giving me a sickly-sweet smile. “The rumors *are* true. You’re here.”

Gregor’s grip on me tightened to an almost painful degree. He leaned in close, making sure I could see the tips of his fangs as his red eyes bored into mine. “The very Fae who murdered my brother with a lance.” His every word was laced with venom.

I squirmed, trying to keep myself as far away from him as possible. *God, ever heard of personal space?*

“Your brother tried to kill my mate!” I cried out. “I was only protecting him.”

Gregor leaned back, laughing. “Mates?” he snorted. “What a stupid, antiquated concept.”

His laughing suddenly ceased as he narrowed his eyes at me. “Besides, it’s no excuse. If I had succeeded in killing your pathetic mate, wouldn’t you demand vengeance?”

Even if he had a point, I’d still prefer not dying tonight.

“Vampires and werewolves have been fighting for centuries,” Gregor said, watching me carefully, “and it’s understood that there will be casualties on both sides. But when you killed Raul, you made it personal.”

I opened my mouth to speak but quickly shut it again when Gregor tightened his grip on me and glared.

“Raul’s been by my side for over two hundred and fifty years,” Gregor added, enunciating and emphasizing each word. “*Two hundred and* *fifty.* We were there during the third uprising. He saved me from a coven of witches. And you…” Once again, Gregor leaned close, baring his fangs at me as his eyes glowed red with hatred. “You took him from me,” he finished.

What did he want me to say? Maybe his brother shouldn’t have gone after me and mine if he had wanted to stay alive.

“I-It was kind of an accident!” I stammered, looking up at him with pleading eyes. He had said it himself. This was a war. Casualties were inevitable. Maybe if I explained to him what actually happened, he would let me go…

“It’s like this,” I rambled, my nervousness at potentially being killed at any moment (and my need to prove my innocence) making for a very messy explanation. “Honestly, up until that point, I didn’t even know vampires existed! It wasn’t like I went hunting for him—Raul, I mean. Really, I didn’t even mean to kill anyone—”

Gregor held up his hand, closing his eyes in barely contained frustration.

“Stop,” he bit out, his nostrils flaring. “Your ignorance only makes me despise you even more.” Gregor opened his eyes again, shaking his head in obvious disgust. “My brother should have died as a hero, not at the hands of an amateur like you.”

I quickly shut my mouth and stared at Gregor as he gave me a once-over, looking at me from top to bottom.

“Why were you even foolish enough to risk coming here?” Gregor asked with narrowed eyes.

“I didn’t come here,” I explained, partly miffed that he would even think I was that stupid. “I was brought here.” I gestured behind him. “Sabyr brought me,” I clarified.

Gregor twisted his head around, glancing at Sabyr with a raised eyebrow. “Oh, is that so?”

I noticed the displeased look on Gregor’s face, causing me to suddenly remember what Laszlo had said—he’d talked about how Gregor would be angry to find out Sabyr had been keeping me for himself. Maybe I could spin parts of the truth of what Sabyr had done, get him and Gregor to argue. That way, I could cause a distraction and escape—or at least earn some time to recover enough strength to use my magic.

“He’s been using me as his own personal drinking fountain,” I added quickly, feigning ignorant innocence. Hopefully this would work to my advantage.

Sabyr chuckled uneasily. “Don’t listen to her,” he said nervously, clearly trying to come up with a plausible excuse. “I was saving her for you—as a surprise!”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I wondered if murdering one of the coven had also been part of Sabyr’s little “surprise.”

Gregor narrowed his eyes, loosening his grip on me slightly.

“Is this true?” Gregor asked, speaking to no one in particular. He still seemed unsure about who was telling the truth.

“He ripped Laszlo’s head off and drank from it,” I said, hopefully sealing Sabyr’s fate—and securing my freedom. I made a disgusted face. “So gross.”

Gregor threw me onto the ground, turning on Sabyr with hateful eyes. *Bingo!*

“Did you kill Laszlo?” Gregor asked, venom dripping from his words.

“I… H-How could you listen to her?” Sabyr spluttered, making excuses. “The girl is a liar! I would never kill one of our own. It was Laszlo who bit Cali—look at her wound!—and her Fae blood drove him mad.” Clearly thinking he was onto something, Sabyr continued with his ridiculous story. “I tried to stop him because I knew you wanted to kill her yourself!”

Gregor stalked closer to Sabyr, his hands curling into strained fists.

“You’re lying, Sabyr,” Gregor hissed.

“I’m not!” Sabyr cried out. “I swear!”

As they continued their argument, I slowly backed away, being careful not to make too much noise or draw attention to myself. I couldn’t believe that had actually worked, but I was proud of myself for orchestrating their little tiff—especially since it meant that Sabyr would get what he deserved.

Hopefully they wouldn’t notice me. As I edged farther and farther away from them, I heard their argument escalate as their voices became louder, interspersed with snarls.

“You two!” Gregor bellowed at the other vampires who were present. “Grab Sabyr and hold him!”

As the vampires advanced on Sabyr, he went on the offensive, hissing and scratching. A struggle ensued as the vampires attempted to capture Sabyr.

Taking advantage of everyone’s preoccupation with Sabyr, I started running away as fast as I could.

“She’s getting away!” I heard someone call from behind me, and all the vampires shouted in surprise at my sudden departure.

I knew they wouldn’t *not* notice me for long. I considered trying to blast them back to buy myself some time, but I quickly decided against it. Even if I could muster the strength—which in itself wasn’t likely, since I was still running on no sleep, reduced blood, and an empty stomach—I’d probably only be able to do it once, maybe twice.

My only option was to run, try my best not to pass out, and hope for a miracle. I felt my lungs burn as the uneven terrain of the woods caused my knees to ache at the varied impact. How long could I keep going like this? They were bound to catch up at some point.

And when they did, what would I do? I mean, maybe I’d be able to stake *one* of them—but a whole coven? Not likely.

For a brief moment, my heart ached as I wished for Xavier or Greyson. Beyond just missing them, I had seen them fight vampires—Gregor wouldn’t have stood a chance.

God, Greyson and Xavier were probably going insane looking for me. I grimaced as I thought back to how I’d gotten myself into this mess. Even though I knew Sabyr had tricked me into coming here, I couldn’t help but feel ashamed that I’d fallen for his false charm in the first place.

But now wasn’t the time to beat myself up over it. I had to focus on getting out of here in one piece.

I tucked my elbows in, pushing myself to go faster. I was running on sheer adrenaline, but then I tripped and fell hard, knocking the wind out of myself.

Dazed, I rolled onto my back, groaning and gasping for air. Through the haze that had taken up my mind, I saw Gregor and the others closing in. I tried to muster some Fae power, but I had nothing left. I was too weak.

I dragged myself upright, wrenching myself onto my knees. I wasn’t going to go down without a fight— I would use my fists if I had to.

Just as I lifted my clenched fists up, ready to face them, a loud snarl filled the woods. Suddenly, a werewolf leapt in front of me. Relief burned through me—my miracle had arrived!

But then, instead of facing off against the vampires, the wolf turned to me and growled.

Any hope of a rescue died instantly as my heart sank.

The wolf bearing her fangs at me was not my packmate. It was Ava.

**Episode 1162**

Why did crap like this always have to happen to me?

I had two options: stick around and be killed by vampires… or run right into my mate’s crazy ex who almost certainly also wants me dead.

Couldn’t I ever be faced with normal choices for once? Like chocolate or vanilla ice cream? Or which shoes I wanted to wear for a nice, normal night out that didn’t include being chased by a bunch of vampires?

As I stared at Ava’s growling wolf, I couldn’t help but remember my first big fights with werewolves—wolf-bears, I used to call them. I remembered how bewildered and overwhelmed I’d been; how scary it had been to face them, with their snarling jaws and sharp claws. Oh, and who could forget about the first time I’d been kidnapped by Nolan? Not me, that’s for sure.

And now his sister was about to attack me.

I fisted a handful of dirt, the grainy pieces filling the space under my nails. Maybe Ava wanted to kill me, but I was sure going to make it damn difficult for her. With a roar, I threw the dirt in Ava’s face, hoping it would deter her, somehow.

Ava snarled at me, shaking off the dirt, then turned to face the vampires. Wait, what? What was happening? Why wasn’t she attacking?

Gregor, who had stopped in his tracks at Ava’s arrival, spurred into action, calling on his coven to move with him.

“Kill the werewolf!” Gregor screamed, his red eyes wide and frantic. “But don’t harm the Fae!”

Immediately, Gregor’s coven leapt into action, lunging for Ava. Ava, who was too fast for them, dodged out of the way. A struggle ensued as Ava and a vampire grappled for the upper hand, snarling, swiping, and snapping at each other.

In the end, Ava managed to bite the vampire and hurl him into the others, knocking them down like bowling pins.

With the vampires temporarily out of commission, I shakily got to my feet, ready to make a break for it. But before I could even take a step away from the scene, Ava leapt in front of me, lowering her head.

For a split second, I looked at Ava, completely confused. Then, it dawned on me what she wanted me to do; Ava wanted me to climb onto her back so we could get out of here. Was she out of her mind? Was I for walking over to her?

I took a tentative step forward, hesitating for a heartbeat. Then I saw the vampires getting up, and I jerked into action. I jumped onto Ava’s back, nearly falling off as she broke into a run.

It took me a couple of moments to get a secure grip on Ava’s neck. She carried me, full speed, through the woods.

I winced as a branch hit me across the face and resisted the urge to rub the spot that had been hit. Doing so would’ve meant losing my balance and falling off Ava.

*Ouch!* Another object flew into my face. For a second, I wondered whether Ava was aiming for the obstacles on purpose. Sure, maybe she was saving my life, but I wouldn’t put it past her to have a little fun with it—at my expense, of course.

After a good couple of miles, Ava started slowing down as we approached a stream. The water was rushing by full speed, but Ava gingerly picked her way across. Once we were on the other side of the stream, Ava came to a complete stop.

My brow furrowed in confusion—Ava’s sudden stop had thrown me off.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. I pointed behind myself. “They’re still coming, you know,” I reminded Ava as I slid off her back.

Once my feet touched the ground and I had let go of her fur, Ava shifted back to human. In seconds, where there had once been a wolf stood Ava—in her fully naked glory. Oh lord. I covered my eyes; there were some things I did not need to see.

From between my fingers I could see her remove a vial from a chain around her neck, ignoring me.

I averted my eyes, still put off by how werewolves had no freaking sense of privacy. Although, before I looked away, I couldn’t help but notice how flawless Ava’s body was. A twinge of jealousy ran through me—there wasn’t a single stretch mark or cluster of cellulite on her.

Life honestly wasn’t fair sometimes. Focusing on her hands and face, I watched as Ava poured a liquid from the vial onto the ground in a long, thin line.

“What are you doing?” I asked, now even more perplexed.

Apparently satisfied with how the line looked, Ava capped the bottle in her hand, putting it back around her neck.

“I’m using repellent to keep them away,” she said.

“Like mosquito repellent for vampires?” I pressed. “That’s a thing?”

Ava sighed, rolling her eyes. “I don’t have time to explain,” she said, turning away from me. “We have to go.”

She shifted back into her wolf form, lowering her head for me to climb on again. As I settled onto her back, I wondered why Ava was doing this. Why was she risking her life for me?

I swallowed a groan as my body rocked with another spasm of pain. My head was spinning, every fiber of my very being ached with exhaustion, and I needed food—and rest. I was honestly in no state to think deeply about Ava’s motives, or anything else.

Hell, I was barely able to hold onto Ava.

I jerked back as she took off again, gripping her tightly, fighting to remain on her back.

As we bounded through the woods, I tried my best to make sense of everything. I mean, Ava should’ve been the last person to help me. And I was pretty sure, if the tables were turned, I wouldn’t go out of my way to help her. Especially since the thought of Ava being sucked dry by a vampire was, oddly enough, somehow soothing to me. I imagined her annoyingly perfect body become paler and paler, as the very essence of her body was drained away…

I shook my head in disgust, suddenly filled with shame. Ava was here, helping me. If anything, I should be grateful to her. I just hoped I didn’t owe her anything in return, like with witches.

I swallowed a sigh as I was greeted by another bout of doubt. I knew I would always find it really hard to trust Ava—she’d just done too much to harm me and my loved ones. Not just physically, but emotionally.

But for now, I was grateful to her for saving my life.

After what felt like a long time, Ava stopped again. I wasn’t sure how long we’d been traveling, but I figured Ava probably needed the rest. I knew it couldn’t be easy to carry a clumsy, awkward, human-Fae hybrid on your back.

I crawled down from her back, barely able to stand.

But I knew Ava wasn’t the type to stop just because she was tired—so why had we stopped this time?

She shifted back, once again greeting me with her naked body. My mouth flattened into a thin line. I wished she could put on some clothes. I found it immensely uncomfortable to talk with her when she was standing there butt-naked.

I focused on Ava’s eyes.

“Why’d you help me?” Probably the world’s stupidest question, but I had to know.

Before she could answer, I suddenly heard Xavier’s voice in my head—*Cali!*

I turned around just as Xavier, Greyson, and the others burst through the trees. I nearly cried at the sight, the events of the past few hours finally hitting me full force.

Xavier’s wolf glanced at Ava then back to me before he shifted back to human. Greyson shifted back as well. Together, the two of them rushed up to me, their worried eyes and haggard faces filled with relief at the sight of me. They rushed me so fast I barely had time to blush at the sight of their unclothed bodies.

I sagged into their touch, filled with relief as my two mates embraced me.

“Where were you?” Xavier asked, tipping my head back to look at the wound on my neck.

“Are you okay?” Greyson demanded as he examined every inch of my body, searching for bruises and cuts.

“Are you hurt?”

“Did they do anything to you?”

Their questions came at me rapidly, leaving me nearly unable to answer any of them. Mrs. Smith pushed past them and came to examine the bite. As she did, I saw my mother—who’d been riding Rishika—run up to me.

I twisted away from Mrs. Smith to meet my mom, who kissed me softly, her tears staining my face.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” she asked, her voice cracking with emotion. “Did they hurt you?”

I was still trying to wrap my head around the last twenty-four hours. I didn’t feel hurt, but honestly, I was very much in a state of shock. If there were injuries, Xavier and Greyson would probably scream about it faster than I would feel it. There was only one thing I could say right now.

“Ava did it,” I said, my voice dry and scratchy. “She rescued me.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “Ava?”

I knew Xavier was thinking the same thing I was—why would Ava risk her life to save me?

But thank god she had.

I thought Xavier would be grateful to her. But instead, he marched up to her, glaring.

“We looked all over for Cali, and none of us could scent her,” he growled, suspicion lacing his tone. “So, tell me—how’d *you* know where she was?”

**Episode 1163**

GREYSON

There weren’t words to describe how grateful I was to have Cali back at my side. Moments ago I’d been exhausted, but now I felt like I’d been hit by a lightning bolt of energy and vitality.

She was all right, which meant I could breathe again. Living without her was like doing everything with a hand tied behind my back, or while holding my breath. All I could feel was the absence. It weighed me down.

But she made me strong.

As I held her in my arms, I looked her over carefully. My blood boiled at the thought of that bloodsucker getting his fangs in her, but I wanted to make sure there wasn’t any other damage.

Mostly, she just looked tired. I’d take exhausted Cali over missing Cali any day of the week.

“Are you okay?” I murmured in her ear. “Did he hurt you?”

Cali sighed, looking between Xavier and me like she was bracing herself to give us bad news. She knew us well. The idea that anything had hurt her set my teeth on edge. I knew it was the same for Xavier.

“One of the vampires drank from me a little,” she admitted. “And I’m tired. I haven’t eaten or slept since I last saw you guys, but… I’m okay. Thanks to Ava.” She gave Ava a small nod, but I could sense her suspicions even through her gratitude.

Meanwhile, Xavier still had Ava by the elbow like he was afraid she’d tear off into the forest and never be seen again. He looked at her, both awestruck and furious—like he didn’t know whether to thank her or rip her throat out for what she’d done. I didn’t blame him.

I knew there wasn’t much love lost between Cali and Ava—or Xavier and Ava, for that matter. Hell, I wasn’t exactly fond of her. After all, Ava had impersonated Cali and had nearly torn the pack apart with her deception. I knew it horrified Cali to know that Xavier and I had both been with her. That we’d been fooled, even though we were the people who were supposed to love her the most.

It had been a betrayal on all sides.

But Cali was clearly grateful to Ava for the save, which meant I was as well. It didn’t mean we were all suddenly best friends, but…

“That’s good,” I replied with a nod. “Surprising, but good. Right?”

“Yeah.” Cali nodded. “I honestly have no idea why she did it.”

We both looked over at Xavier and Ava, who were arguing a safe distance away, their voices low and angry. I decided to let my brother deal with his ex-mate. That was more drama than I was interested in wading into.

“Do you think she’s turned over a new leaf?” Cali asked me, confusion and hope mingling in her voice. She always wanted to see the best in people, no matter what they’d done. It wasn’t as though Cali was jumping for joy at the thought of Ava’s redemption, but that she had room in her heart for it… Well, it was just another reason to love her.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, answering her question after a bit too long a pause. “But whatever her motives, it doesn’t matter. You’re back, safe and sound. And I have half a mind not to let you out of my sight ever again.”

I pulled her to my chest, wrapping her up in a bear hug—or a wolf-bear hug, as she might have called it once upon a time. Cali went limp in my arms, like she was just too tired to do anything other than be held. I loved the feel of her against me. Of the trust and the peace that flowed between us when we were like this. And, most of all, I loved the familiarity of it. The ritual. This was safe for both of us.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“I really am just tired,” she assured me.

“Then I’m going to bring you home,” I told her, before turning to the pack and calling out, “Back to the pack house, all right? The vampires are probably out hunting. We’ll be better off at the house, where we’re together as a unit.”

I scooped Cali up in my arms, and she shut her eyes and curled into my chest. She was only really half-awake.

I reveled at the feeling of my returned strength. It felt good to be able to trust myself.

Of course, the glare I got from Xavier for being the one to carry Cali put a bit of a damper on things. But still, it was pretty great.

As we walked back toward the pack house, Cali’s lashes fluttered until she lazily opened her eyes and looked up at me, a dreamy smile on her face.

“Thanks,” she mumbled shyly. “You know you’ve been naked this entire time, right?” She gave me a tired smile.

I hoisted her up a little higher, so she could rest her head against my neck. “Had to give you something to be grateful to come home to.” I didn’t feel much like joking around, but the sound of her laughter was worth it in that moment.

As her breath tickled my throat, I was hit by the memory of the dream I’d just had. The one with Cali and Maren. The one that would probably make Cali burst into flames of jealousy, if she ever found out about it.

But it was a dream. Just a dream. Nothing to feel ashamed of, just a jumble of subconscious images and impulses.

This was reality—Cali in my arms, warm and alive and safe. The only thing I had to regret was that I wasn’t the one who’d found her. That I’d been too worn out to keep looking for her.

But luckily, Ava had found her. I told myself I’d talk to Xavier about what to do with her later. But I was glad that Xavier was handling it for now.

I could say a lot of shitty things about the guy, but he wasn’t stupid. If Ava was up to something—if she had ulterior motives for saving Cali—I trusted Xavier to figure it out. For now, at least. I could focus on Cali. On making sure she was cared for.

“You hungry, sleepy?” I teased softly, only to look down and realize she’d fallen asleep against my shoulder.

I smiled down at her. She looked so perfect. Right now, she belonged to me. I would be the one to look after her.

Orla held the pack house door open for me, and I paused so she could get a look at her daughter.

“How is she?” she asked, concerned.

“I think she just needs some rest,” I told her.

“Good.” Orla gave me a tight smile as she joined me inside. “Thank you for carrying her, but… I have to tell you, I’m still very concerned. Things could have turned out very differently. We were so lucky Ava found her. If she hadn’t—”

She cut herself off, like she couldn’t even let herself *think* about the alternative. And I didn’t blame her. It wasn’t something I wanted to dwell on either.

“Greyson.” Orla looked up at me, her expression stern even though I was nearly a foot taller than her. “Do you really believe Cali is safer here than in Minnesota?”

I hesitated. I respected Orla. I knew that everything she did was out of love and care for Cali—a love that we shared. But I knew the answer she wanted to hear, and it wasn’t the one I was going to give her.

“We both want what’s best for her,” I started, wanting to establish some common ground. “And I respect that you’re looking out for her. But there are dangers everywhere, and moving Cali away just means moving her from one set of them to another. And you and I both know your daughter has a thing for finding danger.”

Orla huffed a small laugh. “It seems to be a natural instinct for her,” she admitted with a watery smile.

“But if she stays here, she’s with the pack,” I reasoned. “*My* pack. We can look after her. Make sure she’s protected from it all.”

“I’m her mother,” Orla reminded me firmly. “And a Fae. Don’t you think I can look after her?”

I took a breath, wanting to give myself time to answer. Because honestly, my first instinct was to remind her that she was the one who had kept Cali in the dark about her Fae ancestry for twenty years. But that wouldn’t help me get her blessing.

And Cali would want her blessing. I could feel Cali breathing easy against my chest, the steady rise and fall of her chest giving me clarity and keeping me grounded.

“I have no doubt that you can look after her,” I told Orla. “But maybe we should give Cali some say in her life? She’s done pretty well so far.”

“But she’s—”

“Orla,” I said, cutting her off. “I swear to you, I will protect her with my life. But for now, let’s just let her rest.”

“All right.” Orla nodded, crossing her arms over her chest. I could tell she was still feeling defensive, but I knew she wanted what was best for Cali, which put us on the same side.

I walked Cali up the stairs and to her bedroom and laid her down gently on the bed. I took off her shoes and started to tuck her in, wanting her to feel safe and snug in bed. When I brushed her hair aside, I caught a glimpse of her wound.

It was healing but dirty. It needed cleaning.

I padded over to my room where I was finally able to snag a set of clothes. Pulling on a shirt and pants, I made my way over to the bathroom, careful not to be too loud, and grabbed a first aid kit.

I returned to her side, kneeling at the edge of the bed so I could clean and dress the wound as quickly and quietly as possible.

But just as I was pressing the bandage into place, Cali stirred.

Her eyes snapped open, and her lips parted in surprise. She sighed, like she was relieved to see me. And before I could say anything, she grabbed me and pulled me into a kiss.

**Episode 1164**

After a moment of bewildered hesitation, Greyson cupped my cheek and tilted my head back so he could cover my lips with his as he slanted his mouth across mine.

I kissed him back lazily, my whole body humming pleasantly from his touch.

These were sleepy, buzzy, half-awake kisses. I felt drunk on the warmth of his touch. He knelt over me, his heat blanketing me like… Well, like a blanket.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, clinging to him with what little strength I had left. I felt desperate to not just take what Greyson was giving me, but to give something back. To let him know he was wanted.

He cradled my face so gently in his hands, rubbing at my cheekbones with his calloused thumbs. I sighed into his mouth, thrilled to be here with him. I could feel how tired he was, but this was celebratory. A sigh of relief in kiss form.

We were both going to be okay.

A moan of discomfort slid out of my mouth when I craned my neck to chase his lips. Pain rippled out from my bite, hot and sharp, and I let out a hiss through my clenched teeth.

“Cali.” Greyson looked down at me, worried.

“The bite might still hurt,” I admitted with a wince. “Just a little.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, nervous to be stopping our make-out session so I could remind him how fragile I was. How breakable. Despite what everyone thought, I wasn’t obsessed with endangering myself. And I wasn’t made of glass, either. I was just not invulnerable. And around werewolves, that made me different.

Sometimes I hated being different.

Greyson looked down at me, fondness and concern in his eyes. No worry, no annoyance, just warmth.

“Why don’t I finish cleaning it up?” he asked softly.

“Can’t really say no to an offer like that,” I admitted, feeling shy again. Being kissed was one thing, but being taken care of was something else entirely. I felt vulnerable and breakable, but without any guilt or shame. I was just ready to be cared for.

And, honestly, sometimes that was all I wanted.

I let myself relax and go boneless against the pillows as I watched Greyson. His huge hands—usually more comfortable curled into fists—spread a thin layer of antiseptic across my skin. I shivered at his touch, goosebumps covering my arms.

I looked away, overwhelmed by how tenderly he was touching me. I caught sight of my window and felt a jab of remorse. I reached for his hand as he smoothed the bandage over my throat and covered it with my own.

“I didn’t mean to do it, you know?” I meant it as a statement, but it came out a question.

“To do what?” Greyson asked, tilting my chin so I had no choice but to look up at him.

“To leave,” I choked out, finding it hard to speak when he was looking at me like that. “To run off with Sabyr. I didn’t want to do it, but I couldn’t help myself. He was in my head.”

Greyson pressed a finger to my lips, silencing me.

“You don’t need to apologize, love,” he murmured. “You were under his influence. Vampire venom is powerful. Especially on Fae, it seems. And besides, if anyone should apologize, it should be me.”

“Why would you be sorry?” I asked. I wanted to reach up and smooth out the frown lines in his forehead. “I don’t understand.”

“Cali, I…” He looked down at his hands, almost like he couldn’t bear to say the words. “I failed you. I searched all night for you. I should have found you. I should have kept looking. Nothing should have been able to stop me, but I—”

I tangled my hands in his hair and pulled him close, pressing my lips to his in a gentle kiss. Even with my eyes closed, I could see the pain in his eyes as he’d confessed this to me. I wanted to take that hurt away.

Because how could I ever doubt that he wanted to keep me safe?

He pulled back, looking bewildered. His lips looked bruised and shiny from our kissing. I wanted more, but I knew I had to explain how I felt to him first. To let him know how things looked from my perspective.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I insisted, my voice thick with emotion. “I am so grateful that you looked for me. Resting when you were beyond exhausted is not the same as giving up. Because you’re Greyson Evers, and you don’t give up. You were on your way to me when I ran into you with Ava. You would have found me if she hadn’t. I know it.”

Greyson beamed down at me, his grey eyes twinkling. My breath hitched as I returned his gaze. This moment felt perfect. Like nothing could possibly taint it.

“You always think the best of everyone, don’t you?” Greyson mused, stroking the unmarred side of my neck with the backs of his knuckles and sending shivers down my spine.

I shook my head, looking up at him coyly through my lashes.

“I’m not sure I think the best of *everyone* all the time,” I replied, with what I hoped was a wicked grin. “If I could have, I would have staked every single one of those vampires and made a celebratory sand castle out of their ashes.” Greyson’s eyes went wide in surprise, and I wondered if I’d gone too far. “Or something less viciously morbid and freaky?” I tacked on belatedly.

But Greyson just laughed.

“Maybe I like you vicious,” he whispered before planting a kiss on my nose, then ducking down to kiss the bandage on my throat.

I wanted to kiss him again so badly. And based on the way he looked down at me, his eyes smoldering, I was pretty sure he felt the same way.

But before I could lunge for him, there was a knock on my door.

“Hey.” Artemis poked her head through the door, effectively ruining the moment. “I heard you were back!”

Greyson sat up, and I felt myself frown at the loss of his warmth. He brushed a few stray hairs out of my eyes, and his gaze told me everything I needed to know. We’d pick this up later.

“I should go, anyway,” he said. “I have a few things I need to check on. The rest of the pack was rattled by the vampires; I should make sure everyone is safe.”

He looked back at me and, spying my pout, gave me a parting wink before he pushed himself off the bed and headed out the door.

Artemis’s eyes zeroed in on the bandage on my throat and I saw her frown sympathetically. Earlier in our relationship, she might have preached to me about a warrior’s pain and told me to “stop mewling like a newborn.” But things were different now.

“That doesn’t look so good,” she commented, sitting down next to me on the bed.

“It looked a lot worse when there were fangs attached,” I joked, letting my head rest on her shoulder for a moment. But Artemis didn’t relax into my touch. She just sat there stiffly. I wondered if she was upset about the Orb. Or maybe she was still worked up about my disappearance.

“I’m really glad to see you,” I told her, turning to look at her so she could see the truth of it on my face. “It’s nice to be with family right now.”

“You mean Tom and Orla?” Artemis asked, an edge to her voice that surprised me.

“Dad—*Tom* might not be your father,” I said carefully, worried about my sister’s foul mood, “but he loves you like he is. And Orla is your mom. *Our* mom. That makes us family.”

“You say that,” Artemis responded, bristling, “but don’t forget, I lived most of my life not knowing that my mother was even *alive.* And let’s be honest—during all that time I was alone in the Fae world, I didn’t have a single person looking after me. But you, on the other hand…”

Artemis barked out a humorless laugh. I flinched at the sound, surprised by angry she sounded.

“If you disappear even for a minute,” she said with a sneer, “all hell breaks loose. The entire pack has to go out and look for their precious Cali.”

That stung; the venom in her tone took me completely by surprised. I suppose the whole pack had mobilized the go look for me, but we’d have done that for anyone. That’s just how the pack operated. Everyone had been out searching… everyone, except for Artemis.

“I didn’t ask them to look for me,” I told her. “It’s just—it’s what packs do. And why are you being so mean? Did I do something?”

“Is it really that mean to point out the reality of our very different lives?” Artemis snapped. “Because from where I stand, I’m just telling the truth, and you can’t handle it. Because you can’t handle *anything*.”

She practically spat the last word, and I found myself recoiling like I’d just been slapped. But Artemis wasn’t done.

“Sometimes I wish you didn’t exist,” she continued, fuming. “Why couldn’t Orla have just stayed in the Fae world with my father?”

**Episode 1165**

ARTEMIS

I watched Cali’s face crumple at my words, and I knew my arrows had found their mark.

I could tell I had hurt her. Deeply. I just didn’t care. I knew I should feel bad for saying all this. For telling my sister that I wished she’d *never existed.* But the anger inside me was blazing like a wildfire, and I just wanted everything to burn.

And it wasn’t like I didn’t have the truth on my side. I was right. Everything always had to be about Cali. Were twenty years of her parents’ love and affection, of being the center of their universe, not enough for her? She had to get an entire pack to obsess over her, too? And that wasn’t even counting the fact that she had two guys fighting over her while she still refused to choose.

“You have *everything*,” I spat at her. “What have I got?”

Every word was another punch, and if there was one thing I knew I was good at, it was wounding an enemy. I’d always been a master of fighting with my fists, but words could hurt too. And I was glad to know I still had my killer instinct. It felt satisfying to see Cali like this and to know that I’d done it. I fought down the smallest twinge of my own discomfort at the look in her eyes. This was a long time coming.

“You have me,” she insisted. “You have our mom. So when are you going to stop denying it and accept that you’re loved now? You’re part of a family. You’re the only one who thinks you’re alone.”

How dare she? I didn’t want to think on family, friends, or pack. It was easier to hit first before waiting to be taken by a surprise attack. And I wasn’t going to wait around to be left behind again. In the end I was always alone. I was no one’s friend, packmate, or sister.

*Even if you desperately want to be…*

But why did that thought fill me with even more anger?

“Artemis.” Cali got off the bed, like she needed to put some distance between us. “I know you feel responsible for what happened with the Orb, but—”

“Seriously?” I cried, leaping out of bed as well. “Are you really going to rub that in my face too? Yes, I lost the stupid Orb! There! I said it! I thought I could handle it on my own, and I couldn’t. Are you happy?”

Cali looked stricken. “Of course I’m not happy,” she told me, her voice sounding small and choked. “But I don’t blame you. I would never do that.”

She dragged a hand down her face, looking lost for words.

“Artemis.” She looked at me, pleading. “I can tell something’s wrong. And I’m asking you, as your sister, to talk to me. Because I can’t help if I don’t know what’s going on.”

I felt a wave of hot shame wash over me. This was all too much. I felt too many things at once—guilt, anger, sadness, jealousy…

All of those feelings were trapped here, inside these four walls, and I was stuck feeling all of them in front of Cali. I just needed to be gone. I needed to be anywhere else.

“You are *not* my sister! I wish you didn’t exist,” I repeated before turning on my heel and storming out.

Hot tears poured down my cheeks as I wrenched the door open and slammed it behind me. I stormed down the hallway. I wanted to run out into the wilderness, but somehow my feet ended up taking me to Rishika’s room. I paused outside the door and fought the urge to go in. I couldn’t let her see me like this.

Tear-streaked and ashamed. Small. Cowardly.

Besides, Rishika was one of them. She’d looked for Cali. She was a member of the pack I hadn’t been invited to belong to. When I’d first come here, Greyson had even made me hide my identity. That was how sure he was I could never be accepted here. I wished I’d understood that earlier. It would have saved all of us a lot of time.

I ran downstairs, keeping my head down to avoid anyone catching a glimpse of my face. I wanted to get outside, to get some privacy. To feel some semblance of normality. Maybe out under the sky, surrounded by trees, I could pretend I was back home.

But Orla spotted me, giving me a sympathetic look that made me want to fall into her arms and to run in the opposite direction all at the same time.

“Artemis, what’s wrong?” she asked, rushing to my side. “Is everything all right with Cali?”

*Cali.*

Of course.

I wanted to scream.

But I bit my tongue and replayed those words in my head.

*Is everything all right with Cali?*

“Your daughter is *fine*,” I replied contemptuously. “But everything is *not* all right with me. Not that anyone cares.”

And with that, I shoved my way past her and marched out the door. I strode out onto the lawn, sucking in as many deep breaths of fresh air as I could. I tried to focus on the scent. On the freshness of the air flowing in and out of my lungs. Keeping me alive. Keeping me strong.

I looked up at the sky above me.

Now that I was out in the open, I knew that everything would be okay. There was enough room for the things growing inside me and threatening to burst out. I paced back and forth across the grass, feeling it all mounting inside me.

Why the hell hadn’t I just stayed in the Fae world?

I didn’t belong here. I was a bounty hunter. I was a warrior. I was alone. That was what I’d always been. It was the only way I knew how to be. And now the Fae world was closed to me, and I might never be able to return. All because of my own foolishness.

I took in another deep breath and let it out in a guttural scream.

But whatever was inside me was still there. I hadn’t let it out. I heard the sound of footsteps behind me and turned to see Torin rushing to my side.

“Hey, what’s with all the screaming? There aren’t any more vamps out here are there?” He asked, his brows knitting together in concern in a way that made me want to wipe the worried look right off this face. Fuck him for caring.

“Just go away, Torin,” I snapped. “Why don’t you just leave me alone like everybody else? Don’t you have a stupid date to plan or something? Or maybe you want to insert yourself into someone else’s life?”

Torin recoiled like I’d slapped him. I watched his eyes fill with tears and felt a part of my heart break off and sink down into my stomach.

But I pushed that feeling aside. I didn’t have time for it. I could avoid it if I just kept moving.

“Get out of my way,” I growled. “Or I’ll give you something to be worried about.”

Torin opened his mouth, then closed it, as if he’d thought better of whatever it was he’d intended to say. A second later, he turned tail and ran as far and fast as he could. I watched him go and wondered what the hell I’d just done.

Torin was irritating, and too damn perky for his own good, but he was also sweet. Sometimes too sweet. He didn’t deserve the cruelty I’d just thrown at him.

I started off after him but stopped myself after a few steps.

Because why *should* I feel sorry for him? He had Astrid and Cali and everyone else. Even Greyson and Xavier put up with his stupid game show nonsense. And that was saying something.

But had it really been necessary to make him cry?

I folded my arms across my chest and hugged myself, hard. I felt so confused. The anger that was consuming me felt huge. Unbearably big. It couldn’t fit inside my body. I just wanted it out. I didn’t care what happened to me. I just wanted to be rid of this feeling.

“Artemis?” I heard a voice call, but I ignored it, shaking my head. I willed it to go away, but it just got closer. “Artemis?”

I opened my eyes after a minute, realizing I’d squeezed them closed in an attempt to shut everything and everyone out.

Orla was walking toward me with Cali on her heels. I watched Cali wobble after our mother and realized she was still feeling weak after her run-in with the vampires.

“Did you really go running to your mother the second I raised my voice?” I snarled at her.

“No,” Cali spluttered, looking stunned. “I just…”

“She’s worried about you, Artemis,” Orla said. “We all are.”

I bristled again. Cali had someone to speak for her when it was too hard. What had the girl been given that I’d gone basically my whole life without? Why should I rely on them when I’d always be the second choice, at best?

“Something’s upset you and it’s scaring us,” Cali said earnestly.

“You—” My voice sounded softer to my own ears now. “You’re worried about *me*?”

“Of course we’re worried about you,” Orla assured me, placing a hand on my shoulder. “You’re my daughter. I love you.”

Anger erupted inside me.

“If that’s true,” I began, stepping back and out of her grasp, “then why did you make me promise not to tell them my father might be alive?”

**Episode 1166**

I could not have heard my sister right.

Had Artemis just said that Kadmos might be alive?

“Mom?” I asked, knowing I fully sounded like my fourteen-year-old self. “Kadmos can’t really be alive… can he?”

She shook her head frantically. Kind of like when I’d asked her if she’d smoked pot in college. Or when I’d asked her for help on my family tree report in fourth grade.

“Artemis doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” my mom insisted.

“That’s a lie!” Artemis pointed at our mother accusingly. “Just like when she lied to you about being Fae.”

“Mom, what’s she talking about?” I asked, desperate for the truth. I’d thought our family was past all the lies. I’d thought things were out in the open now and we could be honest with each other.

But my mom ignored me and turned to Artemis instead. Her cheeks were flushed with frustration, and I could see her hands clenching and unclenching at her sides, a nervous habit.

“We need to talk,” she insisted. “Privately.”

She reached for Artemis’s wrist, but Artemis danced out of range.

“No.” Artemis shook her head. “Whatever you want to say, you can say in front of Cali. She already knows. The sprite’s out of the bag.”

Even after all the anger Artemis had shown me, I had to agree with her. She wouldn’t just hurl that kind of accusation around without some proof. And as much as I loved her and would do anything for her, my mom *had* lied to me once before.

“I don’t want to talk about it here,” she answered coolly.

“Mom, please,” I said. “What’s going on?”

I looked between the two of them, trying not to lose my cool. Artemis looked absolutely wild, shaking with pent-up rage and fury. It didn’t matter what she had said to me before. She wouldn’t just talk about her father to get at me or my mom. She wouldn’t do that. Not about something this serious. If there was a way to reunite Artemis with her father, my mom wouldn’t keep that from us…

Would she?

“Did you make Artemis promise?” I asked my mom.

My mother nodded, lowering her eyes in shame. She had lied to me. Again.

“Was it a Fae promise?” I asked, my concern mounting.

My mom hesitated, her eyes flicking between Artemis and me.

“Yes,” Artemis cut in. “It was a Fae promise.”

“Oh my god!” I shouted. “But Artemis, doesn’t breaking a Fae promise mean… death?”

I didn’t want Artemis to die! Sure, she was being a pain in the ass right now, and I’d kind of wanted to blast her with my powers a minute ago. But dead? *No*.

But Artemis didn’t seem worried. She just laughed.

“Who cares?” she snarled. “It would be better than spending more time with any of you.”

“You don’t mean that,” my mother told her. “Artemis, you’re upset. You won’t feel this way forever.”

Artemis scoffed. I couldn’t believe how cold she was being. She was looking at us like we were strangers. Worse than strangers—enemies.

“I’m being honest,” Artemis said. “You don’t change your mind about the truth.”

I was about as tired of all the secrets as Artemis was, not that my saying so would help her now. She’d probably just get annoyed I was agreeing with her while she was in this mood, and I wanted to help her, not anger her further.

And aside from all of that—was Kadmos really alive?

No wonder she was barely keeping it together. I couldn’t imagine the pain of not knowing whether your father was alive or not. It would certainly explain her behavior…

Suddenly, I felt painfully aware of how weak I still was. I forced myself to breathe in and out. To keep my balance.

“Does Dad know about any of this?” I asked my mom shakily.

“I haven’t told your father anything,” my mother answered stiffly. “Because there’s nothing to tell. It’s just a rumor.”

But what if it wasn’t?

How would my dad feel if Kadmos suddenly showed up? I remembered his face when he’d heard about my mother’s first love. He’d seemed… stricken. Shocked. I knew the feeling. Both of my mate’s exes were living under the same roof as me right now. It set my teeth on edge. Turned me into a nervous and insecure wreck.

My mom had been married to Kadmos. She had a child with him.

What would she do if he came back? What would it change for her? Could she love more than one person, too? Ugh, these were things a daughter did *not* want to think about when it came to her mother.

“How long have you known about this rumor?” I asked, anxiety turning my stomach.

“Just a short while,” my mom answered softly, as if she could dismiss it by saying it quietly.

And that was when Artemis’s anger started to make a lot more sense to me. Because how could she act like this didn’t matter? And why would she put pressure on Artemis to keep this a secret when it was clearly a big deal?

“Why didn’t you tell us?” I demanded, my voice jumping up an octave. “Why keep it secret? Don’t you trust me?”

Because that was the heart of it. Maybe Dad wasn’t ready to know this yet, but how could my mother possibly think I wouldn’t understand? I knew what it was to be torn between two people. I knew what it was to have more than one identity.

“Of course I do,” my mom answered, her voice wavering as she lost her composure. “But it’s complicated, baby.”

Artemis laughed again, bitterly. “*It’s complicated*,” she parroted sarcastically. “What a nice way of saying she doesn’t trust you.”

“Artemis, back off,” I snapped, sick of her constant snark. It wasn’t getting us anywhere. Plus, I was still pretty woozy from all the blood loss, and I couldn’t afford to get sidetracked. I turned back to my mom. “When are you telling Dad?” I asked. “He has a right to know.”

I wasn’t used to feeling protective of my dad. After all, I’d spent most of my life being taken care of by both my parents. But then my mom had gotten sick, and my dad stepped up to help her. And I’d disappeared and come home with two werewolf mates and a new identity as a half-Fae. And my dad had learned that the woman he’d married was from another world.

And yeah, he’d freaked out. But who wouldn’t?

Once he’d finished processing, he’d focused on supporting us. On listening and learning and trying to keep us safe, no matter what. He deserved better than to be lied to—even through omission.

“I will tell him when I feel like it’s the right time,” my mom told me firmly. The “and that’s final” went unspoken. But I wasn’t a kid. It wasn’t final to me.

“But—” I tried to interject, but she kept going.

“It’s just a rumor, Cali,” my mom insisted. “There’s no point worrying your father with something that might not even be true. Especially with everything else going on.”

“Well, I don’t think that’s fair,” I argued. “Not to Dad, and not to Artemis either. She finds out her father might be alive, and you tell her to make a Fae promise not to tell anyone? What was she supposed to do with that information? Just stew on it all alone?”

My mother pinched the bridge of her nose. I recognized the expression. The “This Fight Is Giving Me A Headache” look. I remembered it well from my middle school days. But this was about more than me begging her to buy me a padded bra. This was serious, and I didn’t want to back down.

My mother looked between both of us—her two determined daughters—and sighed.

“I realize it was a lot to put on you, Artemis,” she admitted. “But I only told you because I thought you were strong enough to handle it. I’ve heard about your life in the Fae world, and how fearless you were…”

“But the Fae promise.” I brought up the thing I couldn’t get over. “The one she broke…”

For some reason, I couldn’t stop thinking of an incident from my childhood. I’d promised not to eat this batch of cookies my aunt had made. The kind my dad’s mom used to make for him. I’d been absolutely addicted to them—delicate chocolate cookies with powdered sugar frosting that tasted like chocolate clouds.

Or at least that was how I’d thought to describe them when I was nine.

So, eventually, after several hours of self-restraint, I’d gobbled all but one of them down. And when my parents had asked where they’d gone, I’d lied and said I didn’t know. It had gotten me grounded for a week. My mother had told me it was important to keep my word when I made a promise. That it was dangerous not to.

“Aren’t the consequences, like…” I searched for the words but couldn’t find them. “Seriously serious?”

“I made a mistake,” my mom said. “Can’t we just leave at that? And can you please just not tell your father? I want to tell him myself.”

“Fine,” I agreed, even though I didn’t like it. “But if I don’t tell Dad, you have to convince him to let me stay here.”

“What?” my mom cried, clearly shocked by my attempt to bargain.

But before I could defend myself, Artemis fell to her knees and cried out in pain.

My mother and I both rushed to her side, trying to figure out what was wrong. But Artemis just wailed.

“Mom, what’s wrong with her?” I shouted over my sister’s cries.

“I don’t know,” Mom admitted. “It could be the result of breaking the Fae promise.”

I watched Artemis’s face contort in pain and wanted to scream in frustration. How could I help her? What should we be doing?

“Mom.” I felt my heart sink. “Artemis isn’t going to die… is she?”

**Episode 1167**

XAVIER

I was out on the porch with a glass of scotch I really felt I’d earned after going in circles with Ava for the better part of an hour. I needed air. I needed peace. I needed to figure out if I was going insane.

I took another sip and tried to relax into my chair as I looked out at the woods, desperate for a shred of information that would tip the scales.

I knew Ava couldn’t be trusted, at least not fully—not even if I gave her a clean slate starting from when she’d been reborn, and ignored the fact that she had *killed my mother.* The first thing she’d done with her new lease on life had been to impersonate Cali and try to drive a wedge between me and my brother and blow up our pack. That made her as untrustworthy as they came.

But even with all of that in mind, her story, *damn it*, made some sense.

She was claiming that she’d been searching the woods and had picked up Cali’s scent. She’d struggled with the choice to either go back and alert the pack, or to go save Cali immediately. She’d figured that every second Cali was with the vampires, she’d been in more danger. Therefore, she hadn’t had the time to warn anyone. She’d had to go alone.

I did not like that I owed my mate’s safety to *her*.

Cali was alive, and she’d admitted that Ava appeared to have saved her. Which was huge, given that she hated Ava almost as much as I did.

It was a good story. Almost a perfect one, really.

And that was why it bothered me.

Nothing about Ava was perfect. Even at her best, she was a messy, impulsive person. She ran too hot and reacted to fast. It wasn’t like her to make a selfless play.

But then again, she might have just been trying to get in good with the pack. Saving Cali would definitely have seemed like a clean way to make amends. Or at least to start. Was she turning over a new leaf?

The thought of that actually made me laugh out loud. *That’ll be the day*. I made a mental note to talk to Cali and see if their stories matched up.

I couldn’t help but think this would be a lot less complicated if I didn’t have to contend with my own feelings about Ava. If I wasn’t going to kill her, why should I begrudge her a new start? But did she have to try starting over so close to me?

Luckily, before I had to come up with answers to any of these deep questions, I spotted Jay by the lake and headed over to join him, eager for a distraction.

For a minute, we just looked out at the lake and the woods beyond. I knew we were both thinking the same thing: the vampires were still out there. And they were a threat to our pack.

A threat to Cali.

“You ready to take on a few bloodsuckers?” I asked, hoping a little pre-battle banter could help get me out of my head.

But Jay didn’t seem to feel the same. He just sighed.

“You know I’ll do whatever I need to do,” he replied, seeming far from hyped about the fight ahead. It wasn’t like I was chomping at the bit to risk all our necks again, but Jay seemed… off.

“You okay?” I asked, trying to keep my tone casual. Feelings weren’t my strong suit, but clearly Jay was struggling with something. I knew that if the roles were reversed and he noticed I wasn’t doing well, he’d ask. Cali would say my asking was an improvement. I’d like to think my mate was having a good influence on me.

“It’s Lola,” he admitted. “She’s kind of gotten obsessed with vampires. She’s binging *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*. She keeps telling me I’m a total Matt? I don’t even know what that means.”

I snorted a laugh at the ridiculousness of it all.

“Dude.” Jay turned to me. “She’s even wearing sunglasses. Inside! At night! She’s acting totally bonkers. So either she’s fully going crazy, or she’s just… truly convinced she’s becoming a vampire.”

I nodded. To be fair, Lola had just gone through a pretty huge ordeal. I knew what it was like to lose your wolf. To long for something else to focus on. For a new guiding star to base your identity around. It wasn’t easy.

“She lost her wolf,” I reminded him. “That’s big. Maybe she’s worried it bothers you. Does it?”

Jay shrugged. “I’d love Lola if she were a mermaid.” He shook his head. “But all the stuff she’s doing is freaking me out. I’m worried about her. I swear to her over and over that I love her, but she just doesn’t seem to believe me. I gave up an eye for her so Big Mac would do that spell. I’d do it again, too. But it doesn’t seem to make a difference to her.”

I knew what that was like. I’d tried to convince Cali over and over again that no matter what she did, I’d be there for her.

“Just stick by her, man,” I advised him. “Prove that you’ll always be there for her. Hey, maybe you should tell her that mermaid line, I bet she’d get a kick out of it. Plus, when’s the last time you did something romantic for her? Something that has nothing to do with lost wolves or vampires or eye-stealing witches?”

Jay looked at me like I’d just confessed a secret desire to eat my own shoes.

“Did you just say the word ‘romantic’?” Jay asked. “Seriously, did Torin slip something into your scotch, or—”

I cut Jay off with a playful shove, which made both of us laugh.

“It’s definitely not Torin,” I told him. “The whole *Bachelorette* thing, it was just about being with Cali. I could do without all the games.”

“I get it.” Jay nodded. “I’m just surprised you put up with it.”

“Anything for the women we love, right?” I offered with a shrug.

Jay smiled and looked out at the lake wistfully. Sometimes a fight could make a lot more sense than talking.

“My advice?” I nudged him. “Take Lola out for a nice dinner. Wine and dine her. Let her see and feel how much you love her.”

Jay chuckled to himself as he shook his head. “When I tell Colton you suggested that, he’ll either think that I’m lying, or that you’ve been replaced by a cyborg,” he said, flashing me a shit-eating grin.

“Fuck off.” I rolled my eyes and gave him another shove as we both laughed.

But our happiness was short-lived. Because who else had decided to join us at the lake, but Ava. She looked up at me, nervous and defensive all at once.

“Sorry to interrupt what I’m sure was a riveting intellectual conversation,” she quipped. “But could I talk to you? Alone?”

Jay shot me an apologetic look before mumbling something about restaurant reservations and practically running back toward the pack house. So much for friendship.

But I couldn’t blame him. This was deeply awkward. If I could have left, I would have.

“So? Talk.” I demanded, eager to get this over with.

“I’m sorry,” Ava blurted out, her cheeks turning red with the effort it took to force those words out of her mouth. “I know I haven’t exactly made life easy for you since I got back. And I know you want me to go. And I get it. But…”

She took a deep breath and sighed, looking out at the lake. I wondered what she was about to tell me. Another shocking revelation about who she was really working with? Maybe she’d poisoned everyone. Maybe she’d put a bomb in the pack house. Or maybe she’d painted a tunnel on the side of a wall that she wanted me to try running into.

But she didn’t say any of that.

“Things didn’t used to be like this,” she said, picking at her nails like she always did when she was nervous. “We used to get along. And maybe me finding Cali and bringing her back to you was a sign. A sign that we can forget all the bad shit and go back to a better way.”

“I doubt I’ll ever be able to forget,” I replied coldly. Because what else was I supposed to say? How could I ever treat her the way I used to?

“I know.” Ava nodded. “But maybe we could try and move beyond it?”

“*We?*” I asked, anger boiling up inside me. “There *is* no we, Ava.”

“Trust me, I know that,” she snapped. “But… I saved her for you. I know what Cali means to you, and that’s why I risked my life to bring her back. To try and make up for what I did. That has to be worth something.”

For a second, when I looked at her, I remembered the girl I used to know. The one who never backed down from a fight. The one I could dare to do anything. The one who could do the exact same thing to me. But she’d ruined everything.

“If all that’s true, then… thank you,” I muttered, unable to look at her. “And thanks for saving Cali. No matter what’s happened between us, I’ll owe you for that. But nothing more.”

“I just…” Ava clenched and unclenched her fists. “There’s one question that I want to ask.”

“Shoot,” I replied, bracing myself for whatever it was. A declaration of love? An admission of guilt?

“I’ve really got nowhere else to go,” she said. “And believe that I’m not proud to ask this, but… Could I stay here with you for a while?”

**Episode 1168**

ARTEMIS

The pain was so excruciating I thought I might pass out. I had to focus on my breathing. I had to focus on stopping myself from screaming.

What the *hell* was happening to me?

“She broke the Fae promise,” Orla was saying to someone. She was trying to hold me, to stop me from shaking as I stumbled on the floor. “That has to be why this is happening.”

The pain was harsh, but I could still think. I couldn’t understand why I’d broken the promise in the first place. And why was I so angry? The feeling had arrived so unexpectedly that I could barely process it. This whole thing reminded me of the way the Orb used to speak to me, making me doubt myself and everyone around me.

The Orb was trapped in the Fae world, though, so it had nothing to do with my emotions.

Something else was going on.

Something else was hurting me.

Nevertheless, even though I knew I wasn’t behaving normally, I couldn’t stop that feeling of anger. It coexisted with the pain, and it didn’t let me feel anything positive toward Cali, even though my sister was standing over me, her expression full of worry.

She squeezed my hand. “You’re not going to die! I’ll go get Torin!” Cali ran off to get the healer. I wanted to feel relieved, but the pain wouldn’t let me.

“You’re going to be okay,” Orla said in a hushed voice, caressing my forehead. It was as if she wanted to make her words reality without even considering all the implications. And then, to make matters worse, she said, “You’re strong.”

“You don’t even know what’s wrong with me!” I choked out, pushing her hand away from my face.

“It’s the Fae promise—”

I cut her off. “If I’m hurting because of the Fae promise, you were the one that made me make that promise in the first place! So that would mean that this is all your fault!”

Orla gasped, flinching away. “You can’t mean that…”

Before I could reply, torn between apologizing and doubling down on my accusations, I was hit by another wave of pain. This time, it was focused in my stomach. I grimaced. Orla did too. I winced when she stroked my hair, whispering, “My poor girl, I’m so sorry this is happening to you…”

Orla kept speaking, but I wasn’t listening.

All I could think about was a Fae that I used to know back home. Someone who had broken a promise to the Kollector—something I’d managed to avoid. The girl had cried in pain for hours until she’d died two days later. Was that going to happen to me? Was this going to be the end of my life?

I refused to believe that I’d survived against all odds only to die because my mother—who claimed to love me after having abandoned me in another world—forced me to make a Fae promise. Up until a few weeks ago, I hadn’t even known I *had* a mother.

Why had I ever trusted Orla in the first place?

My thoughts were jumbled and bitter. Was I right to feel that way about Orla? I wasn’t sure. All I was certain about was that I wasn’t ready to die. I was not going to die, because—because this pain could be anything! Was there a chance that Lola’s awful coffee had poisoned me? That sounded like a real possibility to me.

“Artemis, are you listening to me?” Orla said then, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I didn’t want to deal with her right now. I hated her watery eyes, the worried way she looked at me. I fought to stand up—maybe I’d be able to walk off the pain…

And also walk the hell away from her.

“Artemis, no!” she said, sniffling. “What are you doing? You need to rest!”

I ignored her and took a single step. The pain was nearly crippling. I couldn’t control the cry that escaped my mouth, and Orla reached out to hold me.

“It’s fine,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’ll be okay.”

No matter what I said, though, I had no idea if I was going to make it out of this alive.

“Artemis!”

I turned to see Cali rushing toward me, followed by Torin and Rishika.

Rishika looked haunted. “What happened?” she asked, helping me sit down again.

“No time for chit-chat,” Cali said. She pushed Torin toward me. “You have to heal her!”

Torin stared between us, puzzled. “I don’t know what’s wrong with her, though. There’s no blood.”

Cali looked like she was about to cry or scream.

Torin changed gears instantly. “But of course I can try!”

“Please try,” I said, groaning in pain.

Torin got to his knees next to me and raised his hands over my chest. His brow furrowed as blue light slipped out of his fingertips and reached out to me. A warm, soothing feeling ran through me…

A moment later, the pain subsided.

“Is it working?” Torin asked me, looking anxious.

When I nodded, he smiled. Slowly he pulled back his hands and looked up to my mother. Her expression was cloudy, but I was relieved.

The agony was over.

“Can you stand now?” Mom asked.

I was still panting. Torin tried to help me, but I said, “I can do it myself.”

Slowly, I got to my feet.

Cali let out a sigh of relief. “You’re okay!”

My sister’s enthusiasm rubbed me the wrong way. She reached out to hug me, but the idea of her touching me had me recoiling. I brushed past her and walked away.

Mom called after me. “Artemis! Where are you going?”

I just wanted to get away.

The anger inside me had been renewed, but it didn’t make any sense for me to feel this way. I knew that everyone here was trying to help me, so why did I want to scream at them to leave me alone? Why did staying alive feel so horrible when it was all that I’d wanted to do only moments ago?

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Cali was about to follow me, but Orla stopped her. “Give your sister some time,” she told Cali, who scowled.

I scoffed, turning to fix them with a glare. “At least someone around here gets it.”

I realized that the person who understood was the same person who’d done this to me. Orla, my own mother. The second the thought struck me, my chest throbbed, but I ignored it. I ignored everyone. I headed toward the lake, marching away without a plan.

I just needed to get away from my mother and sister, from all my new well-meaning friends. I knew that they were being nice to me, that this reaction of mine was not natural, but I couldn’t stop it. It was a different kind of terrifying. Why couldn’t I stop feeling this way? Was it because of the Fae promise?

Was I going to be driven mad?

“But where are you even going?” Cali blocked my way.

Without thinking, I burst out, “I just want to get away from you! I can’t take another look at my perfect little sister with her two mates and her loving parents. Must be great to be so loved, huh?”

Cali froze, gasping. “What are you talking about? I just want to help—”

“Cali,” Orla said, coming to stand next to my sister. “Artemis is frustrated. You shouldn’t overthink anything she says right now; she doesn’t mean it.”

Didn’t I, though?

Orla peered at me. “Artemis, why don’t you come back to the house to rest?”

“It’s not my house. I don’t belong there.”

“That’s not true,” said Tom —oh great, now he was here too. “You know you’re part of our family, Artemis. You’re upsetting your mother—you shouldn’t talk to her like that.”

“You don’t get to order me around; you’re not my father,” I snapped, aggravation running through me.

Tom seemed struck. There was a part of me that regretted the words the moment I said them, but that didn’t last long. Tom took a step closer to me, looking hurt, but I didn’t want him to touch me right now. I didn’t want him to comfort me or tell me that I was welcome in his home. Not when I felt like a stranger among strangers and this anger and pain kept bubbling up inside me.

“Don’t come near me!” I declared, raising my hands as the three of them approached me. None of them were listening, so I would *make them* listen. “If any of you take one step forward, I will blast you away, right back into that damn house!”

Tom looked stunned. “Artemis, what are you talking about? I know you’d never hurt us. You’re just upset.”

“Tom!” Orla tried to pull him back as he stepped closer yet, but he broke free—just like the rage inside me. I’d told him to stay back, but he hadn’t listened. And now he would suffer the consequences. I summoned my power, ready to shove him away—

But nothing happened.

There was no energy slipping through my hands. I tried again, and again.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

My Fae magic was gone.

**Episode 1169**

Did my sister just… Did she just try to *ZAP* my dad?

*Has she lost her mind?* I wondered, equal parts shocked and outraged.

“What is wrong with you? Why would you attack him? *Us*?” I demanded. “We’re just worried about you!”

Artemis’s expression was unlike anything I’d ever seen. She didn’t even remind me of herself anymore. She just looked enraged and nothing more.

“This is all your fault!” she shouted at me.

Before I could grab and shake her and ask what the fuck was wrong with her, Artemis ran away from us, toward the lake*.*

*Oh, wow! And I’m supposed to be the dramatic one?* I scoffed internally.

I sure hoped she wasn’t about to jump in for a swim, because I was in no mood to save her if she started drowning. I had other things to worry about. My dad was looking so pale that I was afraid he would faint.

I hugged him, squeezing him tight. “Are you okay, Dad?” I whispered.

He faced me, shaking his head. “I can’t believe Artemis would turn on her own family like that.”

He looked between Mom and me, trembling. I felt sick to my stomach, realizing that my dad didn’t know the entire story. He had no idea about the Fae promise that Artemis had broken.

I stared at my mother pointedly. *This is your doing*, I wanted to tell her*.* I hated to accuse my mom of anything, but it was true.

“Maybe you should be the one to tell Dad more about what just happened?” I told Mom. “You know, the part about keeping promises?”

“What? What does she need to tell me?” Dad asked, looking between Mom and me in confusion.

Mom wasn’t listening to either of us, though. Gazing toward the direction that Artemis had vanished, she said, “I should go after Artemis… try to calm her down.”

*Right*,I thought, huffing. *Because that totally went great the first time we tried to do it.*

“Artemis just made it clear that she doesn’t want to be with any of us right now,” I told Mom. “She literally just tried to use magic on Dad.”

“Breaking the Fae promise might have affected her magic,” Mom said.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Like she doesn’t have her magic?”

Mom nodded. “I don’t know for sure. It’s one of the reasons why I want to talk to her.”

*What?* I thought. *That’s possible?*

“If that’s true…” I took a deep breath. “Then maybe we should give her some space and stop pushing our luck with her.”

The idea of my older sister losing her powers was upsetting, even if she had just lost her shit on us. At least she wasn’t dead. But it felt like more was wrong than losing her Fae magic because of the promise. Was that just it though? I’d had no idea that she had so much anger toward me… toward the family… But I had to take Artemis’s side on this one—our mother had basically forced her to lie to us. To her own family.

“Hello?” Dad asked. “Is anyone here going to tell me what’s going on?”

Mom shot me a look, sighing. She moved to stand in front of Dad. He was at least five inches taller than her, but right then, he seemed so lost and small.

“Well?” he asked.

I studied my father’s face as Mom talked to him about Artemis’s Fae promise. About the possibility that Kadmos, her first husband, was alive. His expression went from worried to stunned to frustrated in seconds. He stood there, silent, staring at my mother. I could see that his hands were shaking.

“Aren’t you… Aren’t you going to say something?” Mom asked him, her gaze searching.

When Dad spoke, his voice broke. “You shouldn’t have kept that from me, Orla,” he said. “I thought we trusted each other, but now… I see maybe I was wrong.”

Before Mom could reply, Dad stormed off toward the house.

Mom made a move to follow him but seemed to rethink it. She turned to me, her voice uneven. “I was only trying to protect you and your dad, Cali. I never thought—”

“You never thought that you would upset us by *lying*?” I asked her, as calmly as I could. “You don’t need to keep secrets from us anymore, Mom. That time in our lives is over.”

Mom rubbed her forehead, nodding slowly. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

I sighed. “I think you should apologize to Dad first. He’s been through so much with all this supernatural nonsense. He deserves the truth.”

Looking guilty, my mom nodded. “You’re right.”

While Mom walked off toward the house to speak with Dad, I decided to go find Torin and Astrid who had, sensibly, hightailed it when everything with my family had gone to shit. They had to know a lot more than I did about Fae promises. I spotted them a few feet away, sitting under a tree, speaking quietly after the circus they’d just witnessed.

“Hey, Cali,” Astrid said, giving me a small smile.

“Sorry about all that,” I said, sitting down next to them.

“Nothing to apologize for!” Torin smiled. I wished I had his positive attitude right now.

“Can I ask you guys something?” They nodded. “What happens to a Fae when they break a promise? Can they lose their magic?”

“There’s no fixed answer to any of that,” Astrid said as Torin nodded. “Broken promises manifest in many different ways—anything from the death of a loved one or yourself, to losing your Fae powers. It’s unpredictable.”

Torin spoke up. “That’s why it’s so serious. And it’s something that I can’t really heal.”

I scowled. “I’m sure my mother knows all that, so why would she put Artemis in that position in the first place? I mean, maybe my sister got a little out of control earlier—”

“A *little?*” Astrid winced. “Sorry.”

“Okay, a lot,” I admitted. “She got out of control, trying to blast my dad and all, but at least now I get why she was so upset with our mother.”

Torin stared at me, intrigued. “What was the promise she broke?”

At this point, I didn’t want to keep anything a secret. “Artemis’s father might be alive. Our mother made her promise not to tell anyone.”

Astrid blinked at me, alarmed. “That’s intense.” She cringed. And then she perked up. “But the good news is that since Artemis hasn’t died, she’ll probably be okay!”

Torin raised his index finger officially. “Except she might have lost her magic. For a Fae, that’s devastating. It’s like losing part of who you are.”

Torin’s words felt like a gut punch. This was like Lola losing her wolf all over again. The heartbreak of it was devastating. “Will she ever get her Fae powers back?”

Torin and Astrid exchanged a look. Cautiously, Astrid said, “It’s possible, but nobody really knows. It’s never happened to me or anyone I’ve known.”

I couldn’t believe this was happening. No wonder Artemis needed some space… She had to be crushed.

*Does that give her the right to talk to me like she hates me, though?* I thought to myself.

I couldn’t bring myself to go talk to her, not after the nasty things she’d said about me. To my *face*, no less. It would’ve been far more respectful of her to talk shit about me *behind* my back, like any normal person would, thank you very much.

Maybe we all needed some cooling down time here.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help Artemis more,” Torin said as we entered the pack house.

*Sweet Torin*. I squeezed his shoulder. “Thank you for stopping her pain. We’d be lost around here without you.”

Torin offered a timid smile when Lola came up to us in the hallway. “What’s going on?” She pointed somewhere behind her. “I heard your parents arguing in the kitchen. What did you do this time?”

“Excuse me?” I demanded. “I didn’t do anything—it’s actually all my mom’s fault.”

Lola frowned, and her teasing mood vanished. “But Tom and Orla barely ever argue. They’re like the perfect couple.”

In that exact moment, I heard my dad bellow from the kitchen. “I can’t believe you did this again!”

Astrid and I winced at the same time. Taking a deep breath, I told my friends, “I’d better go check on them.”

When I entered the kitchen, I encountered a sight I’d never seen before—my mom was wiping tears from her eyes while my always sweet father was practically shouting at her.

“I accepted that you withheld being Fae from me and Cali for all those years!” he said. “You almost died because of that secret, but I stood by your side, and now this—this is how you treat me? More secrets?”

Mom sniffled, looking up at him. “I was only trying to protect you both… Kadmos being alive could just be a rumor…”

Lola was right—I’d never seen my parents like this. The two rarely argued, and if they did, it was always over something stupid—like where the butter was supposed to go in the fridge. But this was different.

“What I’m hearing here is that your first husband may still be alive, and you decided not to tell me. You decided to keep more secrets, even though I have repeatedly told you that not being honest with us just makes things worse,” Dad declared. His expression was full of anguish and resignation. “How do you think that makes me feel?”

Mom opened her mouth to speak, sniffing. But Dad stopped her.

“No. No more excuses.” Shaking his head bitterly, he said, “I can’t do this anymore, Orla. I’m done.”

**Episode 1170**

XAVIER

Allow Ava to stay in the pack house. *Ha*.

That was what Ava was asking of me. Casually, easily, like it was a totally normal thing to ask the ex who’d killed you in the past. The ex who also resented you for killing his mother, and for all the other horrible things you’d done in the past month.

I sighed internally, trying to wrap my head around this one. Sure, Ava had saved Cali from the vampires, but that didn’t mean that we were all best friends now. There was no way Cali would be happy if I let this woman stay in the pack house. I felt pretty confident about that, even knowing how infuriatingly nice she was most of the time.

In fact, Cali would hate it, and she would be angry with me. Rightfully so. Because one good deed did not erase all the horrible shit Ava had done in the past. To all of us.

“Look,” Ava said, interrupting my thoughts. “I know this isn’t an easy question for you to answer, but I really mean what I said before. I’m trying to put the past behind me, and I really have nowhere else to go.”

Ava’s eyes were pleading. For a brief moment, I remembered how things had been between us before her behavior had taken a fucked up turn. I also couldn’t help but feel grateful toward her for making sure that Cali had come back to me safely. Or at least, as safely as she could have, considering the circumstances.

There was part of me that saw Ava as the enemy, but at the same time, I couldn’t stop myself from feeling sorry for her. She really was all alone in this world. It felt like I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

“How long would you need to say?” I asked, grumbling.

Ava gave me a hopeful look. “I wish I could give you a firm answer… I promise I won’t stay a day longer than necessary.”

Well. Wasn’t that the best non-answer I’d ever heard? This woman was so fucking tricky.

“You can trust me, Xavier,” Ava said, as if she could hear my thoughts.

“Sure I can,” I scoffed.

She sighed. “Do you need to ask Greyson about this?”

I fucking bristled. What a joke. “No. I don’t need his permission for anything.”

Ava arched an eyebrow. “What about Cali? Do you need to talk to her?”

I paused. I obviously needed to clear things up with Cali. Everything between us was pretty good right now, and I wasn’t about to ruin my relationship with my mate over my murderous ex staying with us.

“You’re thinking about that too much, so I’m guessing the answer is yes,” Ava said. “If you think it’s important, you should definitely talk to Cali.”

I peered at Ava, unable to stop myself from looking at her with suspicion. She seemed so innocent that it freaked me out.

“If I decide you can stay, I’ll let you know,” I told her gruffly.

Ava stared at me, her eyes bright and hopeful. “I appreciate that, X.”

I grunted in response. I didn’t want her to get too enthusiastic about anything. Turning my back on her, I headed into the house and toward the kitchen. The idea of having both my ex and my mate under the same roof made my jaw clench. I really didn’t need the drama. It was already bad enough that Greyson was here. Ava’s presence would only further complicate things between Cali and me, so why was I even contemplating letting her stay?

The answer was clear.

Ava had to go.

So why didn’t I just throw her out, right here and now? Why had I told her that I would think about it? What the fuck was there to think about? Was I indulging her because we used to be mates? Either way, though, my reaction to her felt *wrong*. I wasn’t supposed to have any soft spots—especially not for someone like her.

*I need to get my shit together before—*

“Are you watching a movie in there? It’s the fucking fridge,” Greyson said from right behind me. I closed the refrigerator door and turned to face my brother. He had a severe expression on this face.

“I was just looking for something to eat,” I told him. “No need to for you to be an asshole about it. Even if you are one.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “I’m not here to fight. I need to talk to you.”

I leaned against the counter, crossing my arms over my chest. “So talk.”

“We need to deal with the vampires,” Greyson declared. That was pretty straightforward for him—no long-winded rant, for once.

I arched an eyebrow, taking him in. “Look at you, involving me in pack business…” I trailed off. “I thought this kind of shit only happened when you felt like running off and needed to leave me in charge.”

Greyson ignored my jab. “It’s not pack business. It’s Cali business.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, frowning.

“They kidnapped Cali,” Greyson said. “We have to kill them.”

It was one of those rare moments when Greyson and I were on the same page.

“You’re right,” I said, nodding. “They attacked us on Halloween and haven’t backed off since then. This is threatening us in more ways than one, and kidnapping Cali is basically a declaration of war.”

“Exactly. The only question here is when do we attack?” Greyson asked. He seemed determined, focused.

I shrugged. “I’m ready anytime.”

Greyson shook his head. “We can’t just show up—we need a plan. Gregor’s coven is difficult to deal with. They’ve been able to mask their scent in the past, and they’ve tricked us multiple times.”

I scoffed. “I don’t give a fuck. If we can take out our own father, we can handle a bunch of bloodsuckers. We’ve done it before.”

Greyson stared at me, nodding slowly. “That’s true.”

He was about to leave the kitchen when he paused by the entryway. “It’s good to be working together on this.” He arched an eyebrow. “You can’t deny that we kick some ass together.”

I snorted. “Maybe. But don’t forget, I still hate you.”

Greyson snorted, rolling his eyes. “Sounds about right.”

Greyson walked off, and I was left in the kitchen alone, contemplating the weirdness of today. First Ava wanting to move in, and now Greyson in a bonding mood?

What fuck was this?

Feeling extra suspicious about everything in my life, I headed upstairs to find Cali. I really needed to talk to her about Ava, sooner rather than later. I was still struggling with the whole thing, though, because I just wasn’t sure what the right decision was here. If I looked at the situation from Cali’s perspective, everything was very complicated. Obviously Cali hated Ava, for good reason, but Ava had rescued her, and Cali was super into being grateful and stuff. She was also very into helping people. Even horrible people.

So, really, I couldn’t be sure about Cali’s reaction. If I told her that I was going to kick Ava out, would she be glad or annoyed? If I asked her if it was okay for Ava to stay with us, would she think that I still had feelings for my ex?

This was way too fucking complicated for me. Maybe it would be best to call Colton and ask for his advice. Not that he gave the best advice in general. And I already knew what Colton would say, anyway. *Stop being a little fuckboy and kick Ava out*—*she murdered our mother!*

Which was true, but still…

Seriously, why the fuck was I hesitating to tell Ava to get out of here?

But then again, since when did I need Colton’s advice to do anything? Since when did I need to run my plans by someone? I didn’t usually let anyone affect my decisions… But—of course—that had been before meeting Cali. Before I’d learned that I had to put my mate’s desires above my own. Before I’d decided to become a man Cali could depend on.

I walked down the hallway, heading toward her room. I realized that no matter how hard I thought about this, the only solution was to talk to her. I knocked on Cali’s door once before opening it. The sight of her sitting on her bed crying was a shock.

“Hey… What’s wrong?” I sat down next to her, pulling her into my arms. She looked up at me with beautiful eyes, always so beautiful, and sniffled.

“Cali? Tell me what happened,” I continued. I hated seeing her this way. Was it Greyson? I’d rip his fucking head off, brotherly love or not. “Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it together.”

My mate wrapped her arms around my neck. Her gaze went from my eyes to my lips, her breathing coming out shaky. Before I could say anything else, she took in a sharp breath and pulled me in for a kiss.

**Episode 1171**

VIOLET

Iris shut the restroom door behind her and locked it.

If she was trying to seem threatening, she’d definitely achieved her goal.

I fought to remain calm and not tell this woman that she was not making a good impression here. In this small space, Charlie’s mother seemed even more intimidating, and the worst part was that I was certain she wanted it that way.

She wanted me to be afraid of her.

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked her as evenly as possible.

“I love my son,” Iris said sharply. “I plan on being in his life for a long time.”

This woman had literally tried to kill her son the other day. Last time I’d checked, it was the grandmother who’d made Iris and her husband see how psychopathic they’d been acting, so I found her declaration utterly freaking *ridiculous*.

Of course, I didn’t say any of that out loud. I was fairly sure it wouldn’t go over well.

“It would be nice if we could both be in Charlie’s life for a long time.” I made sure to keep eye contact with her. Breaking it would seem like a sign of weakness in her eyes.

Iris’s gaze went cold. She was beautiful and regal, and yet she seemed so bitter that looking at her made a large part of me rebel.

“Right,” she said. “Because you two are mates. Bound forever.”

“Yeah, that’s the point,” I said coolly.

“Charlie would have spent the rest of his life oblivious to this *mate* nonsense if it weren’t for you,” she said. It was obvious that she was accusing me. She wasn’t even trying to conceal it. “But you just had to come along and put ideas in his head, didn’t you?”

“It’s not an idea. Being someone’s mate is a natural thing for werewolves, a sacred thing. You can look it up,” I said, still trying to keep my frustration under wraps. “And I was the one who helped Charlie get in control of his werewolf abilities. I’m the one who helped Charlie take care of the Rogue who turned him. So really, you should be thanking me.”

“A werewolf *and* insolent,” Iris said. She was pushing her luck here.

“I’m not trying to upset you,” I said as calmly as possible. “I just want to make sure that Charlie stays happy. I’m only sorry that you won’t allow yourself to be happy as well.” I paused, hoping the honesty was evident in my words. “I love Charlie with all my heart.”

Iris shook her head. Her bitterness was still obvious. Now, it was mixed with anger. “I would have killed you before, but I hesitated because there’s always a chance that Charlie would never forgive me…” She tilted her head to the side. “But then again, I raised that boy. I know that he’s a very sweet and well-meaning person who wouldn’t hold a grudge against me for too long. A boy always loves his mother more than anyone else, anyway.”

My jaw clenched. The nerve of this woman was out of this world. After the way she’d treated Charlie when she’d learned that he was a werewolf, she had the gall to threaten me like this? A mother would have never behaved the way she had. At least not a good mother.

“You say that a boy always loves his mother the most, but I don’t know if you love Charlie as much, if at all,” I told her sharply. “You should be feeling a lot guiltier over the way you treated Charlie when you figured out he was a werewolf. And sure, he forgave you this one time, but I don’t think you should keep pushing your luck.”

Iris gasped, stunned. “How dare you speak that way to me?”

She was lucky that I was still controlling my anger. I would do anything to defend my mate. “I’m just telling the truth.”

She glared at me, taking a step closer. “Monsters like you don’t know anything about the truth,” she said. “You will not be returning with us to Minnesota, no matter what you or Charlie says.”

I was disgusted by her.

Furious, I pushed past the woman, unlocked the door, and headed out. I took a deep breath as I walked back to the table. Should I let Charlie know about all this? About Iris’s threat?

But he seemed so happy to have a relationship with his parents again…

I had no idea what to do.

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After a tense meal, Charlie, Marta, and I stood in the parking lot with Charlie’s parents. They started asking questions about our plans for tonight. They wanted to leave for Minnesota right away; of course Iris would want to whisk him away as soon as possible.

“Before we get whisked away to Duluth,” Charlie said, “we need to go to our place to pack.”

Iris shot me a look. She wrinkled her nose and said, “Your *place*? You mean the werewolf pack house?”

The disdain in her voice was obvious.

I wondered if Charlie’s mom found it difficult not to see him as one of the supernatural monsters that she had sworn to kill. Then again, she’d probably decided that Charlie was just the victim in a set of unfortunate circumstances, and I was the villain of her fairytale. Perhaps that was why she was trying to put all the blame on me for everything, ever.

Her behavior would have been laughable if it weren’t so dangerous.

If *she* weren’t so dangerous.

I didn’t hide my smile when Charlie put his arm around my shoulders protectively. Like a mate should.

“Yes,” he said. “We’ll be heading to the pack house. Everybody’s been very nice to me there.”

I could actually see both of Charlie’s parents fighting not to comment on the fact that Charlie had just called a pack of werewolves *nice*. I was certain that they’d never considered the notion of any supernatural being displaying any redeeming qualities.

“Fair enough,” Paul said, expressionless. “I could follow you and help you kids get all your stuff. That’s also an option.”

Instantly, both Charlie and I shook our heads.

*God, no!* I told him through our mind link.

Charlie squeezed my hand reassuringly.

“It’s a long drive,” he told his parents. “There’s no reason for all of us to go. Violet and I can pick up our things just fine on our own.”

Paul looked between us, his lips pressed together. “Are you worried that we will harm your friends?”

*No shit!* I scoffed inside my head.

These people were really bringing out my sarcastic side. It still boggled my mind how they had been threatening to kill us just a couple of days ago, and now they just expected both Charlie and I to accept them as they were. Meanwhile, Iris had basically tried to steamroll me only moments earlier.

I wondered how much longer I would be able to keep up with this facade.

“It would just be safer for everyone if we went alone,” I told Paul. For Charlie’s sake, I made sure not to sound aggressive.

His parents exchanged a look.

“Fine,” Paul said.

Looking at Charlie only, Iris said, “We’ll wait for you back at the motel.”

Charlie gave his mother a small smile. “Thank you for understanding.”

When Charlie hugged his parents goodbye, Iris glared at me over his shoulder.

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A short while later, Charlie, Marta, and I were riding in the car, heading back to the pack house. I kept anxiously glancing in the rearview mirror, unable to help myself. I couldn’t be sure that Iris and Paul wouldn’t try to follow us. The idea of the hunters harming my pack had me on edge, so I’d decided that I needed to tell Charlie about Iris’s threat.

Even if I hated to upset him, Charlie had to know the truth. Right?

I started to plan ahead, thinking that it would be best to speak with him after we got Marta settled. I didn’t think it would be a good idea to talk about all that in front of her. She was easily stressed, and rightfully so, and the situation with his parents felt too personal, anyway. Marta didn’t need to deal with any more of our drama.

As if on cue, Charlie mind linked with me. *What do we do about Marta?*

I glanced in the rearview mirror. Marta was glued to the window. She was reading every sign and grumbling things like: “Oh my god! Is Shake Shack like Burger King? Why did we need another one of those?”

She really seemed harmless.

I sighed. *We owe her. She saved us. And she is nice, isn’t she?*

Charlie nodded. *I agree.*

I turned around to face Marta. “You have nowhere to go, right?”

Marta’s expression dimmed even more. “Yeah. Fifty years is a long time.”

“I bet you can stay at the pack house,” I said.

Marta perked up instantly. “Seriously? You think they’d let me?”

“It’s plenty big, and I’m pretty tight with Xavier,” I said.

Marta looked intrigued. “Who’s he? The Alpha? Is that really what they call each other”

I snorted. “Not exactly, but he’s got a lot of pull. And I’m sure Big Mac will want to talk to you about your experiences—she’s a witch.”

Marta gasped, astonished. “I didn’t know werewolves could be so accommodating to witches.”

I didn’t tell her that our pack house was an exception, not the rule. I would let her optimism remain intact. Smiling, I said, “We have Fae, too.”

Marta’s eyes went wide. “Wow, you guys have an entire magical menagerie at this place, huh?” I was about to reply when suddenly Marta’s expression changed. Her gaze narrowed. “Wait… something’s wrong,” she whispered.

Charlie and I exchanged a look, alarmed.

“What is it?” I asked.

Marta turned to look through the back window of the car. She swallowed roughly. “We’re being followed.”

**Episode 1172**

“Cali? Tell me what happened,” Xavier said, gently pulling back from my kiss. “Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it together.”

The thing, though, was that I couldn’t deal with any of this right now.

I didn’t *want to* fucking deal.

I didn’t want to think about my loving parents fighting, about my sweet dad shouting, about my mom crying. I didn’t want to think about my only sister losing her magic because my mother had made a mistake, didn’t want to think about my only sister hating me without even knowing why. I didn’t want to think about Fenrir and Greyson and the DNA results, or Ava—oh my fucking god, *Ava*, who we just couldn’t seem to shake—saving me from the vampires.

I *definitely* did not want to think about the fucking vampires.

My brain felt foggy, so fed up with fear and concern that more and more tears streamed down my face. I was shaking, staring at Xavier, who looked solid. Reliable.

For a while now, Xavier had been such a reliable source of comfort for me.

A source of love and kindness.

Xavier, my grumpy mate who made me feel so loved—I needed him so much right now that I could cry, but not because of my sadness. Because of my desire.

My desire to be with him and forget about real life and all its problems.

He opened his mouth to speak again, but I didn’t let him. I grabbed him by the nape and pulled him in for another kiss, hard and passionate, the kind that set him off every time.

And, as ever, Xavier delivered.

He groaned into my mouth, pulling me closer until our torsos were practically glued together. I licked into his mouth, pushing him back on the bed to get on his lap, to have him the way I wanted. When I broke the kiss just to breathe and take off his clothes, he stared up at me, dazed.

“Jesus,” he said, panting.

He swallowed when I removed my shirt and shorts to then lean forward to kiss him again. I loved the feeling of him like this, overwhelmed underneath me, hard and shaking. He made a move to flip us over, but I pushed him back down on the bed. His eyes widened.

“Someone’s in a mood,” he teased, trembling as he grabbed onto my hips. “When did you get so bossy, huh?”

We were both just in our underwear now, and I rubbed up against him, just to feel him hiss. It was heady to have all this power over such a strong man. He tried to flip us over again, chuckling when I pushed him back once more.

“Your move then, tiger.”

A delicious jolt washed through me. Xavier was going to let himself be bossed around by me. I loved him for it.

“You feel so good,” I whispered in his ear, biting and licking down his neck. At the same time, I kept rubbing against him. I was pretty sure that the friction, the pressure of his hardness between my legs as I straddled him, could set me off.

I could come, just like this, with Xavier writhing underneath me.

I had zero control over my life right now, but I did have control over this single moment, and the feeling was incredible.

“Does it feel good, baby?” Xavier asked against my lips, gripping my hair tightly at the nape of my neck. “You’re gonna come like that for me?”

I nodded, whining as I looked into his dark blue eyes. He gave me a wolfish grin and flipped us over the second he felt my thighs start to shake. My orgasm was fast and hard, full of sharpness that Xavier’s movements shared. He kissed my mouth and nibbled at my collarbones and tore off my underwear.

Moving down my body, he said, “Spread those legs for me, tiger.” I did, and he put his mouth on me and licked and kissed hard enough for me to yelp. When he felt me teeter over the edge, he moved up my body, my toes curling as I groaned at the sight of him.

“You want it hard?” he rasped against my mouth.

I nodded. “Yes, Xavier. God, please.”

He gave it to me, and I clawed at his back, quivering from his emotion, from the perfect feeling we were sharing. He kissed me when he spilled inside me, he kissed me when I came, and then, he stared at me and shakily whispered, “I love you.”

I repeated the words back to him, and they came from deep within my heart.

I closed my eyes for a moment, spent in Xavier’s arms.

I didn’t feel like crying anymore.

When I opened my eyes, I found Xavier watching me. “What?” I asked, almost startled.

He smiled. “You’re beautiful.”

I did feel beautiful when I was with him.

“I wanted to talk to you about something, actually,” Xavier continued, caressing my cheek.

He looked so handsome and sweet that I couldn’t bear to hear anything negative come out of his mouth. I was so exhausted talking about one bad thing happening after the other. I needed a break from everything. I needed to stay in this cocoon with Xavier.

I didn’t want to hear anything that could ruin our moment.

I just wanted him.

“Tell me later,” I said and pulled him into another kiss.

It started soft, but it quickly evolved to something deeper. Hungrier. Something overwhelming enough to make me forget all my worries.

“You wanna go again?” Xavier asked against my lips, his palm moving from the small my back down to my ass, squeezing.

“Please,” I muttered.

“I like the sound of that,” he said gruffly. “Say it again.”

“*Please*.”

“Pull your hair back and get on your knees. Now”

Shaking, I did the fastest ponytail of my life and got on my knees. I gasped when he grabbed my hair again, winding it up in his fist. I pleaded for Xavier again when he finally pushed inside me. I pleaded for him when picked up his pace and reached between my legs and rubbed circles. I moaned, not sure how I was supporting myself to stay up when I was delirious from pleasure.

“Do you like when I fuck you like this?” he asked. When I didn’t answer he tugged back on my hair. “Answer me.”

“Yes,” I moaned. Then my release began to build. When I started to come, he kept going, while I bit my lip to muffle my scream of pleasure. My orgasm hit moments before his, and Xavier groaned as he leaned against my back.

Being with him was always amazing.

I fought to even out my breathing afterward. Xavier pulled me into his arms softly, tenderly. I laid my head on his chest, feeling overwhelmed by his desire, by his adoration. I caressed his skin, moving my hand along his body to feel hard muscle that was still shaking, but then I noticed the veins on his chest.

They were *fading*.

The sight was so odd that I flinched back. Sure, the veins had their ups and downs, but now they were at the most faded they had ever been.

*Is it my imagination?* I thought, alarmed. *Is my wishful thinking making me see things that are not there? Has all my fucking drama and trauma—with the vampire kidnapping and my parents fighting and Artemis trying to blast my dad and my mom lying to everyone*—*affected my judgment? Because that is totally a possibility here!*

I was slightly freaking out. Just slightly. Just a little.

*Okay, a lot.*

“What’s wrong?” Xavier asked. His voice was gruff. I twisted to face him. His brow was furrowed as he examined my face.

Trying not to hope too hard, in case all my hopes were shattered yet again, I asked, “Are your veins fading? Or is it just the light?”

I traced his chest once more, and Xavier looked down at his skin. He shrugged. “It looks like they’re fading. It happens from time to time. That’s a good sign, right?”

“Good” was relative. That was what magic had taught me. I suddenly realized that I’d never truly sat down to consider what made the veins’ intensity change. Was that one of my many mistakes when it came to dealing with this curse, or was I overthinking things?

*When it comes to ancient magic, you never know*,I told myself.

If Xavier’s veins were fading, what about Greyson’s? The last time I’d been with Greyson, his shirt had been on, and I hadn’t been able to fully see his chest. A sudden wave of guilt hit me as I contemplated the possibility that the curse…

Was the curse saying something to me?

Had the veins’ shifts and changes been trying to communicate something to me all this time?

Was there a chance that every time I got close with one mate, the curse perceived it as me getting closer and closer to a decision—a decision that would in turn literally lead to someone’s *death?*

Wait.

*Fuck.*

I told myself to keep my shit together. Xavier was with me right now. In my bed. He seemed okay. He seemed healthy. But that didn’t guarantee that Greyson was in the same state. Not when it came to a curse whose balance seemed to be threatened by every little thing.

“What are you thinking, Cali?” Xavier asked. He seemed calm. Curious. He would probably be upset if he knew what was going on inside my mind. I just kept upsetting both the men I loved, and that was all there was to it.

I tried to figure out a way to share my thoughts with Xavier without making it sound like I had a preference between the two of them. I was about to offer him an answer when a blood-curdling scream assaulted my ears.

At the same time, the veins on Xavier’s chest gleamed like molten silver.

It was as if the curse was showing off its power.

It was as if the curse knew that I was thinking about Greyson.

The scream didn’t stop, and panic flooded me.

*Did something just happen to Greyson?*

**Episode 1173**

ARTEMIS

The anger wouldn’t go away.

In fact, it had only been renewed now that my Fae magic had left me.

I stood by the far edge of the lake, looking at the dark water like it had personally offended me. I was furious at everyone: Orla, Tom, Cali, werewolves, Fae…

Every single one of them made me feel absolutely livid.

Groaning, I reached for a fallen log, ready to hurl it into the lake just to see the splash ruin the water’s calmness. But the moment I grabbed the piece of wood, I realized that I couldn’t pick it up. What the hell? How could this be? I had always been so strong, so how—

Breaking the Fae promise had drained me of my strength, too.

I felt sick to my stomach, my head pounding at the thought. I was broken. Breaking that promise had ruined me, and the deep injustice of it all made my fury even greater. I couldn’t contain myself.

I kicked at the nearest rock, ready to lash out. The rock was pretty big, though, and—of course—I could no longer propel it into the lake. Wincing in pain, I stepped back—I had no powers, no strength, and now my big toe was hurting. Fighting the urge to scream, I grabbed that damned rock with both hands and finally managed to hurl it into the lake.

The ripple effect was instant, strong and satisfying. A moment later, though, the lake went back to looking peaceful.

It was calm while I wanted to set everything on fire.

*Am I losing my mind?*

The thought was sobering and intimidating enough for me to pause my weird attack om the lake. Shaking, I sat down on that log I hadn’t been able to pick up earlier. I had lost my powers and my strength, but at least…

At least I wasn’t dead because I’d broken the Fae promise.

At least not yet.

I took a deep breath and told myself to process the events as calmly as possible. Sure, my mother had asked me to make that promise, but perhaps I shouldn’t be so quick to blame her. I could have refused her request. I’d known how serious Fae promises were when I’d made it. I’d known the consequences, and yet I had still acted foolishly.

Why hadn’t I been able to say no to Orla? Was it because keeping her secret would have been a sign of trust—a bond that would have had nothing to do with Cali or Tom? Something private for us to share, between mother and daughter? It seemed like I had been so desperate to be accepted by my mother that I had acted without thinking, and now…

Now, the promise had blown up in my face, and I was paying the price for wanting to belong. For craving an intimate relationship with the mother I’d lost as a child.

There was a reason why I’d spent most of my life by myself.

It was safer being alone.

“Artemis!” said a familiar voice from a few feet behind me. I turned to see Rishika. She approached me slowly, cautiously, like she was afraid of my reaction. Or like she saw me as a wounded animal and didn’t want to scare me away.

She came up to me, swallowing nervously when our eyes met. “Hey, is everything okay?” she asked. “Do you feel like talking? I can leave if you don’t…”

“No,” I said. “You can stay.”

Rishika was probably the only person I wasn’t mad at right now.

Gingerly, she sat down beside me on the log. There was a long beat of quiet as we both looked out over the lake. Rishika kept stealing glances at me until she finally broke the silence.

“So…” She cleared her throat. “What was all that about back there? You blew up out of the blue and burned everyone down with you. Like a volcano.”

The way she described it pretty much encapsulated the way I had felt earlier.

I paused for a moment before admitting, “Something feels wrong with me. Ever since I learned that the portal to the Fae world can’t be opened right now…”

“Yeah?” Rishika prompted.

“It just feels like there’s part of me that’s been cut off.”

“And you don’t know how to deal with it…” Rishika trailed off.

I nodded. “I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go back before. But knowing that it’s not a possibility anymore upsets me deeply. Especially since I’ve lost my Fae magic.”

“What’s that got to do with it?” Rishika asked.

“I can’t help but wonder—even if I could go back right now, would I be welcome without my magic? Would I even survive without it?”

Rishika winced in sympathy.

Before she could say anything, I added, “What am I supposed to do? Where do I fit in? Where else can I go?”

My voice cracked. I could feel treacherous tears gathering at the corners of my eyes. I hated this side of me. I hated feeling vulnerable, weepy. I preferred to be a volcano, not a little weakling. I wiped my cheeks, but it was too late. Rishika had seen me crying. Instead of criticizing me, though, she put a comforting arm around my shoulders.

“You can always stay here,” Rishika told me in a soothing tone. “I don’t know what exactly our relationship is, but I do know that you will always be my friend. I’ll always be here for you.”

I reflected on Rishika’s words. The gratitude I felt was deep, and it lifted my spirits. Even if everything was horrible, Rishika was someone I could rely on. Someone I could trust. I’d been so focused on the bad things that had happened to me that I’d forgotten about the positives in my life. Rishika, this compassionate woman who stood by me, was one of them.

I took a deep breath. “Thank you. Knowing that you’re on my team actually makes me feel better.”

Rishika gave me one of her beautiful smiles. “Always.”

My anger had dissipated after Rishika’s admission. It was as if she knew all the right things to say to make me feel less alone, less lost.

“Do you think I should apologize to Tom?” I asked in a guilty whisper.

She smirked. “You mean the human you tried to blast? Yeah, I’d say you owe him an apology.”

I snorted, still feeling guilty over my behavior. “Let’s go.”

We both got up and headed toward the house.

“Have you had Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha?” Rishika asked. “It’s guaranteed to cheer you up.”

I scoffed. “That’s way too sweet for me. What I could really use is a couple of tramalfa shots.”

Rishika seemed confused. “Tramalfa? What is that? A place in Italy?”

“No, it’s a Dark Fae drink. It makes everything better.”

Rishika snorted. “Whiskey usually does that for me. We can check and see what’s in the pantry.”

As Rishika explained the subtle differences between human alcoholic beverages, I readied myself for another face-off with my mother and Cali. My hands were shaking. I put them in my pockets and felt the blade of grass that Vander had given me. I recalled what he’d told me.

*If you ever need me, just call!*

I paused, staring at the blade of grass. Such an odd thing to say about something so normal.

“You coming?” Rishika asked me. I realized that I had stayed back while she’d moved forward toward the house.

“I’ll be there in a second,” I said. “Just have to check on something.”

Rishika nodded. “I’ll get started on finding something for you to drink.”

As Rishika wandered off, I stared at the blade of grass in my hand. How the hell was I supposed to call Vander with it? It wasn’t like Cali’s cellphone box—it was literally just grass. I looked around. At least I was alone and nobody would witness whatever weird thing I was going to do next.

Feeling like an idiot, I moved the blade of grass to my mouth, as if it were Cali’s cellphone. “Vander?” I whispered.

Nothing happened.

Of course nothing happened. I was literally talking to a piece of grass! What did I expect? Huffing, I accidentally dropped the blade of grass… on the grass. This was ridiculous. *I* was ridiculous. But even though I was certain that the blade of grass was useless, I didn’t like the idea of just throwing it away.

Irritated with myself, I started to look around, scrambling to find it while grumbling Vander’s name. At this point, why *not* call his name? I had no idea how this nature magic worked, so I could be as silly as I wanted. Maybe Vander and his blade of grass were hiding under that rock, or behind that bush, or—

My thoughts were interrupted when I collided with someone.

I gasped, about to jump up and defend myself, even without my powers, but then I looked up and saw the stranger.

“Why hello, Artemis.” Vander stood there, grinning at me widely. “You called?”

**Episode 1174**

GREYSON

There was someone screaming in my house, so it had to be a day ending in Y. That was how drama worked around here. So what was it this time?

Sighing deeply, I shook my head and rushed toward the kitchen, where the sound had originated from. More of the pack streamed into the room, but when I looked around, there was no blood anywhere. I couldn’t smell any blood either.

The entire kitchen was full of a plethora of other scents, though, almost overwhelming in their intensity. Cali had mentioned that Tom really liked using spices while cooking, so I wasn’t that surprised. What did weird me out, though, was Lola retching into the sink.

What had happened to her? Had she eaten something that had upset her stomach? But I knew for a fact that Tom was a great cook. A nonplussed-looking Jay was standing next to his mate, holding a loaf of bread.

“What’s going on?” I asked Jay.

Before Jay could answer, Lola spat into the sink and spoke up. “I’ve been poisoned! They secretly fed me garlic!”

*Right.*

I seriously had no idea what she was talking about.

“What’s going on here, Lola?” I asked. “Garlic?”

“Lola, we’ve been through this before.” Jay sighed in the most long-suffering way possible. “They call it garlic bread because there’s *garlic* in it!”

Lola sniffled and looked at Tom, who seemed very lost. “How was I supposed to know?” she demanded. “It just looks like bread!”

“It literally smells like garlic. How come you didn’t smell it before eating it?” Jay asked her before turning to Tom. “By the way, can I eat this?”

“Wait a minute here,” I said, pointing at Lola. “You ate garlic bread and then screamed bloody murder because it had garlic in it? Is that what you’re saying?” I turned to her mate. “Jay, is that what she’s saying?”

Jay offered yet another long-suffering sigh. “Yup.”

Lola looked deeply offended. “But garlic is like poison to me!”

My jaw tightened. “What’s the issue here? Are you allergic to garlic? Is that what you’re telling me?” I glanced at Jay, because it felt like his mate was speaking a whole other language.

“She’s not.” Jay shook his head, turning to her. “You’re *not* turning into a vampire, Lola.”

Lola continued to look offended as Cali came rushing into the kitchen. She immediately made a beeline for me. “Greyson! Are you okay?”

I frowned. “I wasn’t the one who screamed. Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

Meanwhile, Lola had stopped spitting into the sink, and now she was washing her mouth out with… *soap?*

I swear, there were days I would rather run into battle again than deal with some of this bullshit.

“Why is Lola doing that?” Cali asked me, as if there was any reasonable answer to her question. “What’s going on right now?”

“Nobody really knows,” I said.

“Excuse me,” Tom said, nudging me out of the way. “I have to stir the sauce!”

“But of course!” Lola scoffed. “You want to put more garlic in it to poison me like you did with the bread!”

Tom stared at Lola, eyebrows raised. “For the last time, Lola, I did not try to sneak garlic into the bread. If you hate garlic so much, make sure to check in with the cook before eating anything!”

Everybody started arguing, and it felt like my head was about to explode.

“Everyone, be *quiet*!” I barked and, finally, they shut up. I pointed at Lola. “You shouldn’t scream like that over nothing—”

Lola dared to interrupt me. “Poisoning me is not *nothing!*”

“If you think that Cali’s father would poison you on purpose, you’re delusional,” I told Lola. “Stop being so dramatic. You know that vampires aren’t really affected by garlic.”

Lola recoiled, probably because she didn’t like the truth. Too bad I didn’t give a shit. Before she could say anything, I turned to the rest of the group and raised my voice so anyone else around could hear me. “The entire pack is in a state of emergency after Cali’s kidnapping. We don’t need this kind of bullshit. Everyone better calm down.”

Jay nodded and turned to Lola. He said something in her ear, and she huffed, but I had other things to worry about right now. I faced Cali. She was patting me down, like she was certain that I was hurt in some way and wasn’t telling her.

“Cali, seriously? I said I’m okay,” I said. “Why did you think that something happened to me in the first place?”

“Yeah,” Xavier said, walking up to Cali and me. “I was wondering the same thing.”

Cali looked between us, spluttering, “I was just worried—I heard a scream, and…”

I arched an eyebrow. “And you thought that a scream would be my way of reacting to danger? Or that Lola screamed because she saw me bleeding on the floor?”

Cali blushed and glanced at Lola. “Something like that. I was just worried and got confused. Let me go check on Lola…”

As Cali spoke to her friend, I side-eyed Xavier. “You believe that?”

Xavier shook his head, sighing. “Don’t even know.”

Just then, Rishika walked into the kitchen and grinned. “Something smells really good! What’s going on?”

Tom threw up his hands in frustration. “Have any of you heard of the expression‘too many cooks’? Because this is too many, and all of you are interrupting my stress-cooking!”

I knew that Cali’s father had just fought with her mother and was already upset, so I made sure not to tell him that this was not his kitchen. Even though I wanted to. Today didn’t seem to be a good day for him.

Right on cue, he screeched, “Oh my god, *my lasagna*!” He pulled a pan from the oven and stared at it miserably. “It nearly burned!” He waved us all off. “This is unacceptable—all of you, get out!”

Xavier nudged me, smirking. “Who’s the Alpha now?”

I growled at Xavier, who laughed just as Fenrir barreled into the kitchen. The kid had missed Tom’s “GET OUT” memo. Staring up at Tom hopefully, he said, “Can I please have a snack, please, Mr. Tom?”

Tom’s irritation pretty much melted when he saw the little guy.

“Aren’t you the politest young man I’ve ever met,” he told the kid, clearly impressed. “What kind of snack would you like?”

Not reading the room, Rishika joked, “I heard the garlic bread was great.”

Lola glared at her, and the two of them started arguing, Cali chiming in. At the same time, Fenrir was asking Tom all sorts of questions about cooking. Throughout the chaos, I saw Maren glance over at Xavier and then stare at me. She mouthed, “*Can I talk to you?*”

I preferred that over staying in this kitchen, where the members of my pack were acting like toddlers while the actual toddler in the room was probably the sanest person around. Even Cali was acting weird right now—she hadn’t given me a satisfying explanation for her behavior. Why would she hear a scream and assume that something bad had happened to me?

Frowning, I walked out of the kitchen and gestured for Maren to follow me.

“I’m guessing the scream was a false alarm?” Maren asked, once we reached the living room.

I sighed, nodding.

Maren snorted. “This pack house is very… lively. Fenrir seems to enjoy it.”

“*Lively* is one way to put it.” I scoffed. Then, I made sure to ask, “How is Fenrir doing after the vampire attack? Still okay?”

“He never truly realized the danger,” Maren said. “I managed to shield him from most of the situation.”

I shook my head. “I hate the way things unraveled, Maren. He shouldn’t have been the one to alert us. That’s a lot of responsibility for a kid.”

“He sees it as a game, thankfully,” Maren said. “So I don’t think he’s been traumatized or anything. He just likes sniffing out things and people.”

“He’s got a good little werewolf nose,” I said without thinking. Then I winced. That kind of comment was way too intimate, too tender.

But Maren just smiled. “That was what I wanted to talk to you about. Fenrir and his werewolf abilities. I’m sure you’ve noticed that he keeps shifting randomly. Should I be worried?”

“Nah, it’s just a phase,” I said. “When a child realizes they can do it, any little thought can trigger the shift.”

“Shouldn’t we be trying to help him control it, though?” she asked.

“I can talk to Fenrir about it, if you like. I could teach him a few things, help him understand that sometimes shifting isn’t a good idea. What smells are bad and he should alert us to, like the vampires.”

Maren smiled again. “That sounds great. Thanks so much.”

I cleared my throat. “No problem.”

I was about to walk away when Maren spoke up again. “How do you deal with it?”

“The pack, you mean?” I arched an eyebrow, not sure what she was getting at.

Maren’s expression was serious. “No. I mean… How do you deal with knowing that Cali is *with* Xavier?”

**Episode 1175**

ARTEMIS

Vander had just appeared out of thin air, right in front of me.

I gasped, taking a step back. Casually, he looked around, smirking. “A werewolf pack house—nice. Haven’t been to one of these in a long while.”

I scoffed. “You’re not missing much.”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, I wondered yet again what was wrong with me. The werewolves hadn’t even done anything to me lately, but I was still annoyed at them.

Vander looked behind him, and his enthusiasm seemed to go up a notch. “Oh, and a lake! Quite the romantic setting.” He faced me, smirking. “Are you sure you didn’t just call me here for a date?”

I stared at the guy, trying to process what I was hearing… Had Rishika been right all along? Was Vander *flirting* with me? Did I *look* like I was in a flirty mood? Sure, he was attractive—handsome in a way that Cali would’ve characterized as “hot”—but that didn’t matter right now. He was obviously very bad at reading my face. I most definitely had not called him here to flirt with him.

Ignoring his entire vibe, I asked, “Any update on the portals? Have they opened?”

Vander’s playful expression dimmed. He sighed, shaking his head. “Nope. No developments whatsoever.”

Bitterness settled inside me. I’d really hoped that Vander would have had some good news for me. I could’ve definitely used some of that, just to figure out what to do next. I couldn’t imagine spending the entirety of my life stuck in the human world without any powers. What would that mean? Would I need to get a job? Would I be forced to interact with humans and be nice to them?

“Can’t you try again?” I asked. I tried not to sound too pathetic, but I was having a hard time. “Maybe the portals have opened since the last time you checked.”

Vander seemed thoughtful. He shrugged. “I can always ask nicely. Usually that does the trick. Let me see…” Vander trailed off, and then popped away.

I squeaked and jumped away, startled, and then I was alone all over again. The lake remained peaceful, rubbing in my face how calm its life was while mine dissolved into chaos.

Vander was gone long enough that I started wondering if he was ever going to come back. *Maybe I should head back to the house?* Rishika was waiting for me, anyway. Testing out a bunch of human alcoholic beverages with a pretty girl to forget my sorrows sounded like a better plan than waiting for Vander and wasting away out here.

But just as I was about to leave, Vander manifested out of nowhere.

I stared at him, vibrating with anticipation. “Well?”

Vander shook his head, looking disappointed. “No luck with any of the portals. They’re still shut down.”

I cursed under my breath.

Suddenly, I didn’t want to go inside to drink with Rishika—it felt like no alcohol in the world would make me feel better. I sat back down on the log and fought to keep the tears at bay. I was certain that the answer to somehow reversing this Fae promise curse was in the Fae world, but since the portals were shut, my hope was dwindling.

I couldn’t get my magic back, I couldn’t find the Orb, I couldn’t find Kadmos…

I wasn’t sure if I even wanted to find Kadmos, though. The thought of having a father was hard to process. As hard as it had been to process the idea of having a mother. How different would my life have been if Kadmos had been alive to see me, to hold me when I was born? Would he and I have become close? Could we become close now, if he were alive?

I didn’t want to build up my expectations.

Hoping was way too dangerous.

Especially right now, when I felt stuck and everything was at a standstill. Everything felt *wrong*. It was like I’d told Rishika: there was something inside me that felt sharp. Broken. It was the only way I could explain the way I had treated Tom. He wasn’t my father, but he had always been so nice to me. He’d always treated me with respect and care, even though he barely knew me. And he clearly loved Cali.

I felt horrible about the way I’d treated him.

I needed to apologize as soon as possible. I couldn’t bear the idea of him thinking of me as someone who wanted to hurt him. I had never wanted to hurt him—attacking him had felt like an out-of-body experience. If I had truly managed to hurt him, I would have never been able to forgive myself.

“You seem down,” Vander said, taking a seat next to me on the log. “What are you thinking?”

“Down” was such an understatement.

“You have no idea,” I grumbled.

“I believe I do,” Vander said. “In all my years of existing, the Fae have always been full of life and mischief. They always get into all sorts of adventures. Some of them are actually old enough to rival my age!”

That sounded intense. “And how old are you?”

Vander scratched his head. “So old I’ve lost track. But I’m older than everything else around you, pretty much.”

I paused, taking in his words. “Doesn’t that get kind of lonely?”

Vander shrugged, gesturing around. “I’m never *really* alone. I have all of nature.”

That was sort of how I’d felt in the Fae world. But I’d still felt lonely. And I felt lonely now, even though I was surrounded by people. I felt lonely even though Cali had told me she loved me, even though my mother had tried to convince me that I was welcome in her home. Even though Tom liked cooking for me and taking care of me. After years of being on my own, with nobody to give a damn about me, having so many people pay attention to me felt overwhelming.

And after breaking my mother’s promise—a promise that I had made just because I was so desperate to feel connected to her—I felt like the biggest fool. Like I shouldn’t have been so attached to her in the first place.

“So what’s been bothering you?” Vander asked again, nudging me. “Don’t hold back. I’ve heard it all.”

At this point, there was no reason for me to keep anything a secret. “I broke a Fae promise to my mother, and now I’ve lost my magic,” I said.

Vander whistled slowly. “That’s some serious stuff. But look on the upside—you’re alive!”

A very debatable upside, wasn’t it?

Vander kept talking. “The world’s a much nicer place when you can breathe the air, feel the sunlight, dance under the moonlight. But sometimes we forget all that, even if those things are so important. I was feeling down one day myself, and a platypus taught me a neat little trick to help me remember all the good things in my life—”

“Wait, a *what* now?”

Vander grinned. “A platypus! It looks like… Well, it’s cute. But that’s not the point. The point is that whenever you’re feeling blue, you should just whistle until you forget what’s making you sad.”

I gave him a flat look. “You’re joking, right?”

Vander chuckled and started whistling, elbowing me to join in. This was *ridiculous*.

“No amount of whistling is going to solve my problems,” I told him seriously. “Besides, I hate whistling, and I hate being whistled at. I knew a miner who used to whistle all the time, and he was always off-key and grating.”

Vander cringed, stopping. “Yikes. Did my whistling bring back some bad memories?”

“Everything’s a bad memory,” I said, rolling my eyes. “And everything is especially bad right now.”

Vander frowned. “I can imagine how hard it is to lose your powers. It must be like missing a part of yourself. A part of your identity.”

I stared at him. This was the first serious thing he’d ever said to me. “Exactly.”

There was a pressure behind my eyes that I ignored. I wasn’t about to start crying all over again. It was enough that I’d acted like a vulnerable fool in front of Rishika.

Vander sighed. “Things aren’t looking so great, huh?”

“I know I’m not very good company right now,” I said. “So I guess… unless you have some magical answer up your sleeve to fix my problems, you should probably go.”

Vander hesitated. “Well, there’s one more thing I can try…”

He seemed hesitant, but I shrugged. “If you think it will help, lay it on me. It’s not like I have any other options here.”

“Are you sure?” Vander said, his eyebrows raised.

Now I was curious. “Yes. Whatever it is, just do it.”

Without another word, Vander’s expression changed. An unprecedented intensity took over his face, and then he leaned forward and kissed me!

**Episode 1176**

The plan had been to get Greyson alone, make him remove his shirt to see those veins, and figure out what was going on. Could his veins be fading like Xavier’s? Or had Xavier’s veins been positively influenced somehow after I’d been intimate with him?

Could I have set off a ticking time bomb without realizing it by sleeping with Xavier?

*Am I making a momentary choice and setting off a ticking time bomb every time I sleep with either one of them?* I wondered anxiously.

“I thought I said that everyone should leave the kitchen,” Dad said, nudging me. I was pulled out of my thoughts, startled. I looked around—everybody had left, apart from me. Lola was still upset about the garlic thing, but she would be fine. *Seriously*. That friend of mine kept finding new things to make a fuss about.

There was no way she was becoming a vampire.

*Right?*

“Sorry,” I told Dad, ignoring that last train of thought. My plate was already full here. My time with Xavier had been a wonderful break from the madness, but now real life was back at it with a vengeance.

“I’ll get going…” I trailed off, dejected.

“I was just kidding, Caliana,” Dad said. “Everybody else should leave, but my kid can always stay to watch me cook. Just like when you were a little girl.”

There was a softness to Dad’s smile. He seemed much better than earlier, when he’d fought with Mom. *Thank god*, I thought, relieved. I’d been wanting to speak to him as well, actually, but I felt too insecure to broach the subject. His positive expression, though, gave me hope.

“You seem skeptical,” he commented, eyeing me. “I wasn’t actually trying to trick Lola, by the way.”

I shook my head, pressing my lips together. “I know—Lola’s just exaggerating, like always. I wasn’t thinking about that. I just…” The words got stuck in my throat. I’d never in a million years thought that I would be asking my father something like this. “Are you thinking about divorcing Mom because she lied to you?”

Dad froze, standing there, holding the spoon mid-air as he was about to taste the sauce. He turned to me, eyes wide. “*Come again?*”

The words stumbled out of me anxiously. “You two were arguing earlier, and I’ve never seen you do anything like that before. You rarely yell at anyone…”

Dad breathed deeply. “I’m sorry you witnessed that. I was hurt and angry. But I love your mother with all my heart. I would never leave her. *Never*.”

My heart grew ten sizes, full of hope. “So everything’s okay with you two?”

*Oh my god, YAY!* I thought*. One less problem to think about! Though I still have to figure out why Artemis was so angry at me, and what’s going on with those veins on my mates’ chests...*

It really seemed that the problems never ended. *Ugh.*

Right on cue, Dad shook his head. “No, everything’s not okay. But…” He tasted the sauce he’d been making. “Being in a relationship is just like cooking. Sometimes it takes a little time for the sauce to come together.” He stared at me. “Your mom and I just need a little time, Caliana. That’s all.”

“But the fighting doesn’t mean you’re breaking up?” I asked, sniffling.

He pulled me in for a bear hug. “Of course not.”

“She means well, you know,” I whispered, hugging Dad tight. “She made a mistake, but she means well.”

Dad sighed, facing me. He looked tired but as sweet as always. “I know, sweetheart. We just need to make sure she doesn’t keep us in the dark again. I don’t think it’s fair on any of us. She should’ve known by now that honesty is the best policy.”

*True*, I thought ruefully.

“Sorry that Artemis tried to blast you,” I muttered.

He shook his head. “She’s upset. I just hope she gets her Fae whatsits back soon.”

I swallowed roughly, my heart racing. One more thing for me to worry about.

*Speaking of, I still need to talk to Greyson*, I thought, sighing internally.

“What is this magical dish called lasagna that everyone is talking about?” Torin rushed into the kitchen, looking around excitedly. At least there was *someone* around here having a good time.

When Dad started explaining to Torin how lasagna was made and how the secret was in the sauce, I had to step out. I needed to find Greyson. I hoped I’d be able to get him alone ASAP to discuss the vein issue, but instead—I found him with Fenrir on the front porch.

I scoffed internally. *How could I forget? That’s yet another thing for me to worry about—the DNA test. Could the results create even MORE problems? Because I feel pretty maxed out at the moment.*

“… the grocery store?” I overheard Fenrir say to Greyson.

“No,” Greyson replied seriously.

“The ice cream shop?” Fenrir went on.

“No,” Greyson replied in that same tone.

What on earth were they talking about?

“The playground, then?” Fenrir asked hopefully.

Greyson pressed his lips together to hide a smile. I could tell. “No, Fenrir. You can’t shift at the playground either.”

The kid’s face fell. He was precious. Who could say no to that face? *Damn it!*

“Well… Maybe you *can* shift at the playground, but only if it’s just you and your mom,” Greyson finally said. “But you’d better ask her first.”

Fenrir gave Greyson the widest of grins. “YAY! I’LL GO TELL MOMMY!”

He dashed into the house, but not before waving at me. “Hi, Cali!”

He really was adorable, and *so* polite. I wanted to die from the cuteness, and that was extremely inconvenient.

Greyson walked over to me, his face expressionless. “Hey,” he muttered awkwardly. “I was…”

“Teaching Fenrir how to be a werewolf. I saw,” I said. Also awkwardly. “That’s nice of you. He’s a good kid,” I admitted.

Greyson peered at me intensely.

“We never finished our conversation earlier, Cali,” he said, changing the subject. “Why did you think that something bad had happened to me when you heard a scream?”

The image of Xavier’s fading veins flashed through my mind. Cautiously, I asked, “You’re saying that you’re feeling fine, then?”

“Cali,” Greyson said impatiently. “I really need you to stop beating around the fucking bush and tell me what—”

“Show me your chest,” I blurted out.

Greyson blinked at me in shock. “What?”

“I want to see your chest. Please?”

Greyson looked more weirded out than I’d seen him in a while. “Why?”

I sighed. “Please don’t ask me. Just show me.”

He arched an eyebrow, taking a step closer. “Not before you tell me what’s so important about my chest. Other than my abs.” He raised an eyebrow.

I pressed my lips together before admitting, “The veins. I need to see them. I need to see the state they’re in. Don’t ask me why.”

He rolled his eyes. “Cali—”

“I’m worried about my mate. Is that so bad?”

Greyson shot me a fond but long-suffering look and lifted his shirt. My eyes roamed from his abs to his chest… Unlike Xavier’s, the veins on Greyson’s chest were not fading. In fact, they seemed worse.

I felt my stomach clench. “You didn’t say anything about them getting like this…”

He shrugged. “It depends. Sometimes they look worse. I’ve learned to ignore it.” He dropped his shirt, reaching out to hold my hand. “What’s this all about?”

My voice broke. “Yours are getting worse… but Xavier’s are fading.”

Greyson squinted at me. “How do you know…” He paused. “Never mind. I get it.”

I could see the flicker of hurt plain as day on Greyson’s handsome face. As ever, it hurt me to hurt him. I hated this entire ordeal, and I felt more stuck that ever.

“When I saw Xavier’s veins fade, I was worried I might’ve accidentally done something for yours to get worse,” I admitted.

Greyson rose my hand to his lips, kissing it. “I’m fine. You shouldn’t blame yourself for anything.”

I scoffed bitterly. “Right.”

“I mean it, Cali,” he said. “I know this is hard on you, I don’t want to make it even harder. Unless you’ve chosen Xavier, there’s nothing to worry about.”

I wanted to believe that. This back and forth I felt was killing me—and literally killing the men I loved. Would it ever end?

“The veins are nothing,” Greyson went on. “Ignore them.”

But how could I? There was a pattern here that I’d noticed before but had only now recognized: when I was with Xavier, Greyson’s veins got worse; when I was with Greyson, Xavier’s got worse.

Could we have interpreted the curse wrong all along, from the very beginning?

Was there a chance that every time I slept with Xavier I was making a choice, and that was why Greyson’s veins grew, and vice versa? But if that were true, how would things evolve between all three of us as we continued down this path? This path of me choosing one over the other and switching between them all the time?

Mrs. Smith had talked to me about this from the beginning—about the fact that being with both men could cause accidental harm. And that very obviously seemed to be the case when it came to those veins. I was just a selfish jerk for not having connected the dots sooner.

The solution had been there all along, but it had seemed too painful for me to accept.

I had been in denial, but now that I saw the truth, I couldn’t keep stalling.

I could no longer stop myself from doing the right thing for Greyson and Xavier. I needed to…

I needed to stop seeing both my mates.

**Episode 1177**

LOLA

I stood by the living room window and looked outside. The sun hadn’t set yet, so it wasn’t safe for me to go out. I pushed my sunglasses up my nose. Everyone had made fun of me for the garlic thing earlier, but this was serious business. I wasn’t messing around here, and I wasn’t doing anything for attention.

I could’ve sworn I’d felt a tickle in my throat when I’d bitten into that bread!

It had obviously been my body rejecting the garlic.

… Or maybe there was just too much pepper. Tom sure loved his pepper.

I sighed to myself, shaking my head. I wasn’t sure what had been going on with me lately. I felt normal in general—as normal as I could be as a person—but there was just this sense that I couldn’t shake. Maybe it was just the anxiety of getting bitten by a vampire…

But what if it was something more?

“Hey.” Jay’s familiar voice made me jump. I shouldn’t have been so startled—something was seriously wrong with me. I had to get a grip.

“Hey,” I squeaked, fixing the glasses on my face.

Jay placed his hand on my shoulder softly. “Maybe we should talk?” he asked. “Somewhere where we can be alone.”

I nodded. “That’s probably a good idea.”

We went upstairs to our room, and Jay closed the door behind him. I stood by the bed awkwardly as he took me in, smirking.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, scowling.

Jay walked up to me and gently took my sunglasses off. “What are you even doing wearing these, silly?”

I gave him a “duh” look. “It’s very important to protect your eyes, you know. UV rays don’t mess around. Also, sunglasses are cool—everyone knows that!”

“You’re inside, Lola,” Jay told me slowly.

I scoffed. “So what? I could try making this a thing: indoor sunglasses. Do you want in?”

Jay pressed his lips together, hiding a smile. “I think I’ll pass.”

I stopped messing around and told him the truth. “My eyes have become more sensitive to light, Jay. I’m being serious here.”

Jay chuckled. I usually loved it when he chuckled or smiled because he was gorgeous, but I did not appreciate his attitude right now.

“You’re making fun of me like you did in the kitchen!” I burst out.

Jay took my hands in his, still smiling. “I didn’t mean to laugh at you earlier. I’m sorry, baby.”

I frowned. “You’re lucky you’re hot and I can’t seem to stay mad at you.”

Jay kept pressing his lips together, so I suspected that he still wanted to laugh. “Either way, I think you should know that there’s no reason for you to freak out about the garlic, Lola,” he said. “The whole thing about vampires being allergic to it is a bunch of nonsense.”

I gasped. “You think all my worries are *nonsense*?”

“I never said that,” Jay said calmly. “But you have to admit you’re a little bit hung up on this whole vampire thing.”

I pouted, sitting on the bed. “I guess you’re right. I’m not sure what’s happening to me.”

Jay sat down next to me, nudging me with his elbow. “I have a theory. Do you want to hear it?”

I perked up. “I’m all ears.”

“A big part of you was affected by that spell that took away your wolf,” Jay said. “I know how much you wanted to become a full werewolf, so the idea of becoming another supernatural being might be the closest you can get to you maintaining some part of your identity. Even if it means turning into a vampire.”

I paused, taking in Jay’s words. “That’s a good theory. Maybe you’re right… Or I could just be upset by everything and lashing out.”

I thought back to my conversation with Cali about the mate mark, and suddenly, my eyes felt scratchy. I sighed.

Jay elbowed me again. “Come on, spit it out.”

I sniffled. “I always thought we’d be able to give each other the werewolf mate mark when we got married, you know? I always used to dream of our wedding and how beautiful it would be. But now that I’m human, I won’t be able to go through the ceremony with the mate mark.”

“So what?” Jay asked, confused.

I kneaded at my eye with the heel of my palm. “Without the mate mark, our union will be less special. It’s like… I’m not able to give you everything you need anymore.”

Jay chuckled again. This time, though, instead of being annoyed at him, I was relieved by his reaction. “Lola, *please*,” he said. “I love you exactly just as you are. You’re already everything I need.”

He pulled me into a hug, and I sniffled. “Even if I’m a drama queen?”

Jay faced me, grinning. “I love that you’re a drama queen.” He winked. “It keeps things exciting.”

It was my turn to chuckle. I really loved this man.

Stroking his cheek, I leaned forward to brush my lips over his. “I’ll show you exciting,” I teased, pushing him back on the bed.

He grinned, helping me take off his T-shirt. I sat back and admired the gorgeous planes of his muscular body before leaning forward. I started to kiss from his mouth to his jawline, down his neck and chest. His abs started heaving as I unbuckled his belt. I mouthed at him through his briefs and he groaned, stroking my cheeks and the corners of my lips with his thumb.

His gaze adoring and heavy on me, Jay watched as took him in my mouth, sucked and licked and kissed him in the way that he’d always liked. He groaned, arching his hips toward me, and I felt so powerful knowing that I could make him feel this way. The sight and taste of him was so hot that I reached down my shorts to touch myself.

Jay gasped. “I want… I want you,” he breathed. How could I ever say no to that?

I moved up the length of his body. He quickly discarded my clothes, helping me straddle him. I sank down on him, moaning at the amazing sensation, at how wonderfully we always fit together. He pulled me forward by the back of the neck and kissed me, reaching between my legs at the same time, shuddering when he felt how wet I was. He started rubbing the sensitive nerves there, and I whimpered, feeling hot all over.

“You’re so perfect for me,” he whispered. “I love you so much, Lola.”

I believed every word that was coming out of his mouth. I rode him hard and fast, and he gripped my hips, stroking and rubbing me all over, his mouth hot and searing on my neck. I felt my whole body tighten at his ministrations. After I came for the first time, he flipped us over and kept moving inside me, making the heat in my belly rise again.

I fucking loved every second of it.

His hips bucked sharply against mine, and I wouldn’t have had it any other way—I didn’t want him to treat me like I was fragile, like I was human and breakable. I wanted him to want me exactly like he used to, and right now, I was certain that he did.

The angle of his thrusts was just right for me to shiver and pulse all over him again. He bit into my shoulder, coming at the same time, engulfing me with his pleasure.

“I love you,” I said, locking my thighs around him. “I love you so much.”

Jay whispered the words back to me and held me tight. He kissed my forehead before rolling over and pulling me into his arms, smiling at me. We were both panting, and I was still high from my orgasms. The warmth of him made me feel dizzy, warm, so beautiful…

When I was suddenly struck by a heightening of my senses.

The sunlight through the window was blinding. The atmosphere in the room became heavy with the scent of sex. I was acutely aware of Jay’s heartbeat, the rush of the blood in my mate’s veins. I suddenly felt that same pull toward his neck, but this time it was accompanied by this dry itch in my throat.

“What are you thinking?” Jay asked, caressing my arm.

I swallowed thickly, shaking my head. “Nothing. All good.”

I excused myself and went to the bathroom, splashing some water on my cheeks to cool down. I *really* needed to fucking relax. This was nothing—I’d probably only heard Jay’s heartbeat because it was beating fast.

I tried to shake off the feeling, and it mercifully began to subside.

Jay had to be right. I’d just been up in my head about all the supernatural bullshit and how it was affecting my identity as a person. Satisfied with that explanation, I wiped down my face and looked in the mirror.

There was nobody there.

There was nobody in the mirror.

*I* wasn’t there. I couldn’t see my reflection.

I screamed.

**Episode 1178**

“I was just going to…” I gestured vaguely in the direction of the kitchen. “Grab some water. That’s where I was headed. Excuse me,” I mumbled, backing away from Greyson. I could see he was frowning after me, confused, but I didn’t have it in me to say more. My mind was spinning, and I felt like I might pass out if I didn’t get some air.

Had I really just decided not to date *either* Xavier or Greyson?

I made it to the kitchen and grabbed an icy cold bottle of water from the fridge, then, trying to slide through the crowd in the kitchen unnoticed, I headed out the back door.

I supposed this decision—the not dating thing—was what had been coming all along. When I made it down the lawn to the lake, I took a long drink of water and breathed deeply, trying to clear my head. I looked out across the calm water of the lake—so smooth it reflected the steely grey sky and the ring of emerald-green trees on the far side—and then turned to look back up at the pack house.

As much as I hated to admit it, maybe my parents had the right idea—for me to go back to Minnesota. Maybe I *did* need to step away from everything for a while. Maybe there was something I could try to figure out—a way to fix the way the curse had been redirected. Maybe there was still something out there that could neutralize it.

Maybe I could go back to the Obaltarion, and Steinar could help me find something that would help me figure it out. That library was huge. We had to have only seen a tiny portion of it during our last visit. There had to be a whole section on curse breaking, and at least one passing reference to this curse in particular.

I took a deep breath as a breeze blew the sharp, cold smell of pine trees across the lake toward me. It just felt… *improbable* that there wasn’t a magical solution to this curse. But, then again, maybe there wasn’t. I wasn’t sold on asking Hypatia for help, though Steinar thought that was where I should start. Maybe I should.

With a sigh, I dropped to sit on a fallen log and looked up at the house again. It was a massive structure, like a log cabin on steroids, but it looked strangely small in its massive surroundings. Context was funny that way—making even the biggest things seem small and unimportant by comparison.

My eyes ranged across the tall pines that bordered the house on either side. I lingered on the shadows, though logically I knew I had nothing to fear. I didn’t feel the same way I had earlier, when the vampire had been near. And I was grateful that I’d been able to escape his clutches relatively unscathed… though that was all thanks to Ava.

I still wasn’t sure how I felt about being indebted to her for that.

When the sliding back door opened, I looked up. Torin came out, and he smiled and waved when he saw me.

“Hi, Cali,” he called, heading toward me. But his smile had disappeared by the time he reached me, and he was frowning by the time he sat down. “You look kind of down. What’s up? Is anything wrong?”

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to shout, *YES! EVERYTHING!* But I shook my head. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

Torin looked concerned, but then he brightened. “I know what will cheer you up!”

“What?” I asked warily.

“A hot air balloon!”

“What?” I asked, thunderstruck.

“Oh.” He frowned. “I figured you’d know what it was. So, a hot air balloon is a bag filled with heated air, and underneath it is a basket that people can ride in—”

“I know what a hot air balloon *is*, Torin!” I snapped, feeling bad instantly. “I just don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh.” Torin smiled. “I’m talking about a date, of course! A romantic hot air balloon date complete with a picnic in the sky,” he finished, waving his hand in an arc over his head. “Doesn’t that sound totally romantic?”

“It does,” I admitted. “But not for me.”

“What do you mean?” Torin asked, looking worried.

“There aren’t going to be any more dates,” I said.

The blood drained out of Torin’s face. “*What?* What do you mean *no more dates*? Does that mean you’ve chosen?” He frowned again. “Or *not* chosen, or whatever? Is that why?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” I said. I sighed. “Just between us, Torin, I don’t feel like I should be dating either Greyson *or* Xavier.”

“*Really?*” Torin asked, his eyes wide. “But, why? You’re in love with both of them, aren’t you? I thought you wanted to explore things and see what happened.”

I smiled sadly. “Of course I’m in love with them, but I’m afraid that I’m hurting both of them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just feel… selfish,” I admitted. “I’m with both of them, right under both of their noses. They have to deal with it. It’s not fair to them.” I shook my head. “I’m not sure if the veins would get worse even if I made a decision—even if it was unofficial.”

“Wow,” Torin breathed, looking at me with awe. “That’s really big of you, Cali. But I see where you’re coming from. I was really worried about you—especially after Greyson was hurt. I never intended for the dates to hurt anyone.”

“I know you didn’t,” I said gently.

Torin sat for a moment, apparently thinking, looking out at the lake. “So, how are you going to break it to them?”

I closed my eyes as his question closed around my heart like a squeezing fist. “I don’t know for sure. I don’t have the perfect words, but I think they’ll both understand where I’m coming from.”

Torin nodded slowly. “Sure. They’re both reasonable. Even Xavier, when he wants to be.” I glared at him, and he laughed. “But, honestly, two werewolves in love with a Fae? It feels like a fairytale. Like a bedtime story I would have heard as a kid.”

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

“Oh, you know, like how Fae are told to be wary of werewolves and everything,” Torin explained, grinning. “It’s just funny that you fell in love with two of them.”

“Yeah,” I said grimly, staring out at the lake again. “It’s hilarious.”

If he noticed my tone, he didn’t let on. Torin was in his head again. “It’s got to be pretty rare. I wonder if the difference in the magics between you all has something to do with why the curse happened at all.”

I stared at him, thunderstruck. “Do you think so?”

Could it be that just being Fae had created all this mess? That all this was just the Fae world laughing at me—creating a mess because it could, and because it was bored and liked to stir up trouble? I huffed with irritation, just considering it. Everything in me wished this had never happened to me—that it wasn’t my life this had happened to—but… I wouldn’t wish this on anyone else either.

There were steps behind us, and we both turned around to see Xavier approaching.

“Hi, Torin,” he said gruffly. “Do you mind if I steal Cali for a minute?”

Torin’s face lit up in a huge smile. “Are you *kidding* me? With that Bachelor Nation reference? Of course you can!” He stood up and—behind Xavier’s back—gave me a huge wink.

Xavier looked at me. “Can we take a walk? I want to talk to you about something.”

“Yeah, sure. I want to talk to you, too, actually,” I said, getting to my feet with a sigh. Now was as good a time as any to let him know about my decision.

We started off around the lake, but heading up the grass toward the house. The day was cold and overcast, and a cool breeze wrapped around us as we walked slowly in silence.

We both spoke at the same time. “So what did you want to talk about?”

We looked at each other and smiled.

“You go ahead,” Xavier said.

“No, you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Xavier, just say what you have to say,” I said, sounding a little harsher than I’d intended. I was feeling tense and keyed up.

He seemed to be too, and he took a long breath, blowing it out through his nose as he looked up at the heavy sky. “Okay.” He ran an agitated hand through his dark hair. “It’s about Ava.”

“Ava?” I asked, looking up at him. My heart beat quickly in my chest. Why did he need to talk to me about her?

He nodded. “She has nowhere to go. Would it be okay with you if she stayed here for a while?”

**Episode 1179**

XAVIER

The wind blew as I watched the emotions passing over Cali’s face, waiting for her answer to my question.

“Wait, you mean have Ava stay here, at the pack house?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Yeah,” I said. “She doesn’t have anywhere else to go, and she asked me if she could stay for a while. I told her I wanted to run it by you. I know how you feel about her—” Cali raised her eyebrows. “I feel the same way, when it comes down to it.”

Cali’s eyes searched over my face for a long moment. “No.”

For a moment I didn’t register what she’d said. “What?”

“No. She’s not staying. Not here, anyway,” Cali clarified, like I was an idiot.

“*No?*” I asked, stunned.

She looked at me evenly. “You asked my opinion, and I’m giving it to you. No. I don’t want her to stay here.”

“She saved you from that vampire den,” I reminded her.

“Yeah, I know that,” Cali said, a little huffily. “I was there; you don’t have to remind me. But I still don’t trust her. I never will. And I don’t like the idea of her staying under our roof. I didn’t like it when you brought her here the first time, either.”

I stared at Cali. “You never said anything at the time.”

She rolled her eyes. “I blasted her into the car, remember? I didn’t think anything *had* to be said, but apparently it does.”

“Yeah, it fucking does,” I snapped back, feeling strangely agitated.

Cali shrugged. “You asked me, Xavier, and I’m telling you. I don’t want her to stay here, so that’s it. She’s not staying here.”

I looked at her, confused. This was really unlike her. Cali was usually so compassionate and empathetic. She was usually so giving when it came to helping other people. Sometimes it was annoying as hell, but it was her defining characteristic, and I couldn’t see a trace of it now. I got that Ava was a different case, but she’d said *no* with such finality that it annoyed the fuck out of me.

“Just to be clear, I wasn’t asking your permission here, Cali,” I said, feeling a wave of irritation wash over me. “I was just getting your take on the situation. I never said that you were making the final decision about this.”

We had walked around to the front of the house, and now we stopped by the white gravel walk. Cali turned to look at me and crossed her arms over her chest defensively, which was never a good sign.

The look on her face was hard and combative, and I could see sparks of anger flashing in her eyes.

“Why did you even bother asking me about this if you weren’t even planning on listening to what I had to say?” she demanded.

“What’s your problem, Cali?” I snapped. I was furious and getting more pissed off by the moment, and the worst part of it was that I didn’t even know why I was getting so mad. It wasn’t even like I was loyal to Ava! I didn’t like her any more than Cali did, but it was the principle of the thing. I’d put up with a lot of shit with this whole *due destini* thing, and I didn’t need Cali thinking that every single thing she said to me was law. I took a deep breath, trying to control my anger. “She rescued you, Cali, taking a pretty big risk to do so. It’s because of her that you’re safe and talking to me right now. I’m not saying we have to erect a statue in her honor. All she wants is a few days to figure her shit out before we kick her to the curb. That feels like the least we owe her.”

Cali gawked at me, her eyes wide with shock. “Are you fucking serious, Xavier? After what she did to you and Greyson? She slept with you, pretending to be me! And you think any of us owe her anything after that? You think she can be a good person?”

“She *was*!” I snapped at her, surprising her. “You didn’t know her before, but things were different, before the pack wars. Before Silas screwed everything up, influencing the minds of all the werewolf packs and creating all the dissent within them. It was then that everything…” I trailed off, shaking my head. “It was only after that that things got bad. That Ava got so… *different.* She changed. Her loyalty switched to the Samara pack.” I ran a hand through my hair, feeling tense and angry, but deeply, deeply sad, too, remembering this painful past. “But she had to change, I guess,” I admitted. “That’s the way it was, back then.”

Cali’s eyes were wide, and she listened in silence.

I shook my head again. “You weren’t there. No one who wasn’t there could ever really understand. It was every pack for itself. Every werewolf for himself, practically, at the end.” I looked up, thinking, as this piece of the puzzle settled painfully into place. “I guess I’d never really thought about that aspect of it all, but that’s how it was.”

A cloud over the sun shifted, and for a moment the pale November sun shone onto the dead grass and towering pines just beyond the house. It sparked off the gravel path and made the day seem colder, somehow.

“Still,” I said, my voice low and hoarse, “Ava killed my mother, so I killed her. I don’t regret what I did in the moment, and I never will.”

Cali looked at me for a moment longer, then she spun on her heel and headed up the porch steps to the house.

“Hey, Cali! Where are you going?” I asked, calling after her.

She spun to look at me, anger still flashing in her eyes. “Why does it even matter? It doesn’t seem like you want to listen to me anyway, so you might as well do whatever you want!” she snapped.

“Cali,” I said, starting after her.

But she wasn’t done. “What kind of answer were you expecting me to give when you asked me that question, Xavier? I mean, *really*? I just have your best interests in mind. I’m just looking out for you. But, if you want to invite a murderer into our home for an extended stay under our roof, then by all means, *go ahead*. Maybe I should ask Gregor and his vampires if *they’d* like to stay, too. I mean, it’s the same thing, right? Letting a predator into the house—”

“That’s *enough*,” I growled as we reached the door. Cali stopped and looked at me, her face flushed. “That’s enough. I asked you about Ava because I value your opinion, but it’s for me to decide what to do about her.” I gritted my teeth. I regretted even bringing this up. I should have just made a decision and stuck to it. “I want you to be my Luna when I’m the Alpha, Cali, but I also want to be allowed to make the choices I want.”

“*Alpha*?” She narrowed her eyes, surely doing some Cali-calculations over my words. “And where would that leave me? Just next to you, voiceless?” she asked. “Handy to keep around when you want, but easy enough to ignore when you want to make an executive decision?”

It felt like she’d just punched me in the gut. “Cali—”

“Stop,” she said, putting up a hand.

“Don’t tell me to shut up—”

“I’m not!” she said. “So you can just flatly ignore me, but I can’t ask you to stop talking for a second?”

“This is *insane*—”

“You know what? Do whatever the hell you want!” she finally said. “I’m going inside. Don’t follow me. We’re *done!*”

My whole body tensed. “What did you just say?”

Cali’s hand was on the doorknob. “You heard me. I meant exactly what I said. We’re done, Xavier!” And she wrenched open the door and stormed inside, slamming the door shut behind her.

I stood on the porch, staring at the shaking door as the wind gusted around me, flaming with rage.

What the *fuck* had just happened?

Had Cali just—*broken up with me?*

*How* had that just happened?

I tried to think back through the last five minutes, but it was all a blur of frustrated screaming, and my mind couldn’t make sense of any of it.

Feeling blind with rage, I turned away from the house. I was so angry, I felt like I could rip the house apart, board by board. I needed to do—*something*. The urge to shift and run was nearly overwhelming, so I stormed down the porch steps, ready to run into the night. But when I reached the bottom, Ava was standing there, looking at me.

*Fucking hell, this was not what I needed to deal with right now.*

My voice was tight was anger. “How long have you been standing there?”

**Episode 1180**

GREYSON

Off to the side, I watched the amateur cooking class Tom was leading, trying to focus on anything but the underlying feeling of unease that had made itself too comfortable in my gut lately.

I tried not to dwell on the fact that Cali had abruptly ended our conversation and practically fled after I’d told her that as long as she hadn’t chosen Xavier. She didn’t need to worry about the veins. Hell, *I* didn’t pay them much attention. It gnawed at me that she’d all but confirmed she’d been with Xavier, which had prompted the veins situation at all.

It was the second time today I been forced to picture them together..

Maren of all people had put me in that position just moments prior, and really, what did she expect me to say? How did I feel knowing that Cali was *with* Xavier? Not fucking great, but I missed the part where that was her business. I’d told her as much before Fenrir had bounded outside and started asking me about shifting.

Having the situation be such public knowledge was bad enough without having anyone probe me for my inner *feelings* about it all.

I knew my feelings: I loved Cali and wanted her to be mine.

Just mine.

“Okay,” Tom said to the crowd of werewolves who were all looking on interestedly. “When you’re chopping the onion, you want to make sure you’re keeping your fingers curled under. That way you can’t cut yourself, no matter how fast your knife is going.” He started his knife and moved quickly through the onion.

“*Wow*,” Sage whispered, sounding impressed.

“And your best bet is keeping your knife nice and sharp,” Tom continued. “It’s going to save you a lot of effort. Buy good ones, and keep them sharp.” He turned and dropped the chopped onions into a pan on the stove, where they hissed. He added a knob of butter to the onions. “We’re going to caramelize these for a bit. That’s going to be a good base for any number of recipes—”

I looked over when I heard the front door slam shut and saw Cali storm in, red-faced. Alarmed, I pushed off the wall and stepped out of the kitchen toward her. “Cali, what’s going on? What’s wrong?”

She jumped and looked up at me, and her eyes filled with tears.

*Xavier.*

“What did he do?” I growled.

“What are you talking about?” Cali asked, wiping tears from her eyes.

“What did Xavier do, Cali?” I repeated. “I know just by looking at you. Where is he?” I didn’t really need her to tell me. I could find him on my own, and when I did, I was going to kick his ass. I started to move past her, but Cali grabbed my arm.

“Stop,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s fine. Nothing happened. Everything’s fine.”

Everything was clearly *not* fine, and I was pissed. Where did Xavier get off, hurting Cali like this? Making her cry? I hated seeing her upset, and I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her close. As she leaned into me, she let go of whatever control she was holding onto and began to cry in earnest. It nearly broke my heart.

There was a shriek from the kitchen, and Cali jumped.

“Oh my god!” Zainab called, laughing. “Did you see that? Tom set that thing on fire!”

“It’s a flambé!” Tom yelled back, sounding pleased.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I said quietly, as the kitchen rang out with laughter.

Cali nodded, and I led her upstairs to her room. I sat her on the edge of the bed and got her a glass of water from the bathroom.

“What happened?” I asked again, sitting next to her.

But Cali just shook her head.

I didn’t want to pry, but I hated every tear rolling down her face. “Okay,” I said softly, “you don’t have to tell me.” I pulled her close, and she rested her head against my chest.

After a moment she gave a small chuckle. “It’s nothing, really. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” I said, though I didn’t believe her. “Is there anything I can do to cheer you up?” Then I remembered. “Oh! I forgot to tell you. I got everything squared away with Maren for the DNA test.”

“Really?” Cali said, her eyes going wide. “That’s great. I—I didn’t want to cause any problems, Greyson. It’s just that, if Fenrir *is* your son…”

“I know you were sticking up for me,” I said. “I get it. I should know.” She nodded, and I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I do want answers, and this way I’m actually going to get them. Maren isn’t a bad person, and I want to believe her, but the timing of it all puts that into question. It’ll be good for all of us to know, and then Fenrir can have that clarity as well. Then he can form the relationships that he needs, too.”

Cali nodded again, and it suddenly hit me that the result of this test would impact Cali’s decision about wanting to be with me. Would she want to be—whatever this would make her to a kid? A step-whatever-the-hell?

Now didn’t feel like the moment to ask, but part of me was suddenly afraid that this could turn out to be a deal-breaker.

“Thank you,” Cali said quietly. “And I really am sorry about all this,” she said, waving to her teary eyes. “You don’t need to explain anything to me.”

I nodded and gave her another peck on the forehead. “I’m going to go grab you something to eat. Your dad has been cooking up a storm downstairs. I think he thinks we’re feeding an army over here. Not that anyone here has been correcting him.” Cali chuckled. “What do you feel like eating? More of that chicken soup? Pasta? I think there’s three kinds. Fresh bread?”

She smiled. “Oh, yes, please. It’s been ages since I’ve had his bread.”

“You got it,” I said, getting to my feet. But, as I reached the door, I began to feel strange. I felt lightheaded, like I was going to faint, and the room began to spin.

Oh, shit, was this the witches again?

I staggered back into the room, wildly hoping to make it to the bed before everything went black.

“Greyson? Oh god, Greyson?” Cali’s voice was scared and frantic, but it sounded far away.

My shins hit the bed, and I fell onto the mattress, but it felt like I was falling in slow motion as I slipped into the crowding darkness.

I didn’t know how long I was out. It could have been ten seconds. It could have been days. But the next thing I knew, someone was shaking my shoulder gently.

*“Greyson. Greyson?”*

*I opened my eyes to see Cali. She was smiling at me. She was holding a beer, and she didn’t look scared.*

*“Did you drift off again?” she asked, laughing.*

*“What?” I asked, confused.*

*She shook her head, still smiling. “Dreaming of tomorrow night?”*

*“Tomorrow night? What’s happening tomorrow night?” I asked, my confusion deepening.*

*Cali rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, Greyson. It’s our wedding night.”*

*I stared at her for a moment, then I blinked and looked around. I was at a barbecue. It was early evening, and the air was warm and balmy, and it was a party. Everyone was there: Colton and Maya were over by the grill, laughing with Rishika as they popped open fresh beers. There was a little kid—barely walking—clinging onto Colton’s leg and looking up at him with adoring eyes. As I watched, Colton handed Maya his beer, bent and pulled the toddler into his arms, then threw him into the air until the baby screamed with laughter.*

*“Too high, Colton,” Maya said, but she was smiling.*

*Colton laughed too and cuddled the kid in his arms.*

*Tom was near them, at the grill holding a spatula and wearing a “Kiss the Cook, But Don’t Touch the Buns” apron as he spoke to Nolan.*

*Xavier and Ava were playing corn hole against Violet and Charlie. Lilac stood a ways back, recording the game on his phone.*

*“Greyson!”*

*I looked over to see Sabine and Big Mac walking over to me. Sabine was smiling, but I was hardly looking at her, because walking next to her was Marlene, Xavier and Colton’s mother.*

*“Greyson, Cali,” Marlene said, reaching for our hands, “I’m so happy for you two.”*

*“Thank you, Mrs. Ev—”*

*“You stop that right now,” Marlene chided her good-naturedly. “I told you to call me Marlene. You’re going to be part of the family, after all!”*

*Cali laughed. “Okay… Marlene.”*

*“Good girl,” Marlene said approvingly.*

*“Cali,” Orla called, waving as she walked over with Artemis, “I have a question for you about your bouquet…”*

*As Orla pulled Cali away, Marlene turned to me.*

*“Oh, Greyson,” she said, her eyes growing teary. “I’m so happy for you.” She wrapped me in a big hug. “For you and for Cali. This is going to be so wonderful for you. My savior, Greyson.”*

*I smiled as I patted her back. “You don’t have to keep calling me that, Marlene. That was years ago.”*

*She laughed as she released her arms from around my neck and, with a sigh, she looked around at the party. “It’s a beautiful night, Greyson.”*

*“Yes, it is,” I agreed. I followed her eyes, seeing what she saw. Everyone was smiling, eating, drinking, laughing. It was a happy pack, a happy family, and Cali was mine. It was everything I wanted, and I sighed with contentment.*

*Then I saw someone who I knew didn’t belong. It wasn’t a pack member. It was Lauren, one of the witch sisters, and she was looking at me. When she saw me looking at her, she smiled and lifted her drink, like she was toasting me.*

*Oh shit. This was what she meant. That was what this was—a possibility, like the witches had talked about.*

*My mind was made up. If this reality was what was possible, I was going to ask the witches to do the spell.*

*This was it.*

**Episode 1181**

ARTEMIS

Vander’s kiss shocked the hell out of me. But after a moment, the sweet sexiness of it got to me, and I stopped being shocked and just kind of leaned into it… in every way possible. The air around us was cold, but I was heating up as Vander leaned close. I’d had no idea that the Keeper of All Nature was such a good kisser.

He was hot—again, as Cali would’ve said—so maybe I should have guessed at that particular truth, but that was a musing for another time. I tilted my head slightly to the left and opened my lips, feeling the softness of his lips against mine, but just as I started to think about the other things those lips might be able to do, he pulled away from me.

I stared at him, breathing hard, shocked for a moment. *Why did you stop?!* was right on the tip of my tongue.

“Well,” Vander said. “Let’s see if that helps.”

“Wait, what?” I asked, confused. I stared at him, feeling a beat behind. “Let’s see if *what* helps? What are you talking about? Helps with what?” Vander was hard to follow. How had we just gone from that kiss to… whatever *this* was.

He grinned at me. “Your magic, Artemis. Try it!”

“My *magic*?” I asked, frowning. “What does my magic have to do with anything?”

Vander smiled at me in a superior way that was both deeply annoying and freaking adorable. “The kiss of pure nature has restorative powers, Artemis. You still have the capability for magic, you’ve just been burned down a little, because you broke that promise.”

“Oh,” I said, a little flabbergasted.

I stared at him for a long moment as my brain played catch-up. Was this true? Was this real logic, or was it all just part of an elaborate plan to kiss me? Not that I’d be all *that* mad if it was the latter. I didn’t *think* I would be, anyway.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, getting to my feet. I was feeling a bit dazed, but I was willing to try to give my magic a go. I *was* interested in getting it restored, after all. I took a deep breath and looked out at the lake. I tried to turn my gaze inward, searching for my magic. There were no words to describe what I found, but—my heart leapt—there *was* something there. I could feel it. I tried to harness it as I concentrated my power, but I tried as hard as I could, and the magic didn’t come.

I looked over at Vander—who was still looking at me with wide, expectant eyes—and shrugged, as though it didn’t matter to me one way or the other. As if I wasn’t about to cry. “Nothing at all. A lot of good that kiss of pure nature did,” I snapped.

Vander stood up, looking flabbergasted. “Wait, you mean it didn’t work?”

“Nope,” I said, shaking my head.

His eyes went wide. “My kiss didn’t *work*?” He looked pretty shaken.

“No,” I said tersely. “Got any other special natural abilities that could help me?”

Vander was quiet for a moment, like he was thinking about it, but then he moved purposefully toward me. “Let me try this again.”

“Try what?” I gasped, taking a step back.

“The kiss,” Vander said. “Maybe the first kiss wasn’t good enough. Maybe I wasn’t concentrating enough. Maybe it didn’t transfer enough magic over to you.” He thought for a moment. “The promise you broke was pretty serious, wasn’t it?”

I felt a flash of reflexive anger—thinking of the nature of the promise Orla had asked me to make—but I tried to calm down and consider his question. It had been a Fae promise, so of course it was serious, and on top of that, it was a promise I’d made to my mother. Maybe promises made to family members held even more weight. I looked at Vander, ready to answer, but my eyes fell on his lips, and my thoughts went to the kiss we’d just shared. It had been a *good* kiss. One of the better kisses of my life, and I tingled a little at the thought of a repeat performance.

“Well,” I said with a sigh, “if you think we should try, then I guess we should just go ahead, right?”   
 He nodded. “Right.”

He closed the distance between us and put his hand to my face, his palm gently cupping my cheek. His lips had the perfect firmness of a summer peach that gives just as you bite into it, and I leaned in as he opened his mouth, deepening the kiss. His tongue explored my mouth, grazing past my teeth, and I was ready for him, sliding my tongue along his. Our bodies melded together, hot and alive in the cold autumn air, and my nerve endings started to tingle, starting from my toes and coming alive all the way up my body. I had felt a strange connection with Vander from the moment I’d first seen him on the mountain, and standing here with him—kissing him in this curiously passionate way—felt strangely… *right*.

Heat began to pool below my belly, and my knees started to go loose and weak as he ran his hands down my ribcage. But just as I opened my mouth wider to gasp with pleasure, Vander broke away.

“*Damn*,” he murmured as he stepped back, sounding frustrated. He frowned at me, then leaned back in, pecking me quickly once, then once more. He shook his head, then tried it one last time. “I don’t understand what’s going on. Can’t you use your magic yet?” he demanded.

“What?” I said, a little vaguely. Then I gave my head a shake. “Oh, right. Let me see.” I focused and searched within myself, but there was nothing. I looked once more, checking the far corners of my consciousness for anything I might have missed. “Nope. Still nothing.” I narrowed my eyes, but not at him. I was just trying to concentrate. “It almost feels like the magic is, like, locked away inside of me or something.”

“Well, that’s good,” Vander said thoughtfully. “That’s something. That means you probably haven’t lost it for good, then. “

“That *is* good—”

“But who knows when it’ll come back?” Vander finished.

“Great,” I said with a gusty sigh.

“Artemis!”

I turned to see Rishika walking toward us from the house. I flashed a look back at Vander, to whom I was still standing very close, but he looked wholly unconcerned as he watched Rishika draw nearer. I opened my mouth to say something, but Rishika beat me to it.

“You didn’t come back to the house. I wanted to check on you.” Her eyes flicked between us for a moment, then rested on Vander. “*Vander?* Keeper of All Nature? Hey.”

Vander grinned at her. “Hi.” He looked at me and put a warm hand on my shoulder. His touch made me think of warm spring mornings filled with crisp breezes and fluffy clouds. “I’m going to go. I’ll check into a few things about the portal and get back to you.”

“Oh, but—I dropped the grass,” I said, turning back to him. “How will I get in touch with you again?”

Vander laughed. “You don’t need it, Artemis. Just walk outside and call me the next time you need me.”

And, before I could respond, he disappeared, leaving Rishika and me alone. I turned to look at her, wondering how much she had seen.

She raised a wry eyebrow. “What was that? I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything. That looked like quite a kiss.”

So *that* was how much she’d seen. My face flushed hot, and I shook my head. Guilt struck me hard in the gut. “That wasn’t what it looked like. Vander was trying to restore my Fae magic—”

“Is that what he told you?” Rishika asked, grinning. “That sounds like the oldest pick-up line in the book.”

“No, really,” I insisted, feeling defensive. “He said a kiss from the keeper of nature has restorative powers…” I trailed off.

Rishika chuckled and shook her head.

“I know, I know,” I said, covering my hands with my eyes. “I can hear it. Even as I’m saying it I can hear it, and it sounds absurd.”

“It sounds like a very long-game excuse to kiss you, if you ask me,” she quipped.

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “I wasn’t expecting that when I came out here.”

“It’s fine,” Rishika said reassuringly. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. I care about you, Artemis, but”—she shrugged—“we’re not exclusive.”

It was true, we weren’t. We’d been having fun together. “Dating” as I’d heard Cali throw around before. In the Fae world I hadn’t really been much for it, not with being on call for the Kollector constantly.

Wait, but was being exclusive with Rishika a possibility? Did Rishika *want* to be exclusive with me?

And, more importantly, did *I* want to be exclusive with *her*?

**Episode 1182**

LOLA

My heart stuttered, and my breath caught. I blinked into the mirror, and when I opened my eyes, I could see my reflection again.

“Holy *shit*,” I breathed, leaning close to the mirror. “Did that really just happen?”

I looked hard at my face, searching my features, taking in the scattering of freckles across my nose and the flecks of green marbled in my eyes.

My breath was still rapid and irregular when Jay appeared in the bathroom doorway, his expression wary and worried.

“Are you okay?” he asked, looking around, making sure I was alone.

“What?” I asked, looking at his reflection in the mirror. I was still feeling strange.

“You screamed, Lola,” he reminded me. “It was the second time you screamed today. Well,” he reasoned, “the third, actually. Not that I’m counting.”

“Oh, um…” I wasn’t sure what to say. I didn’t want to alarm Jay, especially since we’d literally *just* talked about how I might be imagining things and possibly reading too much into this idea of becoming a vampire. But could I not tell him? After what had just happened? I glanced back at the mirror and found my reflection looking back at me. But still, I wasn’t so sure.

“There was a bug,” I finally said.

Jay’s eye widened. “A bug?”

I nodded. “A big one. *Huge!* It was one of those ones that looks like a centipede, but it’s a water bug. You know the one?”  
 Jay looked at me evenly. “A bug made you scream like that?”

I shifted, uncomfortable. “It was a big one, okay?”

Jay laughed. “Okay.” He stepped forward and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Okay. My little scaredy cat.”

“Hey!” I said, slapping his arm. “I was a wolf once! I’ve fought in battles! And just because I’m human now doesn’t mean I can’t take *you*!”

Jay smiled, and there was a mischievous glint in his eye. “Oh, is that right? You want to find out? You want to fight?”

I stepped away from the sink and pretended to push up my sleeves. “Hell yeah, I do. Bring it, pal.”

Jay shrugged. “Okay.” And in one swift move he bent, picked me up, and slung me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

I screamed with laughter as I batted uselessly against his back.

“What?” Jay asked innocently. “We’re *fighting*. This is it. This is the fight.”

I laughed again. Maybe Jay was right. Maybe I was just seeing things and losing sleep and that was making me see even more things. All thoughts of my missing reflection vanished as Jay threw me onto the bed with a growl. He crawled over me, and I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him down so I could climb on top of him. Laughing, he settled his hands on my hips and, when I bent to kiss him, I was feeling a lot better.

After a lot of that, and a little bit more, and then a shower together, we headed downstairs. The kitchen was filled with good smells, and as I looked around, even more full of food. Tom was on a roll, and he’d filled the counters and the center kitchen island with a huge spread.

As I thought back to the garlic bread incident, I realized that Jay had been right; it was all in my head. There was no scratchiness in my throat. Garlic bread was harmless. And delicious.

I smiled as Jay handed me a plate, and we both helped ourselves to fresh bread and pasta and soup and brownies. I was feeling ten times better, and as I bit into the fresh, warm bread slathered with butter (no garlic), I started thinking that I should probably apologize to Greyson and Cali. And probably to the rest of the pack for freaking everyone out earlier. I hadn’t meant to, but I’d just been scared, and I really *had* thought something was happening. I sighed as I started on my pasta. I’d find Cali when I was finished.

But when I was done, Jay took my plate. “Meet me outside,” he said, and he had that same suggestive glint in his eye.

“What are you up to?” I asked quietly as he carried our plates to the sink.

He shook his head. “Nope. I’m not telling. I’ll be right outside, just go wait for me.”

I rolled my eyes. “I hate surprises.”

He looked at me. “That’s not true.”

It wasn’t true. “Okay, fine, I *love* surprises. But I do hate waiting to find out what they are.”

He shook his head with a smile as he loaded our plates into the dishwasher. “Just go.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Fine.” I stomped outside into the cold November night.

After what felt like an hour—but was probably more like thirty seconds—Jay came outside.

“We’re going on a little adventure.”

“What does that mean?” I asked warily.

“You’re going to have to wait to find out,” he said with a grin. He shifted and dropped to all fours, then crouched low so I could hop on his back.

I hesitated for just a moment, and Jay growled a low, playful growl.

“Fine,” I said with a laugh, and I climbed on.

I hugged him tight, partly out of spite, but mostly so I wouldn’t fly off as he took off—sprinting like the wind—through the woods. He was flying through the cold air, moving so fast that the trees became green-brown blurs as we passed them. I relaxed on his back. I loved the feel of the wind in my hair and the sharp, clean smell of the pines. This was exactly what I’d been missing about being a wolf—this freedom and abandon. I closed my eyes and drank it in for a moment.

*Thank you. I really needed this*,I told Jay through our mind link.

*I know, babe*, Jay replied. *I know you did. I know things haven’t been easy, and we can do this anytime you want.*

*Really?*

*Really.* I could hear Jay’s chuckle in my head. *Hang on tight.*

He sped up as we hit a sharp, almost hairpin turn, and I yelped and redoubled my hold on his neck, clutching his fur. There was a large clearing in the distance, occupied by some kind of dark structure. As we drew closer, I could see that it had a tall, sharp steeple. It was a church.

Jay came to a stop in the clearing, and I slid off his heaving back.

“I’ve been wanting to take you here,” he said, shifting back to human.

“Yeah?” I said, looking around the clearing. Other than the small church, there was nothing but trees. “Why?”

Jay shrugged. “I found it on a run the other day. I thought it was interesting, and that you might like to look around.” He reached for my hand. “Come on.”

We started across the overgrown grass toward the church.

“Yeah, I can see that,” I said, looking up at the old building. “Because I’m so religious.”

Jay rolled his eyes. “I was thinking about what you said about the mate mark, and how you were talking about a wedding.”

Heat rushed to my face. “What?” I asked, a bit too loudly, and the sound bounced off the trees. “I mean… what? I didn’t mean—when I said… *what*?”

“Lola,” Jay said, cutting off my embarrassing ramblings. He stopped me and turned to look at me. “I brought you here because I wanted to show you that I love you and that I want us to be in a place like this one day, wolf or no wolf.”

I looked at him, and my heart filled with love for this man. “Oh.” My eyes pricked with tears, and I leaned in to kiss him. “That sounds good to me, too.”

Jay smiled and kissed me back, his hand gentle on my cheek. “Good.” He looked up at the church. We were right at the entrance. “You want to check it out?”

“Inside?” I asked warily, looking at the dilapidated building.

“Yeah,” Jay said, his eye alight with excitement. “I haven’t been inside yet. But maybe you don’t want to go in. It’s pretty run down.” The light in his eye dimmed.

“No,” I said quickly. “We can go in.” I grinned. “Adventure, right?”

He smiled back. “Right.” He turned and opened the door. It creaked on its hinges. “Ladies first.”

“Thanks a lot.” I laughed but stepped inside. Or tried to. As I tried to cross the threshold, something stopped me. It was like there was some force preventing me from moving into the church.

“Lola,” Jay said, laughing. “Go ahead.”

“I’m trying,” I said, panic rising in my chest. I could feel some force beneath my hand. There was something *there* in front of me. I just couldn’t see it.

“Stop messing around, Lola. What are you doing?” Jay asked, no longer laughing.

“I’m not messing around,” I said, nearly crying now. “Jay! I can’t go inside!”

**Episode 1183**

XAVIER

As I stared at her, Ava shifted on her feet, looking awkward. This told me all I needed to know. With a sinking feeling, I realized she *must* have heard everything that had just happened between me and Cali. The fight Cali and I had about *her*, and the moment Cali had told me we were over.

*Fuck.* I wanted to be anywhere but here. With *her*.

“How long have you been standing there?” I repeated, my voice a snarl. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Um.” Ava glanced into my eyes, her own blue eyes soft. “I only heard the end part.” She raised her eyebrows. “It sounded pretty rough. Are you okay, Xavier?”

*No. I’m far from being okay*, was what I wanted to say. But I didn’t say anything. I kept my mouth shut and shifted my gaze away from hers. I didn’t like the way she was looking at me. Her eyes were searching mine—they knew me too well, and I didn’t like it. I was pissed, and the urge to shift and run was growing stronger every fucking second. The last thing I was going to do was discuss *Cali* with *Ava*.

“I didn’t hear all of it, but…” Ava took a step toward me. “Was that about me?” she asked, tipping her chin toward the closed door where Cali had disappeared

*Fucking fuck.* I bristled. It *was*, of course, but I wasn’t going to tell her that. If she hadn’t heard what Cali and I were fighting about, I wasn’t going to tell her.

“Don’t worry about it,” I snapped, and brushed past her, heading toward the woods. The trees were calling to me, and I was aching to disappear into them.

“I really am sorry, you know,” Ava called after me.

I turned around. “For what?”

Ava stared at me for a long moment. She hugged her thin body as a cold wind whipped around us. “For everything,” she said, shaking her head. “And if asking you if I can stay here is putting a rift between you and Cali, then I’m sorry for that, too. It wasn’t my intention; I hope you know that.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re really giving yourself way too much credit, Ava. That had nothing to do with you, and even if it did, what happens between Cali and me stays between Cali and me. That’s how things are with mates.”

There was a flash of pain across her eyes, but she blinked it away. She nodded, then looked away, toward the woods. “Were you going for a run?” I didn’t answer. “Because that’s just what was I was about to do. Would it be too much… Could I join you?”

I turned toward the trees. I could feel my body starting to change, even before I consciously initiated it. “You can do whatever you want,” I growled, before I fully shifted. Then, dropping onto all fours, I took off, sprinting into the trees.

In an instant I was enveloped in the trees, and the sharp pine air filled my lungs. Every sense was heightened—I could hear everything, seeeverything, smell everything. My thoughts slowed and quieted as I felt my heartbeat rise to a steady rhythm that matched the rapid pace of my footfalls on the soft, rain-soaked earth.

I *needed* this, more than I’d realized. I needed this to clear my head of everything—all the anger and confusion I’d been feeling for weeks. To think through what had just happened. Had Cali *really* just broken up with me? After everything? I knew she couldn’t really choose between Greyson and me because of the curse, but things between us had been going really well… or so I’d thought. I knew Greyson was still a factor, but if I was being honest with myself, I’d stopped giving a fuck about him a while ago.

When Cali was with me, it felt like she was *only* mine. Just like in the beginning, when she’d shown up on my doorstep, this fresh-faced, smart-mouthed woman from Minnesota who Colton had found. I’d wanted him to send her home. I hadn’t known then how she was going to change my life, but she’d moved into my heart and rearranged everything, and I’d be damned if I was going to just let her walk away from me now. Not after everything we’d been through together. I dropped my head and ran faster. There was just no way I was going to let that happen.

I loved her way too damn much.

The trees were a blur on either side of me. I’d run these paths a hundred times, and I took a fork to the left, taking me farther away from the lake. I made it another five or six miles before I saw something in my peripheral vision. It was Ava’s wolf. A smooth runner with an easy gait, she had caught up to me. She looked over at me and snorted, then began to outpace me, indicating that she wanted to race.

Oh, *fuck* if I was going to let Ava beat me in a race.

I took off, and we left the path, weaving through the trees, dodging fallen logs and leaping over streams and rocks. Ava was sleek and fast, and I’d always loved running with her. For a moment, it almost felt like old times. It almost felt like things between us had never turned so dark and ugly that I still woke up from nightmares with the taste of her blood in my mouth. It was almost like before, and I felt free—and a lot more relaxed than I’d been before we started.

By some unspoken agreement, we both started slowing down when we reached a small clearing. I won, but barely—Ava gave me a run for it—and she tackled me as I slowed to a stop. She caught me off guard and rolled me onto my back, playfully nipping at me in mock outrage. She used to do this every time she lost a race, and I’d tease her about being a sore loser. Ava was painfully competitive, and she hated to lose—especially to Colton, who always tried to keep score, and teased relentlessly when he won. He’d always had it rigged so he’d be in first place, and it used to drive Ava crazy.

We rolled around the clearing for a moment, and it was nice to feel my muscles stretch, but when I growled and flipped Ava onto her back and pinned her down, I looked down at the exact view I’d had the moment before I’d taken her life. It was the same vision I saw in my nightmares, and I could feel myself tense. Every muscle in my body tightened, and it felt like all the oxygen left the clearing.

Ava’s eyes were on me, and they registered the change in my expression.

*Xavier? Are you okay?*

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

Beneath me, Ava shifted back to her human form. “Xavier.” She stroked a hand through my fur. “Are you okay?” She looked into my eyes. “Should we head back?”

I shifted back. “No,” I said, dragging in a breath. “No, let’s just… stay here for a second.” I climbed off her and settled in the soft grass of the clearing. The sky was unusually clear.

I could feel Ava’s eyes on me, but she didn’t ask any more questions, just settled herself next to me and looked up as well. She was close. Close enough that I could feel the heat of her body radiating off her.

It was quiet between us, the only sound the distant hooting of an owl in the trees.

“I remember nights like this,” I said, breaking the silence. “From… before.”

She didn’t respond right away.

“Yeah,” she finally said, leaning back on her hands and looking up at the sky, stretching out her legs . “We’d come out and try to find Orion’s Belt and the Great Bear and the Seven Sisters.”

I shook my head, chuckling. “Yeah, I remember that. Though that was always just another race to see who could find them first.”

“Well it wouldn’t be so damn hard if they didn’t keep moving,” Ava said irritably. “Just stay in one goddamn place, Ursa Major.”

She smiled and turned to me, and I felt her fingers graze lightly down my arm. “This feels good, X. Being with you like this. It feels like before.” She tipped her head. “I hope you’re feeling better about what was bothering you back at the house.”

I nodded slowly, trying to read the subtext of her statement. At least she didn’t mention Cali’s name again. “Yeah, I do. The run did help.”

She sighed up at the sky. Her hand was still on my arm, her fingers light as feathers as she began to move toward me. It was slow, and I almost didn’t notice it until she was all too close, looking up at me.

Wait—was she going to try to *kiss* me?

**Episode 1184**

Greyson was lights-out, and I was *panicked*. I shook his shoulder as hard as I could, but he didn’t even stir.

“Greyson! *GREYSON!*”

Nothing. I was glad as hell he’d made it to the bed before he’d passed out—there was no way I’d have been able to do a thing for him if he’d fallen to the floor—but the moments before he’d fallen had been so scary. He’d had this glazed look in his eyes, and I’d been terrified that he was going to fall and bash his head on something. That was the last thing we needed right now.

This time though, I’d at least recognized the look on his face. It was one of those dreams he’d been having. It had to be. He’d had the same faraway look in his eyes that he’d always had before, though this time seemed to be worse.

I grasped both his shoulders and shook them. “Greyson, please, if you can hear me, give me a sign! Please come back to me! *Wake up!*”

I was trying to breathe, trying to keep myself from completely *freaking out*, but it was hard. I tried to focus on what *wasn’t* terrifying about the situation: he was breathing. I watched his chest going up and down and even put my hand over his mouth, just to feel the warm tickle of his breath. He was safe on the bed, so that was good. But I had no idea how long this damn dream was going to last. He’d come out of the others fairly quickly, but this one… It already felt like it was lasting forever.

And I didn’t have any idea of the kind of long-term effect these kind of dreams could have on his body. They were caused by witches, so I seriously doubted there had been any scientific studies on the subject.

“Oh, Greyson,” I breathed, sitting down on the bed. I cradled his head in my lap and tried to think. Maybe I should run for Big Mac. She was a witch—maybe she knew what to do. But I knew nothing could help Greyson come out of these dreams, at least nothing that I’d seen to date. “Greyson,” I called again. Maybe he could hear me, wherever he was. Maybe it would help.

But then, as I stroked his light hair out of his eyes, I was hit by a feeling so intense that I didn’t have enough time to react as I tumbled down to the bed myself.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself not in my room, but outside. I looked around, confused. I was at a barbecue; I could smell grilled hotdogs and steaks.

*“Congratulations, Cali,” Mrs. Smith was saying, grasping my hands warmly. She smiled her lovely smile. “It’s a lovely party, dear.”*

*“Yes,” I murmured, because she was looking at me like she expected me to say something.*

*“And I’m so looking forward to the wedding tomorrow.”*

*I stared. “Wedding?”*

*Mrs. Smith laughed. “Now, you’re not getting cold feet, are you?”*

*I frowned. “No, I’m not.” I was confused. Who was getting married? I looked around and, to my surprise, caught Colton’s eye. He grinned at me and, with a word to Maya, excused himself from the game of cornhole he was playing.*

*He picked up the small child holding onto his leg and walked toward me. “So, how’s my future sister-in-law?”*

*My mind was spinning as I tried to piece the dream together. I was getting married to one of Colton’s brothers—but which one?*

*It was the kind of question I felt I should definitely know the answer to, but there was something blocking the information in my mind. I smiled thinly at Colton.*

*If he noticed I was acting strangely, he didn’t let on, and, for the first time ever, I was grateful that he kept talking. “Who would have thought that you would have swept my favorite brother off his feet?” He turned to the kid in his arms. “What do you think, Chicken? Are you excited to be in Auntie Cali’s wedding tomorrow?”*

*The little kid didn’t answer, just buried their little face in Colton’s shoulder.*

*Colton laughed. “Feeling shy today, I guess.”*

*I nodded, totally understanding that feeling today. I was feeling completely out of my depth.*

*Colton looked back at me, and his teasing smile was gone. “Seriously, Cali, I’m really happy for you and Greyson. I can’t believe all the Evers brothers are about to be settled down and mated.” He laughed. “Time does fly, doesn’t it?”*

*I nodded. “Yes,” I said lamely. “It does.”*

*I looked away from Colton and around the party, searching desperately for Greyson, but I found Xavier first. He was standing with his arm around Ava, and the sight stung like me a hornet’s nest. I looked at him hard, trying to understand the sudden flash of anger I felt at the sight of the two of them together. The feeling was hazy, and I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but I knew I didn’t like it.*

*Ava and Xavier.*

*As though I’d spoken his name out loud, Xavier looked over at me. His gaze locked onto mine for a moment, then it dropped down, traveling the length of me for a split second before Greyson appeared at my side.*

*He wrapped his arm around me protectively and leaned down. “Having fun?” he whispered into my ear.*

*The sound of his voice sent a pleasant shiver up my spine. “Yeah,” I said. “Of course. I’m just going to pop inside for a drink real quick.”*

*Greyson looked down at my glass. I followed his gaze. It was still half-full.*

*I smiled and downed the last of it in one gulp, then slipped away. The sounds of the party died away as I closed the back door and stood alone in the quiet kitchen. The silence pressed in on my ears so heavily I started to feel a little dizzy. Though maybe it was the wine.*

*Wine!*

*That was what I’d come in here for. I looked around, then belatedly tasted the wine I’d just drunk, surprised to find that I liked it. Coming in for another drink had just been an excuse to get away to think, but maybe I would get a drink. In a moment.*

*I set my wine glass down on the counter and walked into the bathroom just off the kitchen. I knew exactly where it was, though the door was closed. I looked at myself in the round mirror over the sink. I had flowers in my swept-up hair, and when I looked down, I saw that I was wearing a pretty white silk wrap dress that somehow made my boobs look bigger than they were. An amazing feat.*

*I ran a hand towel under the tap and, wringing it out, held it to the back of my neck for a moment, trying to take deep, calming breaths. When I felt more in control, I went back to the kitchen and grabbed my wine glass from the countertop.*

*There was an assortment of wine bottles on the counter, and I looked through it. All pinot noir. It was good stuff, but I was in the mood for a malbec, so I headed up to the study where we had a few bottles that Greyson and I had been saving.*

*The study was upstairs with a view of the sloping back lawn, and we kept a wine rack there in a far corner, shielded from the afternoon sun. I had just taken a bottle of wine off the rack when I remembered that the pack house didn’t have a study like this.*

*I looked around the room, which felt suddenly both familiar and unfamiliar. It was disconcerting, like I was standing on the deck of a ship that was listing in a storm. On the wall I saw a framed photo of Greyson and me. We were standing in front of the Eiffel Tower. Yes, of course—this was our house. We’d closed on it last year in June, on my birthday. Greyson had hidden the key inside my birthday cake. I’d almost broken a tooth when I’d bitten down on it.*

*But… wait. I shook my head. This was a dream. Wasn’t it? I didn’t own a house with Greyson. I pressed a hand to my head, trying to get it to stop spinning, but I looked up when there was a knock at the door.*

*Greyson looked in, smiling. “How’d I know I’d find you in here?”*

*I smiled, feeling easy again, and held up the wine. “Had to get a special bottle.”*

*He stepped into the room and locked the door behind him.*

*“What are you doing?” I asked, my eyes getting wide. I shot a look out the window. “We have guests!”*

*Greyson stepped toward me and pulled me into his arms. “Cali, I have wanted to get you alone since this party started.”*

*And he bent to kiss me.*

**Episode 1185**

GREYSON

Cali responded to my kiss by arching against me, and it drove me wild. I pushed her against the bookshelf hard enough that a dictionary and a couple of first editions tumbled to the ground. I didn’t care—I had other things on my mind.

Like Cali. Cali’s lips, Cali’s skin, Cali’s stomach, Cali’s breasts, and the fine-woven lace of Cali’s underwear.

Somewhere in my brain told me this was a dream, but it felt so real. And if it were a dream, I was at least going to let it play out. Especially now that I had my Cali pressed against me, opening herself up to me, wrapping her arms around my neck, pulling me closer and moaning my name against my lips.

Cali’s dress wrapped around her body and was sexy as hell, and best of all, it gave me easy access to her legs. Pushing the fabric away, I ran my hand up the length of her thigh, then cradled her ass. I used the momentum to lift her off her feet and pivoted, then sat her on the desk. The lamp fell over, but I ignored that, too. We could get a new one. We could get a whole new house if we broke it having sex.

“Greyson,” Cali panted as I kissed my way down her neck. “Aren’t people going to wonder where we are? Our *guests*?”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “Let’s hope they’re smart enough to put two and two together and entertain themselves for a while.”

“Hey!”

“What?” I asked. “They’ll be fine.”

With a soft moan, she spread her legs wider as I stepped between them, then she leaned back on her hands and dropped her head back, giving me easier access to her neck and breasts. “I just don’t want people to start talking.”

“And saying what?” I chuckled. “That I can’t keep my goddamn hands off my wife? That she can’t put a dress on without it being torn off her a second later?”

She laughed but sucked in a breath when my tongue skimmed the top of her breasts. “Yeah, something like that.”

I shook my head. “Let them talk, *Mrs. Evers*.”

At that, Cali gave a throaty growl and wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me even closer, then ducked her head down to recapture my mouth. She opened her lips and slid her tongue along mine, the movement slow and lush.

I moaned into her, falling into the feel of her. This woman—this amazing, sensuous woman—was about to be my *wife*. I’d thought about it, dreamed about it, but I’d never fully let myself believe this possibility was… *possible*. There had always been something between us—Xavier, for one. But more than that, there was the curse, *due destini*, and just fate—there had always been *something* working against us. I had just never fully believed it was possible. But now that I was in a reality where I was faced with the prospect, I found that I wanted it—I really, truly *wanted* Cali to be my wife.

And it felt different, being with her, knowing that this was going to be forever. It felt… *perfect*. When I closed my arms around her, it felt final. Like I’d never, ever have to let her go.

I didn’t want to. Not for a damn thing in the world.

“You know,” Cali said, looking up at me, her eyes half-hooded and dark with lust, “I’m not Mrs. Evers just yet. For tonight, you’re still going to need to call me Miss Hart, Mr. Evers.”

“Oh, of course, *Miss Hart*. Pardon me, *Miss Hart*. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you, *Miss Hart*?” I asked, reaching for the tie that kept her dress together and giving it a pull so the silk fell to her side, exposing her lacy bra and panties.

Cali’s smile grew. “I’ve got a few ideas.” She reached for my pants and started unfastening the leather belt with skillful fingers.

There was a hot buzz in my mind as Cali’s fingers moved closer and closer to my cock, which was already hard and twitching at the thought of her.

Were these dreams showing me what I really desired? The other dreams I’d had about her—the house in Hawaii, the one on the beach with the two kids—and now this one, where we had just bought this house together and were getting married, surrounded by family and friends, at the very beginning of our life together… They all had something in common. All of the dreams had offered me a life that was so beautiful and complete.

Could I even have dreamed about this kind of life existing before I’d met Cali?

With a smile she slipped off the desk and turned her back to me, then pressed against me, so she was brushing her ass softly against my aching cock.

I groaned, and she laughed softly.

“This was one of my ideas,” she said teasingly.

With a growl I pulled her white dress off and flung it aside, where it lay crumpled on the hardwood floor, then pressed her against the desk and ground my groin against her perfect, lace-covered ass. *Hard.* “I was thinking something more like this.”

“*Oh.* I like that, too, Mr. Evers,” she gasped, pushing back against me, desperate for even more pressure.

“Jesus, Cali,” I said, closing my eyes. Letting out a ragged breath, I dropped my pants and, reaching inside my boxer briefs, drew out my rock-hard cock. Then I bent Cali over the desk, making her gasp with pleasure.

“Oh my god, Greyson. Please, I can’t wait any longer.”

Her *please* sent a shiver of pleasure up my spine. I pressed my cock to her ass, just to hear her little moan, then pushed her lacy panties aside and entered her, driving into her hard from behind.

“*Fuck*,” I gasped, gripping onto Cali to keep myself steady. It felt incredible to be inside her.

Cali gripped the desk and lifted herself up on her tiptoes as I thrust into her. “Oh, god, yes. More,” she panted. “*Faster*.”

As I thrust into her, she nodded as a moan slipped out, then another.

I forgot this was a dream. I forgot this wasn’t real and that we weren’t really together. I forgot everything but the connection I felt between us. It was raw and primal and so true, and I never wanted it to end. Our pace went from fast to frantic, and I could feel heat starting to build inside me.

Cali arched. “Greyson, oh—oh, *god!*” She pushed herself up on the desk, her head thrown back as she came, shaking with pleasure in my arms.

It was happening. I was seeing stars behind my eyes. “Fuck. *Fuck*.” Hot waves of pleasure had started to crash over me.

But before they’d fully receded, I was sucked out of the dream, blinking my eyes open in a dark room. I looked around, confused, and sat up.

I was in Cali’s room, and it was dark. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust. I lifted my head, though it pounded with pain, like I was waking up with a hangover. I looked around—Cali was next to me in the bed, and she was lying down. Her eyes were closed, like she was asleep, but as I watched, they started to flutter open.

“Hey,” I said softly. “What happened? Did you fall asleep? Are you okay?”

Cali stared at me, her expression confused. “I think so. I was—I thought I was—you passed out again, I think.”

“Oh.” It was coming back to me. “Yeah, I did, didn’t I?” I rubbed my head as Cali sat up next to me. “What happened? We were downstairs, Xavier had done something—when does he not, right?”

Cali shot me a look.

“—and I got you some water, right?” Cali nodded. “And then I passed out. I had a dream, I think.” I shook my head, trying to get my thoughts back into the present and trying to—well, *adjust* myself without making a big deal about it. I might have been dreaming, but the little soldier in my pants thought it was *plenty* real, and it was a little… *uncomfortable*. Truth be told, I hadn’t been this uncomfortable after a dream since I was about thirteen years old.

I glanced over at Cali and saw her looking down at my lap.

She caught me catching her, and her face flushed bright red. “That’s *fine*!”

I frowned. She was acting strangely. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes!” she said brightly. “Everything’s fine! I don’t know what happened. I must have just fallen asleep. I was having sort of an intense…” She frowned. “*Dream*, I guess?”

There was something about the way she was looking at me that made things click in my head.

“Cali,” I said. “Were we just in the same dream?”

**Episode 1186**

VIOLET

I leaned back against the headrest with a sigh of relief. I was so glad to be headed back to the pack house after the last few days. They had been action-packed but draining as hell, and I was relieved to be going home.

Marta, in the back seat, was looking out the rear window, but then she turned around again and settled into her seat comfortably. “Yeah, we’re not being followed.”

“You’re sure?” Charlie asked, looking at her through the rearview mirror.

Marta nodded. “I’m sure. Sometimes I get confused. I have trouble distinguishing the spirit world from the living world. You know how it is.”

Charlie and I exchanged a quizzical look.

“You know,” Marta went on, “like when I saw your brother earlier, Violet.” She sighed. “I must have just seen a couple of ghosts following along back there. Just some curious spirits, I guess.”

I shook my head. Ghosts, spirits, my brother, fighting vampires, getting trapped by a demented poltergeist in a house frozen in time, facing off against Charlie’s parents… All in all, it had been an eventful few days. And Marta hadn’t done anything good for my blood pressure just now.

I looked over at Charlie, who had his eyes on the road. I reached for his hand and laced my fingers through his, feeling the comforting familiarity of it. At least I had Charlie by my side—my mate. It had been a wild time, but I’d gotten through all of it with him, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. And that was how it was meant to be. Whatever the supernatural world threw at us, we would get through it together.

Charlie looked over me at me and smiled. “We’re almost there.”  
 “*Thank god*,” Marta groaned from the back. “There’s food there, right? I’m starving. Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I’ve had a proper meal?”

I laughed. “There’s usually something in the fridge.”

“Terrific,” Marta said. “I can’t wait. I want some peanut butter, and I would just kill for a roast beef sandwich and some really cold milk. And I want a whole cake, freshly baked, all to myself.” She shook her head. “That diner was only the beginning. I want to go on a whole tour of food. I have so many years of eating to make up for.”

Looking over my shoulder at the wide look in Marta’s eyes, I grinned. “I think we can make that happen. I’m glad we can help out.” I shifted a little to look at her more directly. “I wonder, Marta—do you think you could help me, too? I want to contact Lilac again. I’m worried that he could be following me because he’s in trouble. I’m wondering if that’s what you felt earlier, when you saw him.”

A frown creased Marta’s forehead. “Why do you think that?”

“I just do,” I admitted. “I’m worried he’s still not able to cross into the spirit world.” I shrugged. “Or wherever it is that ghosts are supposed to go. I mean, you saw him, right? That’s not normal. Ghosts aren’t supposed to just stick around here, are they? I don’t want him to. I want him to move on, and I thought that was what he was going to do when I released him from the pendant.”

But before Marta could answer, we pulled up onto the gravel driveway in front of the pack house, and a happy thrill shot through me. *Home*. I grinned as I looked up at the looming house. It was funny—I hadn’t felt this way in a while, like I had a true home. But I did now, and it felt great. Charlie stopped the car and we stepped out, and it was all I could do to not run up the steps to the front door.

“This place is enormous,” Marta said, stepping out of the car. Then she made a face. “And so ugly. Where are the corbels?”

I turned. “The what? What the hell are *corbels?*”

“A carved wooden…” Marta gestured vaguely, then waved. “Nevermind.”

We walked in, and I saw Cali’s mom walking down the stairs.

“Hello!” she called. “Welcome back!” She was smiling, but her eyes looked strangely puffy, as though she’d been crying. “Where have you all been?”

“Violet!” Torin yelled, sliding down the hall in his socks. He picked me up and spun me around. “Charlie!” He picked Charlie up as well and spun him in a circle. But he stopped when he got to Marta and turned to look at me. “Who is this?”

“It would probably be easier if we only have to do this once,” I muttered to Charlie.

He nodded. “Good point.” Then in a louder voice he called, “Hey, everyone!”

A crowd headed toward us from the kitchen, shouting *hellos* and *welcome backs*.

“This is Marta!” Charlie called to everyone. “Violet and I ran into some trouble with a poltergeist who trapped us in a house by messing with our memories, and Marta helped us get out of there. She’s a medium, from the 1950s, and super hungry. Questions?”

This was met was a laugh and a few murmured *hellos*.

But I wasn’t really listening. I was looking around. Where was Xavier? And Orla seemed to have vanished, too.   
 “Where’s Big Mac?” I asked.

“In the kitchen,” Sage said, nodding in that direction.

Charlie and I headed in, and Marta trailed after us, but she stopped in the doorway with a gasp.

She looked around, her eyes as big as dinner plates. “What is this place?” she asked, taking in the massive amount of food loaded onto the counters.

But I wasn’t looking at the food. I was looking at Orla, who was standing with Tom, speaking to him in a hushed tone. He looked over at us and smiled. “Help yourselves, kids.”

“Oh my,” Marta said, and there were tears in her eyes. “This is incredible. You’re my hero, sir.”

Tom turned bright red as Marta grabbed a plate and started to load it up with pasta.

Big Mac was standing by the fridge sipping a cup of coffee, and I stepped toward her.

The witch gave me a sideways glance. “You want something, girl. What is it?”

I stared at her in amazement. “How did you know that?”

“I always know when you werewolves want something. You all get the same look in your eyes.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s not hard, really—you people *always* want something.”

I chose to ignore this. “Well, I guess I do have a request, but it’s not for me.”

Big Mac gave me a beady look. “Isn’t it, though?”

This was proving to be harder than I’d expected, but I plowed onward. “Marta, that girl over there—” I pointed to Marta, who was shoving huge forkfuls of pasta into her mouth. “She’s a medium—”

“Is she?” Big Mac interrupted, eyeing Marta with new interest.

“Yeah,” I said, surprised by her sudden curiosity. “Anyway, I was hoping you knew something about mediums and could help Marta with her powers. She hasn’t used them in a while, and she says she’s pretty rusty. She wants to control them better, and I was wondering if you could help her out—”

“Yes.”

I opened my mouth to argue further but stopped myself. “Wait, what did you say?”

“Yes, I’ll help her,” Big Mac said, her eyes still on Marta.

I stared. “What’s the catch?” I asked warily. This wasn’t like Big Mac. At all.

Big Mac turned to glare at me. “Excuse me? The *catch*?”

“Yeah. What are you going to want in return? The catch. There’s always a catch with you.”

Big Mac considered this. “Well, perhaps there is on occasion, but in this case, I might make an exception. After all, as a witch, I have a duty to my fellow spiritual guides—and who am I to deny a young medium more information about the supernatural?”

I narrowed my eyes. I’d never seen Big Mac do anything out of the goodness of her heart, and I had a strong suspicion that there was more to this than met the eye, but before I could ask any more questions, the back door opened and Rishika and Artemis came in.

“Hey, Violet!” Rishika called, smiling at me. “You’re back!”

“Excuse me,” I muttered to Big Mac, then ran over to Rishika, throwing my arms around her. “It’s good to see you! There’s someone I want you to meet. Marta!” I turned and waved her over.

Marta looked up with a smile and took a step forward, then stopped dead in her tracks. I watched as the color drained from her face, leaving her ashen, and the plate in her hand wobbled, then crashed to the floor, cracking in half.

The kitchen had gone silent, but Marta didn’t seem to notice. Her eyes were fixed on Artemis, and she raised a shaking finger to point at her.

“*You*,” she said, her voice low and throaty. “Death is following you.”

**Episode 1187**

XAVIER

An owl hooted overhead. The wind blew through the trees, rustling the leaves. Time felt like it slowed as Ava moved closer to me, closing the distance between us one millimeter at a time. Was she *really* trying to kiss me? Was I going to let her?

For a strange, suspended moment, it felt like the most natural thing in the world for her to do this. For her to be here and for me to be here and for us to be doing this. She was just Ava—the girl I’d known since we were kids. This girl I’d loved when I’d watched her jump into the creek that ran past her parents’ house on hot summer days, since the first time she’d beaten me in a race down the dusty dirt pathway that wound through the woods. She was my first kiss, my first love, my first mate.

And in that moment, I remembered all of it. Maybe it was the moonlight, the way it glanced off her high cheekbones like silver dust, the way her hair fell around her shoulders like a dark curtain… But then, like an alarm waking me from a dream, I heard a bell clanging in my head.

This wasn’t right. *Nothing* about this was right. Ava wasn’t my mate. She had murdered my mother. And then, when she’d come back from whatever half-death world she’d been trapped in after I’d killed her for it, she’d tricked me—and Greyson—into believing she was Cali. She’d lied her way into my bed, and then lied again to try to help her brother, who’d been working with Silas. We’d all been in danger because of her treachery. She wasn’t a good person. She couldn’t be trusted.

She’d knowingly killed my mother in front of my eyes.

I leaned away, suddenly feeling cold and sick.

Ava’s eyes were half-lidded, but as I pulled away, they opened wide. Before she could move, I stood and stepped away.

“We should head back,” I said gruffly.

She was silent for a moment, but then she got to her feet.

When I turned to look at her, the moonlight had changed—or perhaps it was Ava who had changed. She looked—different. Like someone I’d never seen before in my life. There was nothing familiar about her now. Her skin looked pale and waxy in the cold light of the moon. Dead, almost—as though it had never come back to life.

“Do not try that again.” My voice was low as I felt anger surging through me.

“Xavier—” she began, but I cut her off.

“Listen to me,” I said. “Do not. Do that. Ever. Again.”

She stared at me, speechless, as I walked away, turning my back on her and looking toward the trees.

The mate bond with Ava might not have been broken anymore after she’d come back from the dead, but it sure as hell wasn’t for lack of trying. The mate bond was powerful magic, and it was no easy thing to break. And it’d hurt like hell when she’d died.

I glared into the darkness of the trees. Things had been a lot easier when she’d been dead.

I found myself wishing that she was dead again, just so I wouldn’t have to worry about it. But it didn’t matter. One way or another, I was going to break the bond that still tied me to Ava. I knew I would. I knew I had to. I knew it deep in my bones.

I wanted Cali.

Cali was my one true mate, and no matter what she had said in the heat of the moment, I wasn’t going to let her push me away.

Cali was angry and upset because of all this shit with *due destini* and the trouble it had caused us, but I wasn’t going to let anything break what Cali and I had. Nothing. Not *due destini*, not Greyson, not Ava, not fate, not fear. *Nothing.*

Before I shifted, I looked back at Ava, who was still staring at me.

“You can stay at the pack house if you want, but you’ll sleep outside,” I told her. Then I shifted into my wolf form and took off into the dense trees, sprinting like the wind. I headed back toward the house, running as fast as I could, hoping Ava wouldn’t follow me.

All I could think about was Cali—I had to talk to her. We had to work things out.

When I reached the house, I glanced over my shoulder and, to my relief, saw no trace of Ava behind me. Good. Maybe she’d finally gotten the hint. I shifted back to human and walked toward the house.

“Xavier!” someone gasped.

I looked up. Astrid was sitting on the back porch with Fenrir, and her eyes were wide.

“Put some clothes on!” Astrid hissed, moving in front of the boy to shield him.

I looked down, then around. I hadn’t left anything out here to change into. It wasn’t like I’d planned this run.

Astrid, clearly understanding this, nodded. “I’ve got it,” she said and waved her hand.

I looked down to see that I was suddenly wearing some tight spandex getup. It was red, white, and blue, and had a star emblazoned across the chest. I glared up at Astrid. I’d forgotten that Astrid’s Fae magic had a distinctly odd sense of humor.

“*Captain America?*” I asked. I even had a shield on my arm. “What the fuck, Astrid?”

She darted a glance at Fenrir, who was focused on his toys on the deck, then glared at me. “*Language!*”

This caught Fenrir’s attention, and he looked up at her, then over to me. And his eyes lit up.

“*CAP!*” he shouted with glee, pointing at me. He jumped to his feet and clapped as I walked closer. “Captain America!”

I looked up at Astrid, who shrugged.

“He likes those Marvel movies, what can I say? Torin played with him for hours with his action figures. I thought I’d give him a thrill.” She raised her eyebrows. “Just be glad I didn’t turn you into the Hulk.”

I sighed. I wasn’t the best around kids, but he’d done nothing wrong. “What do they say?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

“What does who say?” Torin asked loudly.

“The Avengers,” I said, not believing I was saying it.

“Oh!” he said. “Assemble.”

I gave Fenrir a smile. “Avengers assemble!” I said, holding up the shield.

This made Fenrir shriek with joy. “YES!”

I chuckled and turned to Astrid. “Hey, do you know where Cali is? I need to talk to her.”

Astrid shook her head. “No, sorry. I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“I know where she is,” Fenrir piped up.

I looked down at the boy. “Where is she?”

“Cali’s with Uncle Greyson in her bed!” He grinned, looking pleased to be able to answer my question.

A wave of rage crashed over me, making my ears buzz, but I tried to breathe through it. “Are you sure about that, buddy?” I asked, fighting to keep my voice light. Surely this kid was just seeing things, or making things up. *Surely.*

“Yeah!” Fenrir said happily. “I’m sure.”

“*Fuck!*” I snapped.

“*Language*, Xavier!” Astrid hissed.

I rolled my eyes and stormed into the house. I stopped in the doorway to the kitchen. The large room was filled with people. The air was tense, and everyone seemed to be frozen, like they were waiting for something to happen—or perhaps something *had* just happened. When I stomped in, every eye turned to me, but I ignored them. I didn’t give a shit about whatever was going on there.

I had to know whether Cali was with Greyson. Which was *insane*. How could she be? With *Greyson?* *Now?* After our last conversation? We had *just* spoken! Infuriated, I pushed through the crowd and out of the kitchen.

As I reached the stairs, I heard Torin’s voice coming from the kitchen. “I mean, he does look good, but the *real* Captain America has a better butt. That’s America’s ass.”

This did not help my mood.

I stormed up the stairs and made a beeline for Cali’s room. The door was slightly open—like they weren’t even afraid of being caught—and as I approached, I spotted Greyson and Cali on the bed together.

*Goddammit.*

I didn’t even see red this time. The world around me went a blinding white, like the color of a nuclear blast. The fury I felt was almost too consuming to truly register. I didn’t even realize I was still moving, but I suddenly found myself inside Cali’s room, and then I found my hands closing around the collar of Greyson’s shirt. I felt the fabric strain as it took the weight of his body as I yanked him to his feet. I dimly heard Cali scream my name, but I’d already slammed Greyson against the wall.

By this point, I couldn’t hear anything, and my vision had narrowed down to just Greyson, like I was looking at him through a long, dark tunnel. This time was going to be different.

This time, I was going to kill him.

**Episode 1188**

GREYSON

One second I was lying in bed, looking at Cali, and the next I was being grabbed by the collar of my shirt and slammed against the wall.

Xavier got right in my face, screaming. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing with my mate? Don’t you fucking touch her!”

I blinked, and my mouth opened and closed. “What the—”

I never saw the sucker-punch coming, but I should’ve. My head snapped back against the wall with a crack, and pain lanced up the side of my face. Ignoring the dull throbbing, I caught Xavier’s next punch before it could land. “What the fuck, Xavier?”

He threw a punch with his other hand, and I barely dodged out of the way before grabbing that fist too.

“Xavier, stop!” Cali shouted.

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded. I’d always known my brother to be volatile, but this was some next-level shit. What on earth had set him off this time? It wasn’t like he’d caught Cali and me in the middle of anything.

But Xavier seemed more intent on trying to murder me than on listening to either of us.

“Don’t play dumb, you son of a bitch!” he said before breaking out of my grasp and going in for a second round. My back still to the wall, I scrambled to grab onto him and managed to shove him back.

For one brief second, with enough space between us that I felt I could breathe for the first time since Xavier had barreled into the room, we stared at each other. I’d never seen such deep and unyielding hatred in my brother’s face. It sent a chill down my spine.

I tried to reason with him again. “Xavier—”

And then he shifted and lunged at me, his claws out and his teeth bared. I had no choice but to shift to protect myself. Anger boiled up too. He was doing this right now with Cali here?

He slammed me into the wall again, but I was ready. I growled and snapped at him, ducking to get my shoulder beneath his chest and flip him onto his back. I didn’t want to hurt him, didn’t want to fight with him, but I wasn’t about to let him tear me to shreds either.

I tried to mind link with him. *Xavier, calm the fuck down!*

He rolled onto his front before I could pin him and attacked again, biting and clawing and snarling and aiming for my throat. I dodged, knocking over Cali’s nightstand in the process.

I still had no clue what the hell I’d done to make him so angry. I’d never seen him like this before—and certainly not without having provoked him first. But I hadn’t been *doing* anything. I hadn’t done or said anything to Xavier to trigger this kind of response. I’d just been lying there.

Xavier lunged again, this time knocking me into the dresser, and I heard wood splinter beneath me. He dove for my throat, no doubt trying to rip it out. Whatever was causing this freak-out, I wasn’t going to let him kill me over it.

I tucked my chin and bared my teeth before kicking him off me. I snapped at him, willing him to back down before one of us was truly hurt. I didn’t want to hurt him, but I wasn’t going to let him hurt me either.

I tried to mind link with him again. *Xavier, that’s enough!*

Still, I couldn’t figure out what was going on here. I hadn’t done or said anything to Xavier to make him want to murder me—or at least not any more than he usually did. That left Cali. At this point, she was the only trigger that I could imagine having this much power over Xavier.

Except that didn’t make sense either. Because the only thing I’d done with Cali recently had happened in our shared dream.

Had Xavier somehow had that dream too? Would that be enough to send him into a rage and make him try to kill me?

Or maybe this was just another jealous outburst because he’d seen Cali with me on the bed?

But “just another jealous outburst” didn’t come close to covering the way Xavier was trying to rip my throat out. This was so much worse than any of our past skirmishes. I didn’t know how to stop this without seriously hurting my brother—something I really didn’t want to do.

But Xavier was making it very difficult to be the better man.

He tackled me onto Cali’s bed, and our combined weight made the frame crack. All I could do was snap and snarl and scratch to try to get him off me, to keep that distance between us. I caught him in the chest and sent him flying with a powerful kick from both of my legs.

Xavier crashed into Cali’s desk, breaking one of the legs and sending the contents flying. He rolled to his feet with a growl, ready to make me pay for that hit.

“Xavier, *stop*!” Cali screamed. Her eyes were wide, and her face had gone pale.

Xavier didn’t seem to notice. He was so intent on tearing me to shreds he couldn’t even see that his mate was in the room, begging him to stop.

“Xavier—”

He lunged at me again, and I was so distracted by Cali being so close while two powerful wolves were fighting that he hit me square in the chest, knocking me back into the wall. His teeth sank into my shoulder.

“Greyson! Xavier, stop!” she screamed.

Suddenly, we were blasted apart. I hit the wall again, and Xavier was sent flying onto the mattress. Cali stood between us, her hands up. She must have used her magic to separate us. Good. At least one of us was beyond reason right now.

We were all breathing heavily, staring at each another.

“What the *hell*—” Cali began.

Xavier pounced on me again, but before he could make contact, Cali blasted him with her magic again, knocking him back even harder this time. He was slower to recover this time, thankfully. I was too distracted by Cali’s presence in the room, the fear of her getting caught up in our fight and getting hurt, to allow myself to truly try to fight back.

She stepped between us. “Stop it! Both of you, stop it right now!”

I stared at Xavier over Cali’s shoulder, making sure he was truly backing down this time before I shifted back to human. Warm blood slipped down my shoulder from where Xavier had bitten me, and when Cali saw the blood, she flew off the handle.

“Is this how you two want to solve our problem?” she screeched. “One brother *kills* the other?”

Xavier shifted back with a growl. “You’d do the same. You chose. You broke up with me and went straight to Greyson, didn't you?”

*Wait, Cali broke up with Xavier? Is that what this is all about?*

She shook her head at Xavier and scoffed. “You’re getting jealous for no reason. I went straight to Greyson to tell him the same thing, that I *can’t* keep dating both of you. But then—”

“Oh fuck that, Cali!” Xavier snarled. “There’s always a ‘but then’ with you, isn’t there? Some excuse that you come up with to justify doing whatever the hell you want.”

I could barely keep up with the conversation. I was still stuck on the whole “I can’t keep dating both of you”thing. Had Cali really been coming to break up with me too? If we hadn’t had that dream, would she have ended it? All the joy I’d felt from sharing the dream with her—the idea of being engaged to her and starting our lives together—seemed to evaporate.

Just when I’d thought everything was finally coming together, it was crumbling to dust in my hands.

“Hey! None of this *due destini* crap is my fault!” she insisted.

Xavier crossed his arms. “Well, it’s not my fault either. You didn’t have to do it—we could have made it work.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right. We could have made it work, if you weren’t so jealous all the time. And I’ve learned about the kinds of secrets you both keep from me. I can’t take this anymore.”

Wait, was she choosing not to choose either of us? How would that work with the curse? And we were still her mates. Could we really just go our separate ways without anything bad happening? Wouldn’t her not choosing either of us just kill us both?

Cali bent down and picked up the broken leg of her desk, shaking her head as tears formed in her eyes. “If this goes on… we’re all going to become even more broken… and I can’t allow that. I can’t keep being between you both like this,” she said. “It’s over.”

**Episode 1189**

There. I’d done it. I’d broken up with Xavier *and* Greyson.

I knew it had to be done, whether it hurt me or not. At the rate we were all going, we would’ve killed each other and this would’ve end in tragedy anyway. But not surprisingly, that thought didn’t offer anything in the way of comfort.

Tears burned my eyes, and I dropped the broken leg of my desk and stormed out of my bedroom, leaving my two mates to deal with the aftermath. Xavier looked like he was ready to go another round with his brother. Greyson, on the other hand, just looked confused and hurt. I preferred Xavier’s anger to that quiet devastation.

As I stepped into the hallway, it hit me—why was I the one leaving my own room? I should have kicked them out. They should have been the ones to leave. Not that there was much left of my room for me to stay in. My mates had pretty much destroyed it.

I stood in the hallway, unsure of where to go, what to do. I didn’t want to turn around and face Xavier and Greyson—or the mess they’d created. I could hear people talking downstairs, but I didn’t want to be seen by anyone. I couldn’t just pretend everything was okay right now, and the list of people in this house I could actually talk to about Xavier and Greyson was growing ever shorter.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. I turned to see Maren approaching the landing. “I heard fighting,” she said, looking around. “Is everything okay?”

*No, everything is definitely* not *okay, but since you’re the last person besides Ava that I would want to talk to about this…*

“It’s fine,” I mumbled and brushed past her.

“Cali, hey.” She reached for my arm. “Are you all right?”

I swiped her hand away. “Fine.”

*Just broke up with Greyson, but you’d probably be thrilled to learn about that.*

I hurried downstairs before she could follow and passed by the kitchen, where my dad was entertaining everyone with his food. Who would have thought that my boring human dad would end up as the pack house’s resident chef?

I would have laughed if I’d had the ability to find anything even remotely funny right now.

Emotions were pressing down on my chest, suffocating me more and more with each step that carried me away from my mates and the destruction in my bedroom. *I need some air.* I hurried toward the back door and headed outside.

The fresh air was a welcome relief to my lungs, and it was cool and refreshing on my flushed skin. But the enormity of what had just happened—Xavier and Greyson had been fighting to kill—and what I’d done about it hit me full force.

The tears couldn’t stay back any longer. I’d broken up with my mates, the two men who each held a piece of my soul, my future. I thought back to Xavier’s jealous fury and Greyson’s confused hurt, and another wave of tears rushed down my cheeks. My chest hitched with the force of my sobs. Had I been naïve to think that all of these things—that the *due destini*—would somehow sort themselves out?

Maybe all the advice I’d gotten over the last few months had been right. Maybe I should have just chosen one of them early on, and then none of the rest of this shit would have happened. Xavier’s and Greyson’s lives wouldn’t be hanging in the balance, we never would have gotten those terrible veins… Maybe I was just being selfish all along, and now all three of us were paying the price.

But none of us knew how the *due destini* worked. If it hadn’t happened this way, it might’ve happened another.

I headed down to the lake, stopping just short of where the water would lap at my toes. Small sobs wracking my chest, the heartache and anger and fear and devastation bubbled over and I threw back my head and screamed with all my might into the night air.

Silence answered back. The chirping of crickets and hooting of owls quieted, probably frightened by my banshee-like scream. I was certain everyone at the pack house would have heard it, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. Xavier and Greyson weren’t coming, and the rest of them probably knew better by now than to get involved with my mess of a life.

Slowly, one by one, the night creatures began to sing again as the clouds slowly passed over the full moon.

*That fucking moon.*

I never used to notice it, really. Not until I’d gotten involved with Xavier and met the rest of the werewolves. Now it was just there all the damn time.

“Stupid moon,” I muttered. It was a reminder of all the irrevocable ways in which my life had changed, and of the curse that had set all of this in motion.

I knew I’d made my fair share of mistakes with all of this, but I’d never meant to hurt anyone. And I’d certainly never wanted to be a reason that two brothers turned on each other. I loved them both with all my heart, no matter what everyone else had to say about it—which was exactly why I felt like my insides had been torn out. It wasn’t an easy choice, and I couldn’t just flip a coin. Because no matter who won, I would lose. And so would the man I hadn’t chosen. I couldn’t live with that. And it had been selfish of me to hope that they’d both choose me—that much was crystal clear now.

*I never knew that love could be like this. That it could be so painful… Is this love I feel for Greyson and Xavier even real? Or is it just another fun aspect of the curse and the* due destini *that nobody knows about?*

Part of me wished that I could write off my feelings as a side effect of the curse, but if I was being honest with myself, I knew it wasn’t the case. I remembered the moment I’d fallen in love with Xavier—when he’d let his guard down and opened up to me. That moment was just as real as anything that had happened in my life before it.

And as for Greyson, I remembered my love for him growing slowly. The more he’d let me into his life, and the more I’d grown to trust him, the more I’d fallen in love with him.

I loved them both—truly, deeply, and so, so madly. And I couldn’t stand it. My love for them was literally killing all of us.

*Love isn’t anything like what I always thought it to be—if anything, it just sucks.*

And now that I knew just how devastating it could be, I didn’t want it. Not anymore. If somehow I’d known love could be like this, I would’ve never allowed myself to fall.

*Hell, even Mom and Dad—who I always thought were the ultimate love story—just had the biggest fight I’ve ever seen. What kind of love is that?*

I looked back at the house. I couldn’t go back there, couldn’t face Greyson or Xavier or anyone else. But the dark, foreboding woods spreading out around me didn’t look too inviting either. I couldn’t just run off by myself. There were vampires and who knew what else out there. The world that I had once thought was safe and predictable had become a terrifying place.

*And now I can add love to the list of mortal dangers.*

I just wanted to curl up and die.

Footsteps sounded near me, and I looked over to see Artemis coming toward me. I quickly wiped my face and straightened. Things with Artemis weren’t great right now, either. Things weren’t great with anyone.

Artemis paused a short distance away. “Are you okay?”

My emotions lodged in my throat. I couldn’t even speak out of fear that I’d break down again. I cleared my throat and tried to wave her off. “M’fine,” I mumbled, my voice rough.

But instead of leaving me alone, Artemis walked up to me and threw her arms around me. And that was all it took for me to shatter. I sobbed into my sister’s shoulder, holding her tight.

“I can’t go on like this anymore!” I said, crying.

She rubbed my back. “Is it because of what I said? I didn’t really mean it—”

I shook my head. “It’s not you. I can’t keep on being torn apart between Xavier and Greyson like this. It’s killing everyone I love. I wish I could just go back, start over—live a normal life. Maybe go back to school and figure out what to do with my life.”

Artemis blinked, and I realized all the “normal” things I’d just listed off were probably utterly foreign concepts to her. After a beat, she asked, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

*Yeah, you can erase my memory of all of this…* I thought bitterly. Almost immediately, I regretted that thought. Would erasing my memory even fix anything at this point? Besides, Artemis had refused to do it in the past, and she didn’t have her Fae powers back yet, so it wasn’t even an option. And Big Mac? She’d say no immediately.

But the dream I’d shared with Greyson—and the witches. I’d seen them on my wine date with Xavier. They’d told me that they’d offered to change Greyson’s destiny…

Suddenly, a glimmer of hope sparked in the darkness of my soul.

Could we change destiny?

“There is something you can do,” I said, pulling back to meet my sister’s eyes. “Can you help me find these three witches so I forget I ever met Xavier or Greyson?”

**Episode 1190**

XAVIER

I watched with silent rage as Cali slammed the door behind her and walked out.

She was done with us. Done with me. Just like that.I should have known she wasn’t going to stick with me, that she would never choose me. How many times had I asked her, told her to choose me, told her that I was the one who was meant to be with her? And how many times had she avoided me or outright said no and then immediately run off to be with my brother?

*You’re such a fucking idiot, Xavier.*

Greyson turned to me, his eyes wide. His shoulder was still bleeding where I’d bitten him, but the blood dripping down his arm seemed to have slowed. He was already healing, the bastard. I wanted to rip him back open.

“What the *fuck* was that?” he demanded. “Why did you do that? And with Cali here?”

I huffed. “You know exactly why.”

“Because you saw us *talking*? What the hell is wrong with you?”

This was the thing about Greyson—when it came to Cali, he loved playing the white knight. The mate who could do no wrong, not even to the brother he’d spent his entire life fighting. Cali, for whatever reason, had fallen for the act, but I knew better. I knew Greyson for the poisonous person he truly was.

He wanted to play innocent, like he’d just been a bystander in all of this. But I knew the truth. I’d seen them together on her bed—right after she’d broken things off with me. At that moment, Cali might as well have chosen Greyson, because if I was being honest, death sounded like a much better option than watching the two of them live happily ever after.

“I’m not stupid, Greyson. You two weren’t just talking.”

“And if we weren’t? So what?” He ran a shaking hand through his hair. “You’ve always known about this. We both know what she’s going through, and you don’t see me trying to hunt you down and murder you when she chooses to spend time with you!”

“She broke up with me because of you!” I roared. “You ruined everything! Just like you always do.”

“No. You want to act like this is all my fault, but she broke up with both of us because of the *due destini*. She couldn’t live with having to choose between us, so she chose to not be with either of us.” He wiped some of the blood from his still-healing wound and held out his hand, shiny and dark. “I get that you’re angry, but you are not the only one affected by this.”

“Fuck you,” I spat. “All of this is easy for you to say—you’re the one she always goes running to.”

“She hadn’t chosen me, either,” he reminded me, letting his words simmer between us. Then he sighed. “Listen, whatever it is you’re feeling about Cali, the amount of love you have for her, the need to be with her, to be the *only one* with her—I feel the exact same way. The fact is, we both love her. And she’s in love with both of us in return. I’ve accepted that, and up until a few minutes ago, I thought you had too.”

I bristled. This was the man who had ruined everything for me—my own brother. He’d messed things up with my mate, and he’d stolen the leadership of the Redwood pack from me. And I was *through* with trying to deal with him civilly. “She’s supposed to be mine! I loved Cali long before you came into the picture. And when you did, you *knew* she was my mate—”

“She’s a person, Xavier. She’s not some object that we’re playing finders keepers with.”

“That is not what I’m saying.” I gritted my teeth, hating that he so willfully misunderstood me. It was like every word out of his mouth was an attempt to one-up me. “You want to talk about facts? Here’s a fact: you may be my brother, but Colton would never have done that to me.”

“You know it’s not the same thing.” He sighed again. “Colton has his own mate. And his mate isn’t a Fae with two mates.”

“Fine, you want a Fae? Take Maren. You probably already have one kid with her, why don’t you two just run off into the sunset and have more pups? Live happily ever after. Far, far away from me and Cali.”

His lips thinned. “She’s not my mate. Never has been, never will be. Cali’s the only mate I’ve ever had—can you say the same?”

I froze. Much as I wished I had a retort to that question, my mind was coming up blank. I knew exactly who Greyson was talking about—Ava. Mating with her was quickly becoming my greatest regret, but it wasn’t something I’d been able to control. It honestly felt like Ava and I had been together in another lifetime. I was a different person with different concerns. The world was a different place.

And now she was back from the dead, but the world had moved on without her. *I* had moved on. And I didn’t want to go back.

“Ava is nothing like Cali,” I said, my voice deadly soft. “She killed my mother, she betrayed us over and over again. My bond with her—”

“Is still a mate bond,” Greyson said evenly. “We don’t choose our mates, Xavier. We’re forced to play the cards we’re dealt. And I guess some people are better at that than others.”

*Fuck. That.*

Rage plowed through me so fast I couldn’t see straight, couldn’t think. And before I was fully aware of it, I had grabbed Greyson by the arms and slammed him against the wall. “I should rip your throat out right now,” I snarled.

My brother was maddeningly, *infuriatingly* calm. “Why don’t you, then? You think that would fix everything? Cali would never forgive you. You’d still lose her. You’d still be alone.”

My fingertips were shifting into claws without permission. I trembled with rage, the angry, feral animal inside me howling for blood, for dominance. It was only the barest thread of control that made me hold back.

Because I knew Greyson was right. The thought of losing Cali was absolutely devastating. Worse than losing my mother or losing my wolf, worse than how I’d felt when the bloodlust had cleared and I’d realized that Ava was dead by my hand.

There was no way out of this. No easy solution. If I did kill Greyson, I would still lose Cali. And it would be because of Greyson. It was… fucking *maddening*.

I released my brother with a growl and stepped back.

Never one to miss an opportunity to have the last word, my brother opened his mouth. “Xavier—”

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up,” I snarled. Whatever he had to say, I didn’t want to hear it.

I didn’t want to hear how trapped I was, how I was doomed to keep chasing after whatever scraps Cali tossed my way. Because that was truly the best I could hope for. Ava and I were over—practically ancient history. As far as I was concerned, our bond had died the day she’d murdered my mother. Any remaining connection we had was just a technicality—one I planned to resolve when I unmated from Ava.

My eyes snapped up to Greyson’s. “You really want to help Cali? Why don’t you just unmate from her?”

He frowned and then shook his head. “Cali is my only mate. I’m not going to give her up.”

I hated that he kept throwing that in my face. I had never asked to have two mates, and I sure as shit didn’t want Ava back in my life. I scoffed, but he held up a hand.

“I’m just stating fact. You have two mates, Xavier, and I have one. Do the fucking math. If anyone should unmate from Cali, it’s you.”

*Like hell I should.* I leaned in, letting my voice go low. “Then allow me to state a fact, *brother*. Cali chose me first. You will always be her second. Maybe you should just learn to live with that. It’ll make everything easier.”

I’d been hoping to get under his skin the way he so easily got beneath mine, but not even the tiniest shred of emotion crossed Greyson’s face. “Maybe. But right now, she doesn’t want either one of us. So that puts us both in the exact same place.”

My claw-tipped fingers curled into a fist, and I spun and kicked a broken chair into the wall, where it shattered to pieces. I stormed out of Cali’s ruined bedroom before Greyson could say another word.

I hoped he considered himself lucky. If it weren’t for Cali, I would have killed him right then and there. Torn him to shreds, taken my mate and my birthright as the Alpha of the Redwood pack and moved on with my life.

But that wasn’t in the cards. Not yet, at least.

I thundered down the stairs and headed outside. How was it that I was practically steaming at the ears, but Greyson was so calm about all of this? He must not love Cali half as much as I did, to be so cool and collected about her breaking things off with him. And how fucking dare he suggest that Ava was somehow a fair substitute for Cali? The whole thing was a giant fucking joke.

*Maybe right now there’s nothing I can do about Cali—but there is something I can do to clean up a few things.* I scented the air, looking for Ava.

*It’s time to put an end to this.*

**Episode 1191**

ARTEMIS

I frowned at my sister’s tear streaked face. She was a complete wreck. “Three witches? And what do you mean, forget Xavier and Greyson? Have you been drinking too much?”

I’d been here long enough to know that Cali loved both of those men way too much. I didn’t get it, but I didn’t need to. She shook her head and wiped her cheeks. I was happy to see that she no longer seemed inconsolably sad, but the hope and excitement on her face gave me a sense of foreboding. Whatever was going on in that head of hers right now probably wasn’t a good idea.

“Don’t look at me like I’m crazy. It could work!” she said.

“Cali,” I said, not really knowing what to say. “It doesn’t sound like the best idea.”

“But I’ve seen those witches before, and they might do it if I give them the right payment.” She frowned a bit. “I’m not sure whether Big Mac would help me.”

I processed this for a moment. I could see why the offer would be so tempting to my sister—her life was in shambles, after all. And that was coming from *me*, the homeless, formerly orphaned, now-powerless Fae who had lost one of the most powerful magical artifacts in the entire world. If *I* thought her situation was messy, I could only imagine how terrible it might be to live it.

But still… “I think that’s a really bad idea,” I confessed.

I had once told Cali she was being selfish by not choosing. I’d thought that the worst thing that would happen when she chose would be that someone would end up with a broken heart, and even though I’d never been in love before, I’d always assumed that a broken heart was no different than a broken arm. It would hurt like hell, but it would heal in time. And the cleaner the break, the better and faster it would heal. I’d spent a long time judging the messy way my sister lived her life, and the way Xavier and Greyson had been dragged into things.

But then I’d learned about the curse, and that changed my perspective on a lot of the things Cali was going through.

But to get witches involved? As Lola would’ve said, hard pass.

My sister’s face fell, and I softened my tone even more. “Cali, you’re Fae. You shouldn’t trust witches. I mean, look at Big Mac—after everything you’ve been through with her, can you truly say that you trust her?”

Cali crossed her arms over her chest. “Sometimes…”

“Exactly my point. How long have you known her now? How long have you lived with her and been an ally to her? And after all that, you can’t even say that you trust her completely to do this spell? And now you’re talking about having three witches you don’t even know at all come in with their magic and mess with your head?”

“Okay, I hear it. But what else am I supposed to do, Artemis?” she protested. “Everything hurts.”

“Maybe you should go see Torin and let him heal you.”

She threw her head back with a groan. Were all little sisters so dramatic? “You don’t understand! I-I broke up with both of them.”

I froze. “Wait, really? Just now?” Suddenly Cali’s behavior made perfect sense. Her tears, her desperation to fix things, to make the pain go away. I looked back at the house.

*Was that what all that noise was about? Talk about a breakup—it sounded like the three of them shattered the entire bedroom, along with Cali’s heart.*

Okay, so maybe this situation called for more empathy, more finesse. But I still wasn’t going to let my little sister run off and make a bargain with a trio of witches. Who knew what they were truly capable of, and how much a spell like this would mess everything up even more?

“Cali,” I said gently, “I can only imagine how much you must be hurting right now, but think about what you’re saying. Trying to forget Xavier and Greyson? In the Fae world, I’ve seen someone down on their luck use magic or makes deals to try to change their life for the better, only to have a backfire—”

I stopped myself. Judging by the look on my sister’s face, recounting any kind of cautionary tale was not the kind of help she wanted right now. I sighed and gently took her hand. “Why don’t you sleep on it? We can talk about our next move tomorrow, when you’re rested.”

I tugged her forward a few steps before she stopped. “No, I’m not going back there. I can’t face them. Not yet. Besides, they completely trashed my bedroom. I won’t be getting any sleep there.”

“That’s okay. You can sleep in my room. My bed is very comfortable, and I’ll make you tea or whatever else you want. Rishika showed me how to. Okay?”

She nodded, and I quickly ushered her across the lawn and into the pack house. We managed to avoid everyone else as we ducked down the hallway and crept upstairs and into my bedroom. I felt a little bit like one of the spies from a television show Rishika liked to watch.

When we got to my bedroom, I pulled back the covers for Cali and helped her get into bed. Then I tucked them up around her. “There you go, snug as a pixie in flower bed.”

She caught my hand. “Thank you, Artemis.”

To my surprise, I felt a smile tugging at my lips. I was actually enjoying this moment, this connection to my sister, this opportunity to take care of someone besides myself. I squeezed her hand. “I’m so sorry for all the mean things I said before. I didn’t mean them.”

“I know. Things have been pretty stressful around here lately,” she said. “We all have our bad moments. I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too. I’ll be right back with some tea.” I left her alone and then crept back downstairs to make some chamomile tea. Hopefully Tom and my mother weren’t still down there. Things were still very tense between all of us. I knew I needed to apologize, that it was the least they deserved after everything they’d done for me, but I didn’t even know where to begin.

I knew my behavior had been completely out of control, and I still wasn’t entirely sure where that explosion of emotion had come from, but that didn’t change all the messy realities of my family. I’d lost over two decades with my parents, thinking I didn’t have any family, but now it turned out that not only did I have Cali, Orla, and even Tom, but that my father might be alive too.

And I was powerless—literally. My route home was closed. And ever since I’d lost the Orb, my anger and anxiety had just been building and building. Was that why I’d blown up at my family? Because of the Orb? Or was there something wrong in the Fae world? Maybe something to do with the war?

Whatever it was, I needed to deal with it myself. I couldn’t take my frustration out on my family like that ever again.

I turned the corner to head into the kitchen and ran into Marta. “Sorry,” I mumbled, catching her before she fell over and stepping back immediately when she gave me that dark, icy look.

I couldn’t help shuddering. *Death is following you*. That was what she’d told me, and I was equal parts freaked out and pissed off about it. I pointed over my shoulder. “Look, no death!” Then I let my hand fall and rest on my hip. “But if you want, I’d be happy to help you find it.”

The girl looked at the knife, then back to me. “Be very careful. Whatever is following you, it’s dangerous.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I pushed past Marta and headed toward the kitchen.

I’d been both a follower and the followed for the majority of my life—I was used to the chase. Still, I wasn’t sure what to make of this medium. It almost felt like she was haunting *me* at times.

*Aren’t mediums supposed to be the bridges between the living and the* dead*?*

I added it to my mental list of things to figure out as I walked into the kitchen. The dinner crowd was dispersing, but still lingering, talking to Tom and asking him inane questions about wine reductions, whatever those were.

My eyes locked with Tom’s briefly before I looked away and busied myself with making tea. He was probably still angry with me, and in truth he had every right to be. I’d have to talk to him and my mother after I dealt with Cali.

The few minutes it took to brew Cali’s tea were silent and thick with tension, and I scurried back up to my room as fast as inhumanly possible. I’d just reached the landing when I was hit with a sudden jolt. My vision blurred, and I nearly dropped the tea as I grabbed for the railing with my free hand. Nausea washed through me as I struggled to balance myself.

Then a terribly familiar voice slithered through my head.

*Do you want your magic back, Artemis? If so, you know what you must do.*

**Episode 1192**

VIOLET

Packing for another sudden trip to Minnesota was turning out to be a whole lot more complicated than the first time around. Charlie lounged on my bed while I stood in front of my closet, trying to decide what to pack. Minnesota was a bit cooler than Oregon—they’d probably have some snow there by now…

*What do I have that’s winter weather appropriate, but also says “I’m not a threat to your son, so please don’t stab me with a silver knife while I sleep”?*

The long-sleeved shirt I’d pulled out of my closet at least accomplished the first part. I wasn’t sure there was a single item of clothing I owned that would fix the latter concern.

*Maybe we can stop on the way to the airport and grab some chainmail for me to wear under my clothes.*

Iris would probably consider me wearing armor an act of aggression, but at least then I wouldn’t have to worry about getting shanked by my mate’s mother.

Charlie was blissfully unaware of my wardrobe concerns. He stretched across the mattress with a sigh, rubbing his full stomach. “Cali’s dad is really an amazing cook. Forget cooking for the pack house—the dude should have his own Netflix show. *Tom’s Homestyle Cooking* or *Cooking with Hart.*”

“For sure,” I said absently.

I eyed my mostly empty suitcase. Beyond underwear and some bras and toiletries, I really had no idea what to bring. Charlie didn’t seem to know how long we’d be staying in Minnesota, or what I’d need while we were there. If he was going to be training to be a hunter, what would I be doing? Should I pack some workout clothes in case I was able to join him? *Hey guys, just your friendly werewolf here, I don’t bite.*

*Iris is probably going to lose her shit with me just going along with him, forget showing up at training.* I grimaced just thinking about coming face-to-face with that awful woman again. If I had it my way, I’d never see her again. Not after Iris’s threat. Charlie and I would stay here. I was glad he and his parents had come to an understanding of sorts, but I still didn’t feel right about my mate heading off to learn from an organization whose mission was to eradicate people like us.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked. “You’ve been staring at that shirt for like ten minutes now. Just bring it.”

“Oh.” I forced a smile to my lips. “You’re probably right. I just want to make sure I don’t overpack, you know?” The laugh that bubbled out of my mouth didn’t sound even remotely genuine. Guilt twisted my stomach.

I had never liked lying, and now here I was lying to Charlie, my mate, about his own mother. That couldn’t bode well for us, right? I’d told him that his mom was happy to have me join him in Minnesota, but that couldn’t be further from the truth.

*Aren’t mates supposed to be honest with each other? What the heck am I doing lying to him about something so important?*

If the situation were reversed, and Lilac were alive and threatening Charlie, I would want to know about it. So why couldn’t I just be honest with him? I’d tried a few times to confess what was really on my mind, but I hadn’t been able to get the words to come out. Was I so committed to protecting him that I’d even protect him from the truth about his own family?

*But isn’t that what mates do? Protect each other?*

I wished someone had told me how hard it would be to navigate this. But then again, I was pretty sure Charlie and I were the first mates in the world to have to deal with supernatural-hunting parents. I didn’t think anybody had a solution for this situation.

“Here, I’ll help you.” Charlie stood up and started browsing through my closet. “Wow, I don’t think I’ve looked in here before. Why do you have so many clothes, Sunshine?”

I smiled again, and this one felt real. When he called me that nickname, I went warm from my head to my toes. “Uh, I’m a werewolf, silly. We tend to go through a lot of wardrobe changes.”

He nodded. “That’s true. My mom would be horrified if she knew how many pairs of jeans I’ve already gone through.” He looked at me and winked. “Guess I’ll have to add that to the list of things to tell her about having a werewolf son.”

I looked back at my wardrobe, pretending to be choosing between a couple of different dresses. I couldn’t even pretend to laugh at that joke.

*Come on, just tell him!*

After another quiet string of seconds in which I actually did start to select some clothes for my mostly empty suitcase, Charlie asked, “Do you think Marta’s going to be okay staying here while we’re gone? She doesn’t really know anyone here, and she’s still got that thing about houses…”

I shrugged. “I think so. Or, at least, I hope she’ll be okay. Big Mac *was* pretty excited to learn that Marta’s a medium, so at least she has Big Mac and Mrs. Smith in her court, if push comes to shove. It’s strange—I’ve never seen Big Mac so lit up about someone.”

Charlie cocked his head to the side. “Is that a good thing?”

“Honestly? I have no idea.” I bit my lip. All the things I wasn’t telling Charlie felt like they were building up in my mind, bursting at the seams to get out. *Come on, Violet. Tell him the truth. Tell him about his mom. Tell him you don’t want to go to Minnesota—that you don’t want* him *to go.*

“Maybe we should delay our trip for a couple days,” I blurted out.

He paused and turned to me, a crease between his eyebrows. “But we told my parents we were coming.”

The words were there, right on the tip of my tongue. *Your mom threatened me. I don’t think I’d be safe.* Still, I hesitated. Why couldn’t I tell him? “Um, yeah, we did, but I don’t have any answers about why Lilac is still here,” I said. “And I thought since Marta saved our lives, we should probably stick around a bit longer to make sure she’s okay.” The guilt from my lie churned in my stomach.

He seemed to mull this over. “You’re probably right. We shouldn’t just bail on Marta or your brother. My parents should be able to trust me; we need to be able to trust each other. What’s a day or two?”

Relief and guilt slammed into me in equal measure. I had a few more days without Iris breathing down my neck, a few more days to gather up the courage to tell Charlie the truth. But I only had that time because I was lying to my mate, and he had no idea. He was trusting me, and I was lying about his family to his face.

*What are you doing, Violet? You can’t keep this secret forever. He deserves to know!*

I turned back to my closet so he wouldn’t be able to see the flurry of emotion breezing around my face. “Thanks for understanding.” My voice was rough when I spoke, so I cleared my throat, forcing some brightness into my tone. “Maybe we should check on Marta before we go to bed. Besides, I still want to talk to her about Lilac.”

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Later that evening, we found Marta in one of the guest rooms. I was kind of surprised to find her in the house, but I was glad she was beginning to feel more relaxed. Her room wasn’t as big as the others, but it looked comfortable.

“I like it in here,” I said, glancing around. “It’s cozy. And, bonus, I bet it’s not haunted at all!”

Marta nodded. “It’s not bad. I don’t feel anything too negative in here—except for that girl. What was her name?”

“Artemis,” I said. “She’s a little tough, and she might take some getting used to, but she’s a good person.”

Charlie smiled. “So how are you feeling about the pack house? Do you think you’re going to be okay here while we’re away?”

I glanced at him with a frown. He was really getting right to it. Part of me hoped that Marta would tell him she was uncomfortable here in the house, so I was disappointed when she only laughed.

“I just left a house of vampires and poltergeists and you’re worried about me staying with a bunch of werewolves?” She paused and pressed her fingers to her lips. “Actually, that’s a good point—they’re not going to use me as a midnight snack, are they?”

I shook my head. “Not our style. Especially since Big Mac has taken an interest in you. The others know better than to piss her off.”

“Do you think there’s a tent somewhere? This room is nice, but I’d much rather camp out in the back yard.”

“Rishika said there are still vampires lurking around,” Charlie reminded her. “It’s probably safer if you stay here, if you can tolerate it.”

Marta sighed and slumped back on her mattress. “Fine.”

“Is there anything you need or want?” he asked.

I couldn’t help smiling. My mate was so kind, so generous.

*And you’re a dirty liar*, my conscience said*.*

“I’m all good,” Marta said.

Charlie smiled and motioned for me to head out with him, but I shook my head.

“Give me a second.” I wanted to ask Marta about Lilac. I didn’t love the idea that he was sticking around the mortal plane when he should have been moving on to… whatever came next.

Charlie said goodnight, and I lingered with the medium, suddenly a little tongue-tied.

“Sooo, what’s up?” Marta finally asked, when the silence had dragged on for too long.

I took a breath. I had to know. “Why did my brother come back?”

**Episode 1193**

LOLA

I had reached the threshold of the church, and that threshold was very firmly telling me “You shall not pass!”

Jay grabbed my arm. “Come on, Lola. Stop being silly.”

I allowed myself to be tugged forward—about half an inch. Then I hit a very firm barrier. It pressed against my face and down my front, almost as if Jay was trying to pull me through a solid brick wall. “Something is blocking me, Jay!”

He paused, looked around, and frowned. “There’s nothing in the way…” I watched his expression shift from confusion to frustration, and he huffed. “If you don’t really want to see the church, you can just say so. There’s no need to play games. I was just trying to cheer you up.” And then his expression changed again. “Wait, did you change your mind? Do you not want to get married in a church?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s not—”

His face fell. “Or do you not want to marry me at all?”

Oh no. My poor, sweet, supportive mate was spiraling. *Everything must be affecting him harder than he’s been letting on.* I’d been suspecting as much for a while—ever since I’d gone shifting-crazy and had started losing control of my wolf, really.

But of course, Jay had been nothing but loving and patient with me every step of the way, whether he was helping me to try to control my shifting or assuring me of his love when I lost my wolf. Even with all the recent vampire stuff, he’d still been endlessly reassuring, reminding me that I wasn’t changing, that I was safe, that I was normal. Or as normal as someone like me could be.

But I could see that it was beginning to take its toll. I wished I could reach for him and pull him into my arms, but he was standing on the other side of that invisible threshold. And with that barrier hanging between us, I couldn’t reach him.

*What a perfect metaphor for our lives lately.*

“*Jay*.” My tone softened a little bit, but I couldn’t quite keep the edge out of my voice. “Of course I want to marry you. You’re my mate, my partner, my everything. Don’t be stupid.”

His pinched expression relaxed somewhat, and he held out his hand for me. “Then come into the church.”

*Ugh, what is this? Rocket science?* I stomped my foot in anger. “I *can’t*! What don’t you understand about that? I cannot physically take a step further.”

“Okay, sure. Just watch how I do it.” He took a step back, joining me outside the church and then walked back inside. He did it a few times for good measure, as though the problem was that I’d forgotten how to enter a building.

He was so kind and genuine about it—patiently teaching me to literally take three steps forward into the church and back—but that only pissed me off even more. I threw my hands up. “I know how to walk! I don’t need you to teach me! I’m saying I *cannot* do it! I am literally, physically unable to pass over the threshold.” I smacked a hand hard against the barrier, and my palm stopped like it was pressed up against an invisible wall.

There was a glint in his eye that told me his patience was waning. “Okay, how about this then?” He moved behind me in a rush and then gave me a small shove forward. I stumbled forward a step or two and then smacked into the barrier. My toes were just an inch short of the threshold. “Ouch!” I groaned, and then whipped around when I felt his hands on my shoulders. “Do *not* push me again.” I held my hands up, shrugging his hands off my shoulders. “Don’t you see? I can’t cross that line.”

A crease appeared between his eyebrows, and he frowned. He slowly reached out and stuck his arm into the church and then pulled it back. Then, gently lacing our fingers together, he extended my arm—and hit a wall just a few inches in. He blinked, then let go and tried the whole experiment twice more for good measure. Each time he reached out his arm alone, he was able to reach into the church, and when he guided my hand, he met a wall.

“*Okay*.” He looked completely mystified. “You really weren’t joking, huh?”

“I told you I wasn’t!” I snapped.

“I’m sorry.” He grimaced. “It’s just really weird… And it doesn’t make any sense.”

A sudden thought hit me straight in the chest. I didn’t want to say it out loud, didn’t even want to be *thinking* it, but I couldn’t see any other explanation. “It makes sense if I’m a vampire.”

He spun to face me. “Why would you just assume that? It could be some kind of spell on the church.”

“A spell that only affects me?” I shook my head. “Think about it: lots of crazy stuff has happened since I was bitten by that vampire.” I began counting the strange events off on my fingers. “I bit you when we were having sex, I craved blood that one time, the whole garlic incident, that time I couldn’t see my reflection in the mirror, and now this!” I had a whole hand’s worth of strange, vamp-y experiences now.

*What if I was really changing?*

He blinked. “The mirror?”

Oh right. He didn’t know about the mirror because I had straight-up lied to him about it.

“Okay, don’t be mad,” I started, “but I didn’t want to tell you about it at first because I didn’t want you to worry—and, you know, think once again that your mate had lost her mind—but earlier when I was in the bathroom and I screamed, it was because I couldn’t see my own reflection.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I thought you saw a bug! You lied to me, Lola?”

“I was freaked out and didn’t want you to worry! And I really did think that maybe it was just my imagination, but”—I gestured to the church—“this is obviously happening now. It’s real. And I think I’m turning into a vampire.” I dragged my tongue along my teeth.

*Oh shit. Do they feel sharper now, or am I just imagining it?*

Jay looked like my words physically pained him, but he shook his head with a sigh. “Lola, vampires are the living dead.” He leaned in and brushed a kiss over my lips. “You are definitely not dead. I can hear your heartbeat.” He trailed his mouth down my neck and inhaled. “And you definitely don’t smell like death, either.”

“Thanks?” I gently pushed him back. “You should stay away from me. Just in case. What if I suddenly attacked you? I could *never* live with myself if I ever hurt you.”

He took a step forward, back into my space. “Why would you hurt me? We’re mates.”

“Okay, sure, but who knows if that will matter? Vampires drink from werewolves too.” My heart began to race at the thought. Was this really happening? Was I really turning into a vampire?

“Hey.” He caught my hands, giving them a gentle squeeze. “Breathe, Lola. Try to stay calm. Even if you do go full vampire—and I don’t think you will—it’s not like all vampires are bad. Remember Mikah? He doesn’t just chomp down on anyone. He’s in control and perfectly safe to be around.”

I scoffed and tugged my hands out of his grip. “You don’t know that. Who knows what he does when we’re not around?” I took another step back, just in case. Jay was the most important person in the entire world to me, and I would never, ever risk hurting him.

“I think you should try to calm down,” Jay said again. “You’re getting all worked up about this, and if you are turning into a vampire, there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“So that’s it? You’re just gonna let me become one of the walking dead?” How could he go from denying the possibility of me being a vampire to just accepting it so quickly?

“Aren’t those zombies?” He shook his head. “Either way, you’re not turning into a zombie—they’re not real. Well, maybe Ava in a way, I guess, but… my point still stands.”

*Great, so I’m turning into Ava. That’s reassuring.* I rolled my eyes and stepped back, then turned away from the church and started walking away. I didn’t want to be here anymore. I clearly had no place at a church, so the sooner I left the better.

“Lola, wait!” Jay chased after me. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Just stop, please.”

I stopped and turned to face him. He gently tilted my head up. “You know I love you, right?” He leaned in and kissed me deeply—and then jolted back. “Ouch! What the—”

“What is it?” I asked.

Jay stared at me in shock, then licked a droplet of blood from his lips. “Lola, you have fangs!”

**Episode 1194**

I walked through the woods alone, the full moon shining down on me. I no longer feared running into Sabyr or any of the other vampires. In fact, I no longer feared anything.

*I’m Fae. I can handle anything and everything that comes my way.*

I drank in the night air, the sounds of the crickets and owls, the stars shimmering in the sky. It was such a beautiful night, and I was so glad to be out of the house. To have found this moment of peace with nothing but the open sky over my head.

A wolf’s howl echoed through the woods. A chill went down my spine until I realized that I knew that howl.

*Xavier.*

*What’s he doing out here?* I turned to watch him approach in his wolf form. And then another wolf appeared at the tree line.

*Greyson.*

Seeing my two mates together in their wolf forms again made my fingernails bite into my palms. It wasn’t long after their confrontation with each other in my bedroom. Had they made up?

*Or are they going to start fighting again?*

Watching them fight in my bedroom had been just as terrifying as it was devastating. They were brothers, and they were both my mates. I loved them to the end of the earth and back, and seeing them trying to kill each other had nearly broken something inside me. I couldn’t watch it again. Couldn’t let it happen a second time.

But rather than turn on each other, both wolves came closer and stopped in front of the large tree nearest to me. Their minds linked with mine in perfect unison.

*You need to rest, Cali. We’ll protect you.*

It seemed almost too good to be true, but there they were, standing in front of me, their eyes shining with nothing but love and affection. Even through the mate bond, I could only feel joy, protectiveness, *love*. No animosity, no jealousy, no anxiety or fear.

*Rest, Caliana.*

“I am tired,” I finally admitted.

The peaceful walk through the woods was lovely, a literal breath of fresh air after the craziness of the last few days—last few weeks, really—but the more I thought about it, the more exhausted I felt. Both physically and emotionally. When was the last time I’d really been able to rest without a thousand different worries hanging over my head? Without worrying about Artemis or my mom or Lola, or one of my mates? Hell, when was the last time I’d even seen them together in agreement, peacefully setting aside their differences?

The night breeze blew past, lifting the hair from my neck, and a chill went down my spine. Warmth and rest, with both of my mates protecting me…

It sounded like heaven.

I slowly approached both wolves and lay down on the forest floor between them. The brothers lay down on either side of me, their soft fur like a warm blanket pressing into me. Warm, safe, and loved by both of my mates in unison, I felt my whole body relax in a way I hadn’t felt in far too long. All of my unending worries about the *due destini* evaporated.

*This is how it should be. Xavier* and *Greyson* and *me. All together.*

I couldn’t imagine anything more perfect.

My eyelids fluttered closed as I savored the moment, the chill night air, the warm surrounding me, the cadence of both wolves’ breaths, the surprisingly soft ground beneath me. Nothing could ruin this—

A low growl broke through the peaceful haze.

My eyes snapped open, and I saw Xavier’s dark eyes on me. But instead of the loving look he’d given me just moments earlier, his gaze was dark, dangerous, and menacing. The look a predator might give its prey.

Even as my heart protested the fear pulsing through my veins, reminding me that *this is Xavier, he’d never hurt me*, my mind knew with utter certainty that I wasn’t safe here. Not anymore. I scrambled backward, desperate to put some distance between myself and Xavier’s sharp teeth. Then another growl echoed through the forest, and I realized Greyson had turned his eyes on me too. They were cold and hard, and the chills running down my spine intensified.

Greyson growled, baring his teeth.

*Oh my god. Are they threatening me?*

Both of my mates rose to their feet, crouching as if they were ready to pounce on me in unison and tear me apart. I didn’t know where to look—if I took my eyes off Greyson to watch Xavier, then I’d only have my eyes on one of the two wolves who seemed to want to kill me. Another chill went through me as I realized that maybe that had been their plan all along.

I stumbled backward, grasping at the nearest tree to keep me upright. “Stop—both of you. Or I’ll use my magic!”

Greyson moved slightly, and I turned to him, my hands raised defensively in front of me.

And then Xavier struck.

He leapt with a snarl, knocking me back and snapping at my arm. His teeth sank into my flesh, and I let out a horrified scream, shoving my hand forward and sending out a surge of energy that blasted Xavier back into Greyson.

Hot blood running down my arm in rivulets, I darted into the woods, sprinting back toward the house. Could I make it back to the pack house before they reached me? Surely someone at the house would help protect me from them, even if Greyson was the Alpha and Xavier was next in line. Artemis, at the very least, would step in to fight.

*If only she had her magic… She could make them stop without having to hurt them.*

I ran through the woods as fast as I could, glancing back every so often to make sure they weren’t about to pounce on me now that I was basically running blind. What the hell had happened? One moment we’d all been getting along better than ever, and now they were trying to tear me apart!

*Have they turned on me because I refused to choose either of them?*

A sharp pain lanced up my leg, and I glanced back with a yelp. It was Greyson and—

*He bit me!*

I tumbled forward. My now-bloodied ankle slipped from his mouth, and I tried to find my footing, trying not to fall because I knew that if I fell, I would die. All I had was the tiny head start I’d already given myself and I *had* to make it work.

Stumbling forward, I stepped on something soft and sticky, something that held my feet in place tighter than even Greyson’s teeth.

A spiderweb.

“No, no, no,” I groaned, trying to jerk myself free from the web, but the more I twisted and moved, the more tangled I became. Xavier and Greyson slowly approached the edge of the web, both about to leap on me, but then they suddenly backed off.

The spiderweb beneath me began to shake, and I turned my head to see a giant spider coming toward me. Only, it was more than a spider. It was Ava.

I screamed and twisted in the web—only to see another spider advancing. Maren.

The Ava spider towered over me. “You’ve brought this on yourself.”

“You don’t deserve either one of them,” the Maren spider added. “The world is better off without you.”

And then they attacked—spiders and wolves alike.

I jolted upward with a cry. Sweat poured down my face, and my heart was beating against my ribcage so hard it almost hurt.

*What the… Where am I?*

And then I remembered. I was in Artemis’s room—the boys had destroyed mine. And everything that had happened afterward had just been a dream.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and wiped away the sweat on my forehead. My mouth was dry. I ducked into the bathroom and ran some cold water over my face. The images from the dream were still fresh in my mind—too fresh. My ankle was almost throbbing with the phantom pain of Greyson’s bite.

I didn’t need a therapist to decipher the meaning of that dream—my mates turning on me, Maren and Ava trapping me in a web… It meant I couldn’t stay in this house. I couldn’t be around either Greyson or Xavier. It was obvious that if I stayed, someone was going to get hurt.

But I couldn’t go home to Minnesota, either. My parents were still fighting, and they were both here in Oregon, anyway.

*I wish I had a place to escape to. A place all my own. Maybe I can find an Airbnb.*

I bent down to drink some water from the tap. It was cool and refreshing on my parched throat. When I stood back up, I noticed a figure in the doorway and almost choked. It was a young woman I’d never met before.

I stumbled back. “Who the hell are you?!”

“I’m Marta,” she said softly. “And I’m sorry to frighten you, but I have an important message from someone named Cassandra. Is that someone you know?”

**Episode 1195**

XAVIER

I headed outside in search of Ava. She and I had some unfinished business that should have been dealt with a long time ago. If my argument with Greyson had made one thing clear, it was that I’d let things with Ava go on for far too long.

I passed Torin, who was sitting on the porch. He yelped and jumped up when I pushed the door open so hard it smacked into the exterior wall of the house. But when he saw I was the one heading out of the house, his stupid face split into a grin.

“Are you going for a romp in the woods?” he asked, his eyes alight with excitement. “Can I come along?”

I shifted and growled, baring my razor-sharp teeth.

Torin’s smile faded. “I guess not…”

With one last snarl, I spun and headed toward the woods, where I had last seen Ava.

God, I was so tired of having all these damn Fae hanging around all the time, constantly underfoot. Some small voice in my head reminded me that my mate was Fae too, but that was different. I’d met Cali and realized she was my mate long before either one of us had ever learned the truth about her heritage. Besides, she was only half-Fae. It barely counted. The rest of them, on the other hand, were individual pains in my ass.

Lately you couldn’t throw a rock in the pack house without hitting a Fae and then having them pull you into some inane bullshit, like a stupid Halloween party or a reality TV show reboot or a stupid fake glamour makeover.

*Or a paternity test…*

Greyson had a lot of nerve telling me to back off from Cali because I’d already mated with Ava—especially when he likely had a kid with that Fae woman, Maren. It wasn’t even remotely the same thing. Ava and I were ancient history—and so was our bond. She wouldn’t even have been here if it weren’t for Silas and Demeter’s evil plans, which Ava had seemed all too eager to get on board with.

Ava had killed my mother, and in return I’d killed her, and then years had passed and I’d met Cali and my life had changed for the better.

Cali had saved me, had helped glue together all my broken pieces. She was my second chance—my last chance—at happiness and fulfillment. There was no way in hell I was going to give her up for the broken, poisonous remnants of my bond with Ava. And if that meant severing those last threads of connection, so be it.

I should have done it sooner, now that I thought about it. I should have unmated with her the moment I’d realized she’d come back to life with some piece of our original bond intact.

*And after I deal with Ava, maybe it’ll be time to send those two Fae packing too.*

Maren was Greyson’s problem and, more importantly, both she and her kid mostly stayed out of my way. And I’d accepted that Artemis would be around in perpetuity, or at least for as long as Cali wanted her here. But Torin and Astrid? Those two had overstayed their welcome.

The whole *Bachelorette* dating game had turned into a complete disaster, and it had absolutely killed me to see Cali with Greyson. I just couldn’t get used to it. Greyson might be able to put on a pragmatic face about the whole thing, but I didn’t think I’d ever be able to truly accept Cali being in love with my brother, or the concept of sharing her with him—whether that was allowing her to weigh her options or going along with some dumb dating game.

Sure, seeing her with Greyson made me feel like my chest was being wrenched apart, but even when the pendulum had swung back to me and I’d gotten to be with Cali, all I’d ever been able to focus on was getting her to stay, getting her to choose me in the long run rather than just enjoying the time we had together in the moment.

*I can’t do this anymore.*

And apparently Cali couldn’t either, since she’d decided that breaking up with me was preferable to any other option.

Fucking Torin. If it weren’t for his meddling, Cali and I could’ve been in a much better place. Greyson should have stayed in Portland with Maren and her kid. Ava should have stayed dead. Everything would have been so much simpler.

I let myself imagine the looks on Astrid and Torin’s faces when I kicked them to the curb after becoming Alpha. It was a beautiful, beautiful thought…

Except they were Cali’s friends. And they had stepped up for us during the fight. If nothing else, they’d proven their loyalty.

*Literally nothing else…*

Okay, so maybe I’d allow them to stay. If Cali wanted me to prove that I was all in, then getting along with Torin and Astrid was probably part of the deal. They were her friends. I could suck it up, I supposed.

*But I swear, if Astrid tries to put me in spandex again…*

Ava’s scent hit my nose as I neared the last place I’d seen her. Hopefully she hadn’t wandered too far from where I’d left her.

I followed her scent past the last place she’d been. *Why do all the women in my life refuse to listen to me*? *I’m an Alpha, for god’s sake. People are supposed to do as I say.*

But then again, when was the last time Cali had listened to me?

When things were good between Ava and me, what felt like a hundred years ago, our dynamic had never been questioned. I was the Alpha, and she was my mate. The one person whose connection with me was powerful than anything else in the world.

Which was why I’d never seen it coming when she’d betrayed me.

But she’d turned against me, and now somehow Ava was back and Cali had left me. But I didn’t want Ava, not now, not ever. I wanted Cali—which I’d thought I’d made perfectly clear.

I’d even tried to be the good guy. I’d thought I could handle Ava being around—call it a sense of duty, of being the better person. But my goodwill only stretched so far, and Ava had crossed the line a long time ago.

*It’s time to put her back where she belongs.*

I slowed as her scent became stronger, fresher. I needed the element of surprise.

And then I saw her. She was asleep, curled up under a tree in her wolf form. It was all too easy to see myself curled up beside her. We used to do that together all the time—but that had been a lifetime ago. Things had changed.

I took slow, cautious steps toward her, trying not to wake her until I absolutely had to. She slowly began to stir, and I froze when her eyes snapped open. She mind linked with me.

*You came back?* Surprise and bitterness colored her tone. *I didn’t think* Cali *would let you.*

My mind flashed red, and I growled. *I don’t want you to ever say her name again. Do you understand me?*

She slowly lifted herself to her feet, her eyes locked on me. *Did* Cali *throw you out?*

*Ava*. It was the last warning I would give her.

*She doesn’t deserve you. I bet she’s with Greyson as we speak—*

And then I snapped. I lunged at her, snarling, and we collided in a flurry of limbs and teeth and claws. I slammed her into the ground with my superior strength, but she’d always been the faster, more flexible one, and she shimmied out from under me and scrambled to her feet.

My strategy was fueled by rage—a need to let out all the hurt and fury inside me, to pin her down and tear out her throat just like I had the first time round. Ava’s strategy was to her advantage, darting in and biting and scratching, and then dancing out of reach using her speed. Each time I aimed for her, trying to tackle her to the ground or sink my teeth into her, she just barely dodged me. And each time I missed, I only grew more and more furious.

This time, when she darted forward to nip at my flank, I predicted her attack and caught her across the chest, slamming her into the ground. I pinned her beneath me before she could wriggle away again, and she stared up at me, panting, her eyes wide.

I could do it now. I could end this—end her—right now. The scar I’d inflicted the first time I’d killed her was just beneath her fur, almost like a guideline. I knew the taste of her blood, the sensation of her tender flesh giving way beneath my teeth.

Her eyes locked with mine, and her voice slipped into my mind.

*I know why you’re here.*

Ava lifted her head, exposing her throat to me.

**Episode 1196**

A chill went down my spine as I stared at the new girl. Marta, she’d said her name was.

*Cassandra has a message for me?* Well, if that wasn’t one of the most ominous things I’d heard in a long while… I had a feeling I knew exactly which Cassandra Marta was referring to—the one from the original *due destini* myth—but what I didn’t know was how *the* Cassandra could be passing along messages to me through this rando girl who’d shown up at my house in the dead of night.

Well, actually I did know another Cassandra, if I were to count my freshman year classmate. But last I’d been on Facebook, she hadn’t *died*… So it couldn’t be her.

I shook my head, confused. “What do you mean she has a message for me?”

“I’m a medium,” Marta explained in a rush of words. “Well, a new-ish one. Kind of. It’s a long story. But I do have the power and ability to connect to the dead; that’s not in question. I’m still getting the hang of some things, though, and that’s why Violet and Charlie brought me back here to work with Big Mac.”

Silence stretched between us, and I tried to make sense of her word-vomit. “I beg your pardon?”

“I can see ghosts.”

“Oh.” That made so much more sense. She really should have started with that. “And you see Cassandra… now?” I looked around, half-expecting the ghost of Cassandra to hop out of the shower or smile back at me in the mirror like the ghosts in so many creepy horror films.

“Kind of?” Marta shrugged. I could already tell it was going to be an uphill battle to make sense of her powers and whatever message she was, in theory, going to pass along. “There is a ghost here in the house that came to me asking to talk to you. So, do you know anyone named Cassandra?”

I had no idea how to explain who Cassandra was to me, especially to a stranger, so I just nodded. “Yeah, I know a woman by that name.”

A long, awkward pause set in with me staring at Marta, still standing in the doorway of the bathroom, and her staring back at me.

“So, um…” She laced her hands in front of her. “Do you want to do this now, or later, or…?”

“Oh.” I blinked. “You mean, she wants to talk to me *right now* right now?”

She nodded. “Limited time engagement. I’ve found that ghosts have the strongest connection to the mortal world at night, but Cassandra seems to be holding on pretty steadily. Maybe there’s something about this house…”

I just stared at her blankly. Was that a question, or was she just thinking out loud?

Marta sighed. “Follow me.”

She stopped at a closet on the way and grabbed a handful of different candles—thick pillar candles and smaller votive ones—along with a box of matches.

*Wow. I had no idea we had this many candles in the pack house. Let alone how Marta knows where they are. Maybe it’s a medium thing? Like, she can sense ghosts* and *séance supplies*? Hmm… That could be a handy-dandy trick. You’d always be prepared—

*Not now, Cali. Focus! Cassandra,* the *Cassandra from the original* due destini *myth, wants to talk to you! This could be your chance to finally fix things!*

I bit my lip. I probably shouldn’t hang my hopes on Cassandra giving me a quick and easy solution—I’d learned firsthand that being a *due destini* mate meant “quick and easy” wasn’t even an option. Even in the dreams I’d had about Cassandra, and in learning more about *due destini* by reading her journal, I hadn’t found any real solutions. At least, none that I could live with.

*Well, at least regardless of what she has to say, things can’t get any worse than they are now. If I choose one mate, the other will drop dead.* Since Cassandra hadn’t had a witch and a half-baked spell to mess up her curse, I was pretty sure she at least hadn’t been forced to deal with *that* particular fine print.

I didn’t know what I was expecting when Marta led me down the stairs with her arms full of candles, but it was *not* that we would pass by several empty and perfectly viable rooms and go outside into the freezing night. If she’d warned me, I would have grabbed my winter coat. And some shoes.

Marta stopped on a patch of flattened ground about ten feet away from the porch and began arranging the candles.

“Are you sure this is the best place?” I asked, rubbing my arms.

“Yes. The connection is stronger with direct moonlight or starlight. That’s one thing I’ve learned.” She formed the candles into a circle. “Also, for reasons I won’t go into, I hate houses.”

I stared down at her. *Who hates houses? This girl is weird, even by my standards.*

Marta lit a match and started lighting the candles one by one. Then she stepped over a candle and sat cross-legged. “Come sit with me in the circle.”

I moved slowly, extra careful to not knock the candles down, and sat across from Marta. I looked around dubiously. What would happen now? Marta didn’t look like a typical medium, and this arrangement of candles in the moonlight, though kind of romantic and dreamy, didn’t really scream *séance!* to me.

But then again my only reference for this kind of thing was from TV shows and those spoopy booths at the Minnesota State Fair. “So um, where’s the Ouija board?” I asked.

Marta laughed. “It’s not like that. I don’t need a board game to speak with the spirits.”

“Oh, so, like a… crystal ball, then?” *Man, I’m out of my element here.*

“That’s for fortune tellers. And to my knowledge, I don’t have that skill set.” Marta closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “If you could please be silent, I’m going to summon Cassandra now.”

*Okay.* I sat there quietly, watching Marta breath slowly and deeply. Her eyes remained closed. It almost looked like she was praying, or meditating… or sleeping sitting up in a circle of candles. Talk about a fire hazard.

*Focus, Caliana!*

I looked around. Nothing seemed to be happening. It was just me and this girl I didn’t know, sitting in the moonlight on a frozen November night. Marta’s face was set with concentration. She didn’t move; she barely even seemed to be breathing.

Was I supposed to close my eyes too? Maybe meditate with “Cassandra” as my mantra?

The candle flames began to flicker just the slightest bit, like a light breeze was passing through. A few stray dead leaves trailed slowly past, and the gentle wind lifted some of the hair on the back of my neck.

*Cool. Here comes the hypothermia.*

I glanced around nervously. Should I be concerned about the dead leaves getting caught on the candles, or—

A glimmer of light caught in the corner of my eye, and I turned my head with a gasp.

A beautiful woman had appeared right in front of me. Her form was translucent and glowing. Shimmering, really. And her face was etched with sorrow. It was Cassandra. I knew it in my bones. I didn’t know how or why I knew it, but I still recognized her.

“Caliana.” Her voice was soft, but seemed to echo around us. “It is time for you to do what I could not. You must choose.”

*Ugh. Please tell me she isn’t dropping in from the spirit world just to nag me about picking a mate.*

“I wish I could,” I said. “But the terms of the curse have changed, and now whoever I choose, the other one will die because they weren’t chosen. If I choose one, I condemn the other to death. How can I live with myself if I make that kind of choice?”

“It will be far worse if you don’t choose at all.”

I shook my head helplessly. “I don’t understand. What could be worse than causing one of my mates to die?”

“I failed to choose, and then both of my mates died,” she reminded me. “And I am destined to mourn both of them for all eternity.”

Another chill went down my spine, and I shuddered. Mourning for all eternity? Hard pass. But in Cassandra’s case, at least whichever mate she hadn’t chosen would have had the opportunity to live a full and happy life. I didn’t even get that comfort anymore.

“That sounds… so awful, and I’m sorry that happened to you. But won’t I be filled with the same amount of pain—if not more—by sending one of my mates to his death?”

Cassandra’s expression was grave. “Your indecision will fester, rot away at you like maggots on a corpse. You can’t run from it. Staying away from both of them will only make everything worse.”

“Say what?” My jaw dropped. How could things get any *worse*?

**Episode 1197**

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “How could things get any worse?”

This could not be happening! There was no way that Cassandra herself had come all the way from the spirit world to warn me to make a choice—even if it meant killing one of my mates in the process—because if I didn’t, things would get even worse.

How in the world could this hot smelly dumpster fire of a curse get any more terrible than it was already?

There was no “worse.” Killing one of my mates was rock bottom, and I’d been living there long enough to etch my name on the stone. And all that talk of maggots and rotting corpses? Gross.

*I get that she’s dead, but her metaphors could use a little less decomposition.*

“If you stay on this course,” she warned me, “it will destroy your soul, and you will slowly be driven mad.”

“So what?” I blinked. “I’m already mad. *All the time*. In fact, I’m furious and—oh.” Realization hit, along with a new wave of anger and panic. “Wait, do you mean I’m going to go *crazy*? As in, bye-bye any chance at a somewhat normal life?”

Okay, so admittedly “a normal life” had gone out the window the moment I’d fallen in with the Redwood pack and learned about all the supernatural creatures and magic that existed in my world. And then that faraway concept of normal had pretty much left the stratosphere the day I’d learned I was half-Fae. But still! I had plans! I had an idea of what my future would look like without either of my mates.

When I’d decided to break things off with Greyson and Xavier, I had more or less pictured myself growing old, raising about eight too many cats all by myself, thinking about the two loves of my life that I’d lost—like a tragic heroine in some old Victorian novel.

Cassandra reached out to take my hand, but of course her touch went right through me and left a chill behind. She pursed her lips. “I didn’t seek you out to scare you, Caliana. I just want to help you avoid making the biggest mistake of your life. You have the benefit of my experience to guide you, and I wish I could have had someone to help me.”

I remembered reading Cassandra’s journal, and all the love I’d witnessed for her two mates within its pages. Along with that love had been a heap of despair and misery. Cassandra had lived for a long time with so much regret, and all of those dark feelings had clearly followed her into the afterlife.

I wished I could reach out and hug her—

*Wait.*

A horrifying possibility struck me.

*Am I going crazy* right now*? Is this all a hallucination? Is Marta even real?* It was weird that she’d known exactly where to find me in the middle of the night. And she’d somehow known where all the candles were.

Except… wait. *If this is all a hallucination, then Cassandra’s warning isn’t real. And if Cassandra’s warning isn’t real, then am I still at risk of going crazy?*

There was a very real chance this curse was going to break my brain.

“Caliana, focus. Please.”

I snapped back to the moment. Cassandra’s figure was fading at the edges. “You know what you need to do,” she said. “Do it before it’s too late. Do it before fate makes the choice for you.”

The wind rushed across the lawn, and Cassandra’s figure disappeared. The candles blew out, thin, smoky tendrils rising up and flying away with the breeze. And I was left sitting on the cold grass in a circle of unlit candles with Marta, who was apparently *very* real.

The girl’s eyes rolled back, and then she fixed her gaze on me. She whistled. “You got some problems, don’t you, kid?”

“Kid?” I scowled. “Aren’t you still in high school?”

“I’m old enough to be your grandma, trust me.” She stood up and then offered me her hand. After a beat of hesitation, I took it and stood.

“So, what are you going to do?” Marta asked. “It sounds like you’re in a tough spot.”

“I wish I had a nickel for every time someone asked me that.”

“Would you buy a solution?” She began picking up the candles that I still didn’t know how she’d found.

“No.” I sighed. “But at least I’d be richer than Jeff Bezos while I faced down my impossible problem.”

“Who?”

I frowned. “You don’t… Never mind.”

Marta straightened, her arms full of candles. “So, do you know anything about this Big Mac lady?”

A distraction. *Oh, thank god.* “What do you want to know?”

“Everything, I guess?”

“Okay, well… She’s a witch.” I started counting out facts about my favorite witchy frenemy on my fingers. “She’s engaged to Mrs. Smith, one of the older werewolves here. Mrs. Smith’s first name is actually Sabine, FYI, and she makes the most amazing white chocolate mocha, so you should definitely make sure to sample some of that while you’re here.” I snapped my fingers. “Oh, and this one time, Big Mac took Jay’s eye in exchange for a favor, so be careful if you ask her for anything.”

*I kind of wish I’d followed my own advice with that, considering how all of her “favors” to me have turned out.*

Marta almost dropped the candles. “His *eye*?”

“Yeah, just one though. He can still get around fine. But she is a witch and they deal in those kinds of things, apparently, so just be careful with her. You never know what she’ll ask you for.”

Being in this situation with Marta was reminding me of my conversation with Artemis about the three witches whose help I wanted to seek out. If Big Mac was the devil I knew, how badly could things go with three witches I *didn’t* know? What if they changed my past, but the cost was something I couldn’t live with?

“Anything else?” Marta prompted, and I realized I’d trailed off.

“Oh. Um…” I searched my memory banks. “She hates chamomile tea.”

“Right.” Marta gave me a strange look. “Well, if there’s nothing else, I’m going to bed.” She yawned. “Being a medium is tiring.”

“Um, sleep well?” Should I thank her for scaring the daylights out of me and then dragging me outside for a little spirit chat with Cassandra?

*I didn’t exactly ask for it, and now that I’m thinking about it, I kind of wish I’d stayed in Artemis’s bed.*

Marta was already in motion, heading back inside. Clearly, no thanks were needed.

“Okay then,” I muttered.

I stared at the house but couldn’t bring myself to go back inside. After the talk with Cassandra, I knew it would be a miracle if I fell asleep again at all. My gaze lifted to the bedroom windows on the second floor.

*They’re both probably in there. Xavier and Greyson.*

Cassandra’s dire warning echoed in my head. Choose a mate, or lose my mind. The options were just getting better and better. I had no clue what to do.

*I kind of miss the days when choosing one of them would’ve just resulted in a broken heart.* Admittedly, I still didn’t know how I would choose, even if the curse were still sticking to those much more benign terms, but it was nice to think of a time when the choice—or not choosing at all—wasn’t life and death.

The door to the porch swung open, and Greyson stepped outside, his eyes locked onto me.

For a moment, I wanted nothing more than to run up to him, to feel his arms wrapped tight around me, to breathe in his scent. I wanted him to comfort me, to protect me from the terrifying reality we were living in, to tell me everything was going to be all right.

And then I remembered the dream we’d shared, just Greyson and me, on the cusp of our wedding day, sneaking around like carefree young lovers. It had all felt so sexy and intimate, so bright and hopeful. With the way things had been lately, it was hard to even imagine what it would look like to be with Greyson—really be with him—without the weight of the *due destini* hanging over me.

I wondered if he was thinking about our dream, too.

He slowly approached, and my heart began to race. I knew I should turn away, or even just walk past him and go inside and sleep in Artemis’s room like I’d planned. After all, I had told them both that I couldn’t do this anymore. I’d been the one to break things off.

But instead of turning away, I stayed exactly where I was as Greyson drew closer.

He tentatively reached for my hand, his fingertips just barely grazing my palm and sending tingles up my arm.

A thousand memories of the two of us flooded through me as he finally broke the silence. “I know you want to run, Cali. I know you’re overwhelmed. But I meant what I said before—” He took a breath. “I want to make this work. I’m not going to let you give up on us. You were in that dream with me. You saw how good things could be between us.”

“Greyson…” I trailed off as he reached up and lifted my chin so he could look into my eyes.

His irises almost glowed in the moonlight, and I saw enough love in his gaze to make my knees weak. “Cali, do you trust me?”

**Episode 1198**

XAVIER

I pressed down harder on Ava’s throat, allowing my claws to prick her skin. A cold bead of sweat broke from her hairline and traveled down. Her breathing was now raspy and uneven as her chest rose and fell roughly.

*Just do it*, she cried out through the mind link, imploring, as her eyes filled with tears. She closed her eyes in momentary defeat, her voice dropping to a whisper. Her eyes seemed sad, even in wolf form. *Get it over with.*

I slightly lessened the pressure on her neck, hesitating.

Feeling that, Ava slowly opened her eyes, confused. She watched me carefully, taking me in.

*What?* Ava’s jaws panted, her eyes taunting me cruelly. *Are you worried I’ll come back from the dead again? I guess there’s only one way to find out…*

I bared my teeth at her, once again pressing down hard on her throat. I knew I could just rip her throat out and end this—but would it really end?

My brow furrowed as I thought about it. Had I really come here just to kill her? Not that that had worked out so well last time…

And what would Cali think? Although I knew that she hated Ava—Cali had made that clear, for sure—she would still be horrified if I did choose to kill her.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I didn’t actually have to kill her. Ava wasn’t attacking me, she hadn’t threatened Cali or anyone… So why did I have to end her life?

I flared my nostrils, releasing a slow breath, willing the instinctual need to eliminate her to leave my body. Maybe once, I would have killed her without a thought, but that had been before I’d met Cali.

*What’s stopping you?* Ava asked, breathless. I felt her body continue to tremble ever so slightly underneath me.

I partially pulled away, lifting my paw slightly from her throat. Even though I wasn’t going to purge her from this world today, I needed to cut her presence from my life. It had to end, otherwise I would never be able to move on and fully commit myself to Cali—and Cali alone.

Realizing that I was no longer holding her down, Ava slowly straightened, no longer exposing her throat to me completely. She kept her eyes trained on mine, her questions evident. She stood up, shaking her fur, ears pointed down in anger and alarm.

*I didn’t come here to kill you*, I stated, my voice low and strained through the link as I thought about what to do.

She cocked her head at me, ears tilted in complete confusion.

*I—Then why are you here?* Ava asked, clearly thrown. *Just to fight?*

I paused, still thinking. What was it that I wanted? I knew I couldn’t kill her, but I also knew I couldn’t just let her roam free. As long as Ava was alive and bonded to me—

I sucked in a quick breath as I realized what had to be done. I could unmate with her, sever our connection for good. But no matter how much I thought about it and tried to convince myself to do it, I kept feeling like something was holding me back. But what was it? What was I so afraid of?

Everything.

I was afraid of what had happened the last time I’d killed her—I’d lost my wolf. It had been terrifying, depressing. I’d lost an entire piece of myself, and I hadn’t known how to get it back.

And now? Now, there was a whole new piece to the equation.

If I unmated from Ava, would I lose my wolf all over again? And if that happened, would I then lose Cali? Would I even get my wolf back at all this time? Losing Cali was not an option. I had to be careful. I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to focus. I had to think this through logically, weigh my options.

On the one hand, I had come out here impulsively, fueled by the rage I felt at Greyson and the hurt from Cali breaking up with me. Hell, I was just so damn *angry* about everything that had gone wrong in my life, starting with Ava.

For a brief moment, I saw red as Ava came into my line of sight. This girl had brought me nothing but heartache and hardship—from killing my mother, to deceiving Greyson and me, to creating a rift between Cali and me…

Ava made a strangled sound as I nearly lunged at her a second time. And for a moment, that sound brought me nothing but joy. For that brief, delicious moment, all I wanted to do was to murder Ava, to make her pay for all that she had done.

But I didn’t do it.

My teeth and claws ached for her blood, but I could not give in to my feral nature. No matter how much I wanted Ava gone, unmating from her was the better option. I would be free from her, which meant that Greyson wouldn’t be able to throw her in my face anymore.

A small thrill of excitement swept through me as all the possibilities filled my mind. If Ava and I were unmated, Cali would finally be rid of any doubt she had about us. It would be erased, just as my bond with Ava would be erased. Then I could get Cali back, completely free and clear to be her mate—and her mate only.

A position that I knew Greyson would never be able to claim.

I turned on Ava, giving her a cruel wolf’s smile.

*You’re nothing but baggage to me*, I hissed through the link, making sure that she understood and felt every ounce of the hate I had toward her. *And you’ll never be anything more.*

Ava recoiled slightly, clearly stung by my words. Her expression was painted into a perfect picture of heartbreak, the pain evident in her eyes. Then, just as quickly as that expression had formed, it disappeared into a mask of cool indifference.

Her claws dug into the soft earth, black lips pulling back to reveal white fangs. *If you’re done with me…* Ava paused as if she was making sure I could feel her unshed tears through the bond. *If you came to humiliate me, job done. Now get the fuck away from me.*

She snarled, readying herself to strike.

In response, I merely lunged at her again. She was a cunning fighter, but she was dealing with an Alpha. I pinned her under my paws easily for a second time. If I was going to do this, I needed to make sure she couldn’t get away. I shifted forward, using my weight to keep her still. I pulled back my mouth, growling at her to stay in place, maintaining my dominance over her as I mentally readied myself to end this.

Part of me still hesitated.

I glanced at Ava’s neck, which was straining with her efforts to shove me off her. I licked my mouth and snout, tempted. Her neck was right there—I could still shut her up for good.

I shook my head, letting out a low growl, trying my hardest to get myself to think sensibly again.

*No*. I wasn’t going to kill her, I wasn’t going to tear our bond that way. There was only one way I was going to unmate her. I just had to say the words.

I locked eyes with Ava, taking her in for one last time. I looked at her face, her fur, her eyes… I allowed myself a moment to remember everything—the good, the bad, the in-between.

This woman had played a role in my life, but that role was now over. My eyes reconnected with hers. Her pupils were wide and dilated as she let out rough breaths.

*Goodbye, Ava*, I said.

She stilled underneath me, clearly caught off guard by my statement.

Then I recalled the phrase that would set me free from her.

*Nego illam mate foedere iungit!* I chanted, putting forth all my intention into the words, making sure Ava could feel each one. *Nego illam mate foedere iungit! Nego illam mate foedere iungit!*

*You can’t reject me!* Ava growled as understanding dawned on her. She lifted her head, her eyes ablaze with anger. *You have no right. I’m your mate. We belong to each other!*

*Not anymore.*

Ava winced. I felt her tremble beneath me, but the unmating ritual had already begun, and I knew she was trapped.

For a second, I was hit by doubt—not about what I had done, but about whether it was actually working. Shouldn’t I have been feeling different by now?

Ava continued to shake beneath me, her spasms becoming more volatile. But was that because she was upset?

Then Ava howled—a guttural, painful cry. Tears, unnatural for a wolf, were streaming down her fur in full force. Almost as if her very wolfish nature was at war with itself.

I stepped away from her and watched, my eyes narrowed. I tried to determine if the words were taking effect.

She lowered her head to face me, lurching forward in a sloppy attempt to lunge at me. Her snapping jaws caught nothing but air.

*Take it back!* she screamed in my head, but already her voice was fading from my mind. Her wolf’s face was snapping, snarling, full of fangs. *Don’t do this to us.*

I backed away to stay out of her reach, but then I was suddenly struck by an agonizing, blinding pain. The pain filled my body, zapping through every single cell, filling my core.

I stumbled, trying to steady myself. Something was happening… It was our mate bond—it was breaking.

And then all the pain went away, and I was filled with total happiness. Ava and I were done. And now—finally—Cali could be mine forever.

**Episode 1199**

I blinked the sleep from my eyes, squinting against the small stream of sunlight that had entered my room.

Wait, this wasn’t my room.

Still lying down, I took in my surroundings. Judging from the tacky decorations that only someone who had never lived in the human world would want to hang up… I was in Artemis’s room.

I sighed, rubbing my face, realizing it was a new day. And yet I felt even more tired than I had before I’d gone to bed. My eyes felt heavy, my skin felt rough, and my body ached like I’d run a marathon.

The conversation with Cassandra’s ghost was still weighing down on me quite a bit—hell, Cassandra’s words had haunted me all night.

On top of that, Greyson was asking me to trust him—which I’d told him I did. But the problem was that I didn’t trust *myself*. All it would take was one little mistake for me to sentence one of them—either Xavier or Greyson—to death.

I pushed myself up slowly, my shoulders curving inward at the thought of losing either of them.

Didn’t they understand that was why I had to stay away? My mouth turned down into a frown at the thought. I had to leave them in order to save them. There was no other way. Part of me knew that wouldn’t really solve the problem—as Cassandra had so graciously told me, it would get worse. Much worse. As in, I would literally go mad. *Would that really be so different than how crazy I felt already?* Maybe I shouldn’t tempt fate.

I groaned as I fell back into bed. My options were limited, and none of them sounded good.

If I went to the witches and they made me forget about Xavier and Greyson, I would still go mad—except in that scenario, I wouldn’t know why. But would that matter? Would I even know if I was losing my mind?

I blew out a breath as another thought hit me—what if the witches screwed things up?

I mean, I had seen magic before, and it didn’t always work out the way it was supposed to. So, how could I trust that the witches would actually do their job right? Maybe I needed to think more before Artemis and I tracked them down.

I glanced over at Artemis, who was asleep on the floor. She was lying stiffly on her back, her arms folded over her stomach. God, even in her sleep, she was so uptight and guarded—then again, years of not having anyone truly care for you probably tended to have that effect.

My lips curved up into a soft, involuntary smile. At least Artemis had me and Mom and Dad now, even if she didn’t always see it. And most of all, I was glad Artemis and I had finally made up. I couldn’t stand fighting with her for so long.

I shifted my gaze over to the ceiling. I knew Artemis and I weren’t capable of being mad at each other forever—but it was my parents I wasn’t so sure about.

Sighing, I quietly got off the bed and decided to head back to my own room to grab some far more presentable clothes. I knew I wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep anymore, not with all the doomsday thoughts rolling around in my head. I had to tiptoe around Artemis, taking extra care not to make even a bit of noise as I left her room.

Only when I had fully closed Artemis’s door did I release the breath I had been holding.

Rolling back my tense shoulders, I made my way to my room. Fresh clothing acquired, I made my way downstairs. There, I found my mom sitting on the porch, sipping some tea. When I closed the door behind me, she looked up and immediately frowned, her brow furrowing in concern.

“You look so tired, honey,” she noted.

“I have a lot on my mind,” I admitted. I thought about asking her about having the witches erase my memory, but I already knew if I did, she would most definitely freak out—and I definitely wouldn’t get any closer to an answer.

I looked at my mom, wondering if she had the magic to do it, like Artemis. Though, even if I asked, I doubted she would admit it—she’d kept a lot of secrets from me. As sad as it was for me to admit, at this point in time, I wouldn’t put it past my mom to hide her abilities.

My mom gave me a small smile, then turned her face forward, taking in the view. The rising sun set a soft glow on her, making her looked almost peaceful. Almost.

I knew my dad had said that things between him and Mom would be okay, but he hadn’t been very convincing. I didn’t really want to ask. There are some things a kid just doesn’t really want to know about their parents, but I had to.

“How are things between you and Dad?” I ventured, keeping my voice light.

My mom paused mid-sip. She set her mug down on the table next to her and smiled ruefully. “I’m sorry that you got drawn into that,” she said, not quite answering the question.

I groaned internally, annoyed that she wasn’t being straightforward with me. I just wanted to know one thing, and one thing only.

“You’re going to be okay, right?” I pressed, my voice getting a little snarky.

My mom glanced up at me, clearly noting my tone. But she didn’t say anything about it.

“I hope so,” she admitted. Then she gave me a pointed stare. “I don’t want you to worry about it, Cali.”

“It’s hard not to,” I said, my eyebrows lifting in emphasis. I paused. “Is it because of Kadmos?”

Instantly, my mom’s demeanor changed, becoming more guarded. Her gaze became cool as she regarded me carefully.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Is that the reason you and Dad are fighting?” I added, making it clear what I was asking. “Because Kadmos might be alive?”

My mom sighed. “We don’t know that.”

“But you kept it a secret from Dad and me,” I pressed, my voice rising slightly. “And made Artemis lie about it. You said it was to protect us. But I know that by keeping secrets like that, you only end up hurting the people you love.”

By now, I was breathing heavily, my emotions rising to the surface.

“If Kadmos came back,” I started, my voice taking on an edge to it, “would you still love him?”

My mom looked down at her hands, playing with her fingers. For a moment, there was nothing but silence as the early morning breeze swept past us. To others, we might have looked like a mother and daughter, just enjoying the sunrise. But in this moment, we were anything but that.

“I love your father,” my mom finally said. She didn’t give any indication that she was going to expand on that thought, still not quite answering my question—once again. At least I knew where I got my own hardball question-dodging streak from.

“But what if Kadmos were here?” I said curtly, seething and frustrated. “Right now. What if you had to choose between the two?”

My mom narrowed her eyes at me. “Is this about me, or you?”

My nostrils flared as I released a slow breath, well aware that my mom was picking up on my own problems. But right now, we were talking about her, not me.

“Just answer the question.”

My mom’s lips flattened into a thin line as she considered her words. “When I met your father,” she answered, “I thought Kadmos was dead. I mourned his loss—and then accepted that I could either wallow in my grief or move on. Try to find some happiness.”

She went quiet for a moment, seemingly lost in her memories of the past. When she continued, her voice was soft. “I had to move on, to accept that things with Kadmos were over.”

“So you don’t love him anymore?” I asked again, hoping to finally get a straight answer.

“I will always love Kadmos,” my mother said.

I stared at her, unbelieving.

“But I’m in love with your father,” she quickly finished.

I knew my mom’s situation was different than my own, but I couldn’t imagine being able to move on from either one of my mates. My heart skipped a beat as I remembered all too well how it had felt when I thought I’d accidentally chosen Xavier—effectively almost killing Greyson. I was so caught up in the memory, I didn’t even notice my mother stand up and make her way to me. It was only when I felt her hand on mine that I realized she’d moved.

I swallowed, pushing the memory to the back of my mind.

“I know how conflicted you must be,” my mother said. “Just know that I’ll love you no matter what you decide.”

I gave my mother a small smile, grateful for her words. We didn’t have much time to savor the silence and stillness of the morning when we were interrupted by Violet, storming out of the house in a huff.

“Has anyone seen Xavier?” she asked, breathless.

“Isn’t he in his room?” I asked. I didn’t want to think about Xavier. Or Greyson. The knowledge that I’d have to leave them both was still tearing me in two. But Violet looked genuinely concerned underneath that teenage petulance.

“I wanted to talk to him,” Violet said. “But he never came home last night.”

I remembered Xavier asking me about Ava, about whether she could stay or not. With a gulp, I also recalled how angry he’d gotten when I’d told him the truth and refused to allow her to stay here… Was this how he’d reacted?

I felt the blood drain from my face, and my body suddenly felt strangely foreign.

Had Xavier gone to Ava? Had he run off with his former mate?

**Episode 1200**

LOLA

I gripped the edge of the tub tightly, trying to take deep breaths. With tears in my eyes, I slowly lifted my face, allowing my hair to fall back, until I was facing the ceiling. I squeezed my eyes shut, so tight that I quickly saw stars instead of the usual black. I wanted nothing more than to scream into the void.

I ran my tongue across my teeth, freshly distraught at what I felt. Since I’d discovered I had fangs, I had resorted to locking myself in my bathroom at the pack house. There was no way I could go outside and face everyone as my freakish self.

A fresh batch of tears formed as I remembered Jay’s reaction when he’d first seen my fangs. The abject horror on his face, his wide eye that showed nothing but fear… He’d been truly frightened just *looking* at me.

There was another weak knock outside, as Jay continued to try and coax me out. He had spent the entire night trying to get me to open the door so we could talk.

But what more could he say? His face—his reaction—had said it all.

Until now, I’d never seen Jay scared of anything. And of all things he could’ve been afraid of, he was afraid of me, his own mate. It was my worst nightmare coming true—Jay was going to reject me because I was a vampire.

I let out a hiccup as another round of silent sobs went through me.

“Lola.” Jay’s voice came through the door. He sounded hoarse, likely tired because neither of us had slept. “Will you please let me in? I can hear you trying not to cry in there.”

I rubbed the tears from my face furiously, not answering.

“I want to help,” Jay pleaded. “But it’s hard when there’s a door between us.”

I scoffed, not buying it. I’d seen that look in his eye, and I never wanted to see him look at me like that again. It was too painful. How many times could that man break my heart with just a simple expression?

God, what was I going to do?

I slid down the tub until my back rested against the outer slab of porcelain. I slowly opened my eyes, keeping my gaze away from the mirror, too afraid to see myself—or worse, to not see myself at all.

I winced, hissing quietly in pain. My tongue was sore from all the times I’d flicked it against my teeth in order to see if the fangs had come back after they’d receded, back at the church. God—all of that orthodontic work, ruined by fangs… What would my dads say?

And why were braces the first thing to pop into my brain? Ugh, this was the worst. I had far more upsetting things to contend with—like the fact that I was turning into a freaking *vampire*.

I paled at the thought and swallowed loudly. My entire life was grounded in the fact that I was a werewolf—that was my identity, my secret, the thing about me that had led me to Jay… but ever since I’d lost my wolf, I’d tried—really hard—to just accept that I was a plain, ordinary human. And although it was difficult to swallow that reality, I was slowly working toward accepting that life for myself.

But now? Now, I was becoming the very creature I had detested all my life.

Cold dread filled my core as I thought once again about Jay’s reaction to seeing my fangs.

Maybe it hadn’t been fear in Jay’s eye. Maybe it had been disgust—disgust at who I was, what I was becoming.

I clenched my fists, overwhelmed by all the thoughts and emotions that were coursing through me. I ground my teeth together to keep in the scream that was threatening to take over. I just wanted this to end. I wanted this to be over. I wanted to go back to who I was, *what* I was. I didn’t want to become one of the undead—and most of all, I didn’t want to see that look in Jay’s eye *ever* again.

A strangled sound escaped my lips. Who could ever love a monster like me?

Apparently alarmed by the noises I was making, Jay pounded on the door.

“Aw c’mon Lola, you’re killing me here,” he cried out, his voice breaking. “Let me in, babe.”

My eyes shifted to the door, which reverberated with each knock. Tears filled my eyes as I found myself moved by his words.

“Please don’t do this to me,” Jay said, his voice dropping. “I love you.” The pounding on the door stopped for a moment.

*Jay loves me.*

Reluctantly, I stepped out of the tub and reached for the door and unlocked it.

The door swung open, revealing a haggard-looking Jay. He rushed over to me, taking me in his arms, saying nothing. And I didn’t say anything, either. The hug was enough to speak for both of us.

The tears finally subsided as I let myself be comforted by his presence and his touch. As I sat there, wrapped in his strong arms and enveloped in his heat, I remembered how Jay had always been there for me. He was the only one who could make me feel better.

Slowly—almost cautiously, as if he was afraid to break me—Jay reached down to cup my cheek. He brought my face toward him, kissing me gently. I leaned into the kiss, needing it more than anything.

After a couple moments, we pulled away.

“This isn’t the end of the world,” Jay told me, and he had no idea how much I needed to hear exactly that, but I was still hesitant.

“Don’t I scare you?”

Jay shook his head furiously, his brow furrowing. “You only scare me when you lock me out.”

I looked at him, searching his face, desperately wanting to believe him. But I just couldn’t shake the look in his eye when he’d first seen the fangs. It was the only thing I could think about.

“You’ve never liked vampires,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

Jay gave me a crooked smile. “I’d never fallen in love with one before I met you.”

“You find them disgusting,” I shot back.

Jay pulled back slightly, his eye narrowing at my accusatory tone. “I never said that,” he replied.

I tore my eyes away from his and stared at the floor. “You didn’t have to. I saw your face.”

Jay sighed, tipping my chin up with his fingers, urging me to look at him. “What you saw,” he said patiently, “was a man worried to death about the love of his life.”

“Oh.”

“So you’re a little more fangy now, who cares?” Jay said, smiling softly while giving me a pointed look.

I would not laugh at his corny jokes… even if they did make me feel just the tiniest bit better.

“It’s great that *you’re* willing to accept me,” I said. “But what about the pack? I’m a vampire. A vampire can’t live with a werewolf pack.”

“She can if she’s my mate,” Jay said simply, confident.

I stared deep into his eye, finding solace in his certainty. I closed the distance between us, hugging him. As long as I had him, everything would be all right. I leaned against Jay, resting my head on his shoulder, content.

With my ears so close to his chest, my mind became full of a sound I was wholly unfamiliar with—the blood pumping through Jay’s veins. I licked my lips, taking in the sound of his beating heart with morbid pleasure. How had I never noticed what a delightful rhythm that was? And how starved it made me…

I stiffened as a feeling of hunger took hold—a deep-seated, insatiable hunger.

“What’s wrong?” Jay asked.

I couldn’t say anything, too afraid that if I opened my mouth, I’d just *bite* him. I ran my tongue over my teeth and gasped. My fangs were growing back. I pulled away from Jay jerkily, covering my face.

“Get out,” I ordered from behind my hands.

“No,” Jay said crossly, adamant. He reached out and pulled my arms away. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Immediately, his eye widened as he noted the fangs.

“Get out!” I screamed. “I don’t want you to see me like this.”

Jay swallowed, smoothing his face into cool indifference. “Hey, I just said the fangs weren’t a big deal,” he said nonchalantly. “When I’m a wolf, I have them, too.”

But I could barely hear him—his voice was being drowned out by his heartbeat, by the rush of his blood. I stared at his neck.

*Blood.*

I was craving blood. My eyes darted to Jay’s.

“I’m going to bite you,” I warned, trying hard to control myself.

Jay exposed his neck. “Then do it. Feed on me. I want you to.”

I was reminded of when Ava had baited me—but this time felt different. I *wanted* Jay’s blood. I *needed* it. I moved closer and closer, the hum of the blood underneath his skin hypnotizing.

With extreme effort, I pushed him away, getting up—and coming face to face with my non-reflection in the mirror. Holy hell, I was an actual vampire… I couldn’t see myself anymore!

“No!” I screamed, freaking out. I scrambled through the door and ran out.

I heard Jay call after me, but I ignored him. I needed to get out of the house before anyone saw me.

I burst outside, running into Astrid. Almost immediately, Astrid’s heart filled my senses, the smell of her blood intoxicating.

Shit. She was Fae.

As I felt that dull hunger intensify into an overpowering need, I heard Jay come up behind me—I had to get away. But how could I? Jay was a werewolf, and I was only a human. Maybe?

I realized that he seemed much further behind me than he normally would be if he was chasing me. Normally I was always lagging behind, being a hybrid wolf, but this time I was outrunning him. It was taking him a while to catch up to me. I was moving so fast—even faster than I’d been able to go when I’d had my wolf.

Without another word, I raced into the woods, distancing myself from Jay and the pack house. That was when I became aware of a new scent, a strong, coppery smell that drew my attention, causing me to stop. I swiveled my head, following the smell—a rabbit. It was frozen, staring up at me.

Waiting for me.

I moved so fast, it surprised me. And before I even knew it, I had grabbed a hold of the frightened rabbit and sunk my fangs deep into its throat.

**Episode 1201**

XAVIER

Even in wolf form, my muscles *ached*. Gritting my teeth, I forced one paw up, then the other, trying to pull myself up. I blinked the sleep away, a wave of drowsiness and pain overtaking me.

I had been in the woods all night, running as far away from Ava as I could—before the pain hit me again, that was. It was a constant cycle, with no reprieve in sight. The pain was unbearable, causing me to buckle on the spot as every fiber of my body screamed as if it was being torn apart. And maybe it was. A mate was supposed to be one half of your wolf. And I had just ripped mine away.

My night had been a complete fever dream, I drifted somewhere between sleep and the waking world. I kept coming in and out of hot flashes, the heat completely suffocating. At one point, I remembered, I’d thought my fur was being melted off.

I took another tentative and wobbly step up, trying to force myself to move forward before I was incapacitated again.

I let out a little whimper. I’d felt pain like this after I’d killed Ava the first time, effectively severing our bond—but my wolf hadn’t left until the end.

So far, thankfully, that hadn’t happened. I was clearly still in my wolf form, my shaky paws serving as my proof.

But it was only a matter of time, I thought darkly. Even now, I could feel the unmating ripping through my body.

Instantly, I buckled, hit by another wave. Whatever progress I had made in picking myself up was gone. I was back on the ground, unable to do anything but ride it out.

I whimpered again, agonizing pain searing my flesh.

*Xavier…*

I shut my eyes tightly, curling in on myself.

*Xavier… Please, Xavier.*

I recognized Ava’s voice, but it was distant, quieter since the unmating ritual severed our natural mind link. Her voice repeated my name over and over and over again. Begging for me, calling for me, crying for me…

I could feel the bond trying not to let me go, the invisible string only becoming more and more taut, not quite breaking. But I had to do it. Hell, I’d done it once already, so I could do this again.

I didn’t want to go back. Never. Ava had brought me trouble and heartache and pain—she had killed my mother, toyed with my heart, and continued to disrespect me and my boundaries. I wanted nothing to do with that woman.

But Cali…

My ears perked forward, paws fighting to get me back upright at the thought of her. The pain that had felt excruciating just moments before suddenly dulled into something relatively bearable.

Oh god, my Cali—she was my light, my happiness, the sun on my dark days. I wanted her, I needed her. Most of all, I wanted to be able to give myself fully to her—without the baggage of Ava, or the hint of another bond. I wanted to be hers, and hers alone.

But first, I needed to make it through this.

Clenching my jaw, I tried to stand again. I let out a low, pained howl.

I needed to get back to the pack house. I knew I wouldn’t last long out here on my own.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I managed to straighten completely, only to nearly completely collapse. *Get up, Xavier. Get the fuck up.*

But I couldn’t. My legs felt like water on a string, wobbling from the effort and energy it took to stand up. Every nerve in my body was on fire, screaming in pain. I felt heavy, tired beyond reason.

I was weak, exhausted, fighting pain, and vulnerable. And I hated that that was the case.

I was an Alpha, and to be reduced to this because of that horrible woman? The anger burned hot within me. I wasn’t going to let that bitch take me down.

I let out a growl, the sound echoing through the empty woods. Spots of red lined my vision. I couldn’t believe I was allowing that pathetic little excuse for a wolf to affect me like this. She was *nothing* to me, and yet she was currently the source of *everything* bad in my life.

I wouldn’t stand for it. I wouldn’t allow it.

With a surge of rage, I pushed myself all the way up—and, this time, I stayed standing. I took a moment to gather myself, then began to power my way back to the pack house, pushing through the pain as I made my way through the woods.

As I stalked through the forest, being careful to avoid sharp rocks and jagged branches, I tried to stay focused on Cali.

I imagined her soft laughter, the way her eyes brightened whenever she saw me, the soft curve of her hips… I remembered the way she moaned, how her breath would hitch every time I kissed that little spot by her neck, how she teased me, how she pushed me to be the best man I could be…

Cali was my goal, my true mate.

But just as quickly as I had brought Cali alive in my mind, she was gone, replaced by Ava, and another crushing wave of pain that sent my paws out from under me.

I lurched forward, my paw giving a sickening *crack* as it hit a rock. I immediately lost what little stability I’d gained and careened down the side of a hill. I grunted and whimpered as I tumbled down violently, my back and legs being scratched by the rough ground of the forest. My fall was broken as I slammed into a tree. For a moment, I was unable to do anything, wracked with another spasm of pain. I just lay there, at the base of the three, and allowed the pain to work its way through my body.

After a couple of minutes, the agony finally subsided into a dull ache. Taking advantage of this temporary reprieve, I tried to regain my footing. However, instead of triumphantly overcoming the weakness and the pain, I only managed to lose my balance again, collapsing onto a nearby rock—hard.

I blinked groggily, not knowing where the pain began and ended.

Suddenly, I shifted back to my human form, my nakedness sudden and unexpected. I shivered slightly, the cool breeze of the forest dancing across my bruised skin.

Then, with a gasp, I was sent into a very vivid memory of Ava—it was the bond, trying so desperately to hold on…

*Ava and I were holding hands, both afraid to look at the plastic stick she was holding.*

*I glanced up into her eyes, seeing how scared she looked. I was terrified, too, but I couldn’t help but imagine what would happen if Ava was pregnant. I mean, I was going to be Alpha someday— and Ava would be my Luna. We were going to have children at some point, so why not begin that now?*

*I looked down at Ava’s hands, the test just millimeters away from my line of sight. But we were both young—and if Silas learned about this, he would probably take our child away. Ava, too.*

*“Promise me,” Ava said, her voice shaky and quiet, “that no matter what happens, you won’t tell anyone.”*

*“No one needs to know,” I assured her.*

*Then, without another word, we both looked down. The test was negative. She wasn’t pregnant.*

*I didn’t know whether to sigh in relief or cry. I glanced at Ava, who was looking at me with tears in her eyes—tears of happiness? Or sadness?*

*It didn’t matter. Silently, I pulled her into a hug.*

*“It’s our secret,” I whispered lovingly…*

I doubled over, pulled out of the memory by another wave of excruciating, crippling pain. Opening my eyes, I stared up at the tree I had fallen against, trying desperately to shake off the memories.

Ava as a mother to my child? Maybe if things had turned out differently… But right now, the last thing I could imagine was her being a loving mother. I now knew what she was capable of, and I would never allow myself to forget it.

The selective trip down memory lane must have been an attempt by the mate bond to convince me to change my mind. It was being manipulative—just like Ava herself.

Angry, I howled at the trees, into the forest. *Why not show me the real Ava? The murderer she became, the manipulative woman she is?*

I felt my voice get hoarse and scratchy as my heart beat erratically. I *hated* that woman, hated her with every fiber of my being. And I wasn’t ever going to go back to her—*ever*. And no vision or memory or bond was going to convince me otherwise.

As I stared up at the tree, the blood from the gash on my head dripped into my eye, obscuring my vision. With my weakened state, my wounds were truly taking their time to heal.

Achingly slow, I staggered to my feet. There was only one thought in my mind: I had to get back to the pack house, to Cali.

I took a step forward, ready to find my way out, but then I paused.

Death. I could smell death.

I lifted my hand and wiped the blood from my eyes—only to come face to face with Gregor.

**Episode 1202**

Was it really possible that Xavier had gone to Ava—of all freaking people!—last night, after I’d broken things off with him?

I swallowed roughly, trying to process all of this information. I couldn’t help the jealousy that coursed through me as I thought about Ava—her perfect skin, her perfect body, her perfect hair. She was so many things that I wasn’t—and would never be. I didn’t want to think the worst of Xavier, but I had seen how upset he was about everything.

The look in his eye when he’d attacked Greyson… It was like he’d been ready to murder *his own brother* over the thought of me choosing Greyson over him. And the way he had stormed off angrily when I said Ava couldn’t stay…

But even though he’d been truly upset, I couldn’t believe Xavier would just up and run off with the woman he had told me had ruined his life. Not after everything we had been through and all the promises he had made. Something wasn’t adding up.

I felt my stomach roll, a bout of nausea taking over me. Despite not having eaten anything in a while, I didn’t feel hungry for breakfast at all, now. How could I? With Xavier suddenly gone, and Ava missing as well, it was all just too much…

“Are you feeling okay?” my mom asked gently. I quickly unclenched my fists. My whole body prickled as my ears heated.

I shook my head, unable to formulate any words. That was a huge *no*—I was far from okay, but I didn’t know how to explain any of this to my mom. And, frankly? I wasn’t in the mood to try.

I felt my lip tremble as my mind became overwrought with emotions. How could Xavier do this to me? How could he leave me like this?

It started as a single tear that traveled slowly down my cheek.

“Oh, honey,” my mom said sympathetically.

*Don’t cry. Don’t cry or I’m going to throw myself into the lake.* Despite my less-than-heartening pep talk, the tears came rushing out anyway. They streamed rapidly down my face as my eyes went red and puffy. My nose was instantly snotty, and I felt my face getting splotched and red.

My mom immediately wrapped her arms around me, trying to soothe me. She stroked my hair, pressing gentle kisses to the side of my forehead. But it was all in vain. All my thoughts were centered around Xavier and Ava as I picked apart their relationship—and mine with Xavier.

Had Xavier really left me to go be with Ava? Wait—had there been more to our conversation yesterday than I’d realized? Had him asking me if Ava could stay been more than it had seemed? Was their bond stronger than I’d thought? Was *our* mate bond stronger than the one between him and Ava?

I pulled away from my mom slightly, furiously scrubbing the tears from my face. None of the scenarios seemed to be good, as all of them pointed toward Xavier and Ava *together*. I stilled. *But then*, I thought, *do I really have the right to be upset?*

I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm my heart, rein in my emotions, and think things through. I mean, I *had* broken up with Xavier, which had effectively ended whatever I’d had with him—along with whatever obligation he’d had to me. In choosing to end things with him, I had lost the chance to even be upset about this.

If Xavier *had* gone to find solace in Ava, that was his right, even though that killed me inside to admit.

I dropped my hands from my face, my shoulders falling in tandem. Xavier and I weren’t together anymore; that was the missing equation from all my frantic thoughts. That was what I hadn’t wanted to yet fully admit in the wake of this revelation.

My mom watched me closely. Thankfully, I had stopped crying, although I probably looked like hell. That wasn’t surprising, considering I was beyond exhausted and had practically broken down just seconds ago.

I dabbed at the remaining tears in my eyes, nearly completely calm.

Just as I turned toward my mom to assure her I was fine, Jay suddenly appeared, frantic.

“Cali!” he cried out. “I need you to come with me right away. It’s Lola.”

I pivoted, taking Jay in. His hair was disheveled, his clothes were rumpled, and it looked like he hadn’t slept in years. God, this was the most stressed out I had ever seen him—which meant that something truly terrible had to have happened. Immediately, worst-case scenarios began to run through my head. *If it wasn’t one thing it was another…*

Wide-eyed and worried, I asked, “Did something happen?”

“There’s a situation. I can’t explain here,” Jay said, rushed. “And I really need you to come with me. Right now.”

“Can I help?” Orla asked, her brow furrowed, concerned.

“Sure,” Jay said distractedly, his gaze darting over to the woods. “You guys are her family, but we need to move *now*.”

He didn’t need to tell us twice. My mom and I were off and running, following Jay close behind. I was still sick thinking about Xavier, and now I had this new worry over Lola to contend with. I may not be able to have any say in who Xavier chose to spend his time with, but at the very least I could help my best friend.

“Lola,” Jay huffed, twisting his head back to speak to my mom and me as he continued to run, “is turning into a vampire.”

Okay, I wasn’t expecting that. “What?” I had to have misheard him. There was no way…

“But I don’t know what’s going on,” Jay continued. “She doesn’t smell like a regular vampire, and she still seems alive. She’s definitely not dead… but she does have fangs.”

I wasn’t sure if my heaving breaths were from the running or from the fact that I was beyond freaking out. I had moved away from Panic Mode. I was light years away from Melt Down. I was now orbiting around Total Body Freak-Out Zone.

“Lola has *fangs*?” I cried out.

Jay, oblivious to the mini panic attack I was having behind him, continued to talk.

“She ran away because she was afraid she was going to bite me,” Jay said. “Drain my blood. I need you to talk her down, to make sure she doesn’t run away from us, and that she knows we’re not going to turn against her.”

My mouth turned down into a frown. She was afraid that we wouldn’t accept her because she was a vampire? Not if I had anything to say about it.

As we bounded through the forest, I found that all of my problems—the *due destini*, Ava and Xavier, choosing between the boys, my mom and Kadmos, Artemis—seemed to fade away. All I was focused on, and worried about, was Lola.

Lola was like a sister to me, and right now, she needed my help. I only hoped that I’d actually be able to help her.

“She ran faster than I could,” Jay revealed, speeding up slightly. “Like a vampire—I lost her.”

If he didn’t know where she was, how were we going to find her? Perhaps my mom and I would be able to summon a wisp? But that would take too long…

Jay froze in his tracks, skidding to a stop. He lifted his face toward the sky, his nose twitching as he sniffed the air.

I held my breath, waiting. Jay had picked up her scent, I was sure of it. I watched as Jay’s eye widened. Bingo. He must have picked up the trail again. He took off at full speed, giving my mom and me barely any time to scramble to follow him. We tried our best to keep up, but Jay was too fast. At this rate, we were going to lose him, too.

“Stop!” I called out to Jay. But it was no use—he was already moving away.

I rolled my eyes, slightly peeved. Werewolves—they were too damn fast, and they hardly ever stopped to listen.

My mom and I kept running, trying our best to follow Jay.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” I asked my mom, turning slightly to look at her.

“I don’t know,” my mom admitted, taking a slow breath. Her gaze was focused forward. “We’ll have to see. At the very least we can offer some moral support.”

I felt a trickle of disappointment. I was hoping my mom would have a few more Fae secrets up her sleeve, but I guess she didn’t this time.

After what seemed like forever, my lungs bursting, we caught up to Jay—who was standing in front of Lola who looked like someone out of a bad horror movie. Her face was smeared with blood. I cocked my head, taking her in. Was that *fur* on her chin? Lola’s eyes tracked toward my mom and me, causing me to gasp in shock. Her eyes… they had a reddish look to them. Seeing me, Lola dropped the remains of what must have been a rabbit.

“Lola?” Jay asked tentatively. She didn’t say anything, just stared at us.

I peered at Lola from behind him, noting how strange she looked. It was as if she wasn’t really seeing us. Like she was there, but not quite.

When she still didn’t say anything, I decided to give it a shot. I stepped around Jay.

“Lola, it’s me,” I said, approaching her slowly. “Cali. Your bestie.”

As I came closer, Lola’s eyes went wide, as if she was seeing me for the first time. She whipped her head around to look at Jay.

“Why is Cali here?” she whimpered, her voice hoarse.

“We want to help you,” I continued, ignoring the fact that Lola seemed distressed that I was here. I reached out toward her gently.

Lola took an immediate step back. “Stay away from me. I’m dangerous.”

She pointed to the mound of bloodied fur.

“I just drank the blood of a bunny!” Lola cried out, close to hysterics. “I like bunnies—” Lola’s voice cracked. “Why would I do that? What’s happening to me? Vampires don’t eat bunnies. I can feel my own heart, my breath—I can take your pulse from here.”

Lola looked at us with terrified eyes, breathing heavily.

“What am I becoming?” she whispered.

**Episode 1203**

VIOLET

I had just finished doing one final round through the house, looking for Xavier and asking if anyone had seen him, when I spotted Orla, Jay, and Cali running into the woods, all looking panicked. I had no idea what was going on this time, but knowing them, it would probably be resolved in a couple of hours. Either that or we were doomed.

I guess drama does kind of give you blinders, because I only had room in my head for two things: Charlie and Lilac. No wonder Cali, Xavier, and Greyson were so preoccupied all the time. At least I only had one Charlie to worry about. But Lilac…

I squared my shoulders and headed outside to try and find Xavier. Or Marta. Because the answer she’d given me last night had only left me with more questions. When I’d asked her about Lilac, she’d told me she had no idea why he’d come back, and that she hadn’t heard from him since.

Which had been a major disappointment.

I knew it wasn’t fair, but I was definitely wishing Marta was a better medium. Or that I knew someone else who had a better chance of contacting Lilac or understanding what he was going through. Maybe Big Mac would be able to help Marta with her abilities. Maybe learning more about Lilac’s situation could be, like, her first medium school assignment!

But asking her directly felt pushy, especially after she’d already been so helpful. Hopefully Big Mac’s surprising amount of enthusiasm about mentoring her would help her master her craft. Then it would be an easy favor to ask.

Hopefully it would be a skill she learned sooner rather than later, because I didn’t know how long I’d be able to keep Charlie here. I’d been able to delay the trip back to Minnesota by a few days, but I knew they’d go by quickly. And then I’d be face to face with Iris again.

Even after all of the rom coms and teen shows I’d watched about relationships, I still hadn’t imagined that meeting my mate’s parents could possibly go as poorly as meeting Iris had gone. Just my luck—I’d been a good kid all my life, and in spite of it all, I’d ended up totally despised by my true love’s mother.

Before I could muse any longer on how cursed I had to be, Charlie interrupted my thoughts by barreling down the stairs to meet me. His hair was wet from the shower, and he had an excited glint in his eyes.

“Has Xavier turned up yet?” he asked, snaking a hand around my waist and pulling me in for a peck on the cheek.

My cheeks flushed, even though the touch was casual. This was the part of being in a relationship that continued to thrill me. For so long, I’d wondered what it would be like to have someone to hold, to kiss, to run to in the pouring rain and make proclamations of love… But now I had someone who kissed my cheek easily. Who didn’t ration his smiles. Who gave out affection just because he wanted to. Because I made him want to.

“Not yet,” I answered, threading my fingers through his so we could hold hands.

“Dang,” Charlie frowned. “Sorry. I know you wanted to say goodbye to him before we went back to Portland to meet up with my parents.”

“Leaving without saying goodbye would suck,” I told him. “I don’t know if it sounds weird, but I’d feel guilty leaving without talking to him. I know technically he’s not my Alpha, but still, he’s done a lot for me…”

“Hey guys.” Marta greeted us brightly. “Do either of you know where Big Mac is?”

“We’ll help you find her,” I offered, hopefully not too quickly, but I had to ask her about Lilac. I returned Charlie’s peck on the cheek before he could object to my volunteering him on this little mission.

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When we walked into Big Mac’s bedroom, she seemed really excited to see us. Well, Marta mostly.

“It’s so rare that I get to spend time with mediums,” Big Mac admitted with a broad grin. “Marta, how long have you been aware of your powers?”

“I’ve always been able to sense ghosts,” Marta answered with a shrug. “I didn’t realize it was anything special until Bert trapped me.”

“Bert’s the poltergeist who trapped you?” Big Mac asked.

“Not a nice guy,” Charlie quipped.

“He used me to help attract ghosts and other spirits,” Marta explained. “That way he could trap all of us in this old mansion and pretend he was still serving his old masters.”

“He used to be a butler,” I clarified. “He made me and Charlie wear all these weird old clothes and stuff.”

“So when did you last communicate with a ghost?” Big Mac asked.

“Last night,” Marta answered, undaunted by the way Big Mac and I both dropped our jaws at this admission. “A ghost came to me with a message for Cali.”

“What?” Big Mac practically squealed. “Really?”

“She also saw my twin, Lilac,” I blurted out, unable to contain myself for another second. “Just a few days ago.”

“And Marta, when you saw Lilac,” Big Mac prompted, “did you conjure him?”

“You mean, did I call him?” Marta asked. “Because I didn’t. He just sort of appeared. In front of our car. I never really have to contact ghosts. Most are always near those they want to keep an eye on. It’s mostly not creepy… mostly.”

“Do you have any idea why Lilac would do something like that?” I asked Big Mac, knowing I shouldn’t interrupt, but I was just so desperate for answers.

“Honestly, it’s hard to say,” Big Mac admitted.

“I thought I had helped Lilac move on to…” I sighed. “Wherever spirits go. But he came back. Was it to tell me something? To warn me?”

“It sounds like unfinished business,” Big Mac offered.

“Meaning something is wrong?” I asked, my voice jumping up an octave. “Do you think he could be in danger?”

“I don’t think so,” Marta piped up. “He’s a ghost. How much danger could he be in?”

“Does that mean that *I’m* in danger?” I asked the room, feeling my blood run cold. Charlie took my hand in his and squeezed it tight. But in spite of his comfort, I couldn’t help but think of Iris. She seemed plenty dangerous.

“We have no way of knowing what Lilac’s intentions were,” Big Mac told me. “Unless Marta can summon him back.”

I looked to Marta. I felt bad—I didn’t want to put pressure on her, but I was so desperate to know why Lilac would try to contact me.

“But I don’t know how,” Marta explained. “Spirits seem to find me, but I don’t know how to call to them directly. That’s why I’m hoping you can help me, Miss Mac.”

“Can’t you just summon him?” I asked Big Mac over her snorting laughter at Marta’s formality. “I mean, all those ghosts showed up when we were fighting Silas, and we didn’t have a medium then.”

“Those ghosts were brought to us through the presence and power of the Orb,” Big Mac told me. “Usually, without a source of supernatural power like that, ghosts need a medium or a séance to appear. A séance can show the ghost to others, but a medium can communicate or be used to communicate with the living.”

“So, like when Marta was possessed by my grandmother,” Charlie chimed in. “She was calling me ‘Peanut’ just like she used to when I was a kid. It was wild.”

“Yes,” Big Mac grumbled. “Something like that.”

“Can you show me how to do it?” Marta asked, leaning forward eagerly.

“I can help guide you,” Big Mac replied, clearly choosing her words very carefully. “But I’m not a medium. It will be up to your powers, not mine, to do the heavy lifting.”

After a few minutes of setup and more cautioning from Big Mac that this could take time and that it wouldn’t necessarily be easy, we all sat in a circle on the floor. Candles burned in between us, and we all had to hold hands.

“Now, Marta,” Big Mac said in a soothing voice. “Take some deep breaths, try to relax yourself, and kind of… reach out with your senses. See if you can hear, see, taste, even smell anything. I won’t pretend to be an expert here, but you need to be receptive to however the spirit can get a foothold into our world.”

Marta nodded and started drawing in deep breaths.

“Now, normally,” Big Mac continued, “it helps to have something from the ghost’s former life. Something that gives you a sense of what to look out for and allows you to establish a connection. But since Lilac is Violet’s twin, her presence should be enough.”

“So I just… reach out for him?” Marta asked, sounding a bit nervous for the first time.

“Focus on him,” Big Mac instructed. “Remember what it was like the last time he showed up. Focus on Violet and her energy.”

I squeezed Charlie’s hand, then looked down and realized I was gripping him so tightly his fingers had turned white. But I couldn’t stop myself. I was doing my best to keep the pressure off Marta. But I wanted—no, I *needed* this to work. I was desperate to speak to Lilac.

I needed to know if he was okay. He wouldn’t have reached out to me like that if something wasn’t wrong. And every second I didn’t know, the anxiety in my chest seemed to multiply.

Out of nowhere, Marta’s head snapped up like she’d heard something. Something none of us could hear.

“*We’re here*,” she breathed out, two chiming voices speaking through her at once.

**Episode 1204**

I’d seen a lot of stuff since I met Xavier. Gross stuff, sexy stuff, scary stuff, beautiful stuff, and more than one thing that had been a weird combination of all of those adjectives.

But still, seeing your best friend with a mouth full of rabbit will generally give you pause.

So, there I stood, trying to recover from the sight of my best friend after she’d guzzled the blood of Peter freaking Cottontail. And I didn’t have an answer to her question that she was going to like. Because what *was* she becoming? She certainly looked like a vampire.

My eyes were drawn to the mutilated bunny corpse that had just slid out of her mouth and fallen onto the forest floor with a wet slap. Gross. I was going to unfortunately remember that sound the next time I had anything with meat in it. I could barely get over the little protruding fangs Lola had acquired. If she really was turning into a vampire, wouldn’t that also mean she’d have to be careful of…

“The sun!” I shouted, looking up at Lola, just about ready to shove her out of the way. “Holy hell, Lola, you’re standing in direct sunlight.”

Lola yelped, jumping into the shadows. But it wasn’t like her skin was sizzling or anything. She looked fine. Minus the fangs and the blood smeared all over her face, she just looked like Lola.

“But it didn’t hurt you,” I pointed out, before she could freak out more. “And you don’t have one of those protective amulets like the one I took off Sabyr.”

“Was *that* his name?” Lola asked, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

I turned to my mother, ignoring Lola’s quip. Mostly because I didn’t really want to discuss my kidnapping in front of my mother any more than I had to.

“That’s gotta mean something, right?” I asked my mom.

“If I’m not a vampire then what the hell am I?” Lola snapped, not giving my mom time to answer.

Lola’s voice broke as her eyes misted over with panicked tears. I knew she was barely holding on. Lola had always been a dramatic person, and sometimes that meant she blew up over the small stuff. But this wasn’t small. And I didn’t know how to help her.

“You’re Lola. No matter what,” I told her firmly, feeling my eyes start to sting as well. “We can go to Big Mac together. We’ll figure out what’s going on.”

“You mean it?” Lola asked me, her voice shaking ever so slightly.

“Of course I do,” I told her, giving her a watery smile. “Now come back with us.

“No.” Lola shook her head. “You don’t want to sleep under the same roof as a vampire. Wouldn’t you be worried that I’ll suddenly want to feed on you? Like, that we’ll be in the middle of a conversation and suddenly you’ll just look like a giant turkey leg to me?”

“Since we’re not in a cartoon, I’m not worried about that,” I told Lola gently. “You would never hurt me, and we both know that.”

I knew she would never hurt me—intentionally that is. The truth was, I’d never really seen Lola act like this, and I didn’t know what she was capable of.

“Do you believe that?” Lola sniffed. “Will you really not be afraid of me?”

*Shit*. “Yes,” I said, putting on my best smile. “You’re my best friend, and we’ll get through this together.”

That I did mean.

Tears start to stream down Lola’s face in earnest. “I want to be as confident as you are, because I can’t imagine wanting to hurt you, but what if—”

Lola choked out a sob, and Jay rushed to her side and slid his arms around her.

“It’s okay,” he murmured as he held her. “We’ll get back to the house and we’ll figure something out. Everyone wants you to be safe, you have to know that. I won’t let anything bad happen, I swear.”

And as I watched Lola relax into his touch, I couldn’t help but feel a pang in my chest. Jay was so kind and loving and supportive. I used to have that with Xavier and Greyson, but now I didn’t have it with either of them.

Had I really forfeited that feeling of safety? Of the kind of peace you could get when you were in the right person’s arms? Would the rest of the world ever fall away again? So many people never even met one person who could shut out all the bullshit—I’d met two.

And I’d pushed them both away.

Absently, I scanned the trees. Where was Xavier? Was he out there somewhere? Was he coming back soon? Things ended so horribly between the three of us…

But I had to remain strong. I’d meant what I said, sort of, about breaking up. Putting them in danger wasn’t an option, not when the curse was so fickle. That was its whole game, wasn’t it? Make us go from bad to worse?

*Come back, Xavier*, I thought. *Please be okay*.

With one last look at the trees, I turned back to Lola and Jay. “Let’s go back, Lola,” I said. “You ready to come with us?”

Lola wiped the tears from her eyes and offered Jay and me a weak smile. I could tell she was trying to be strong for him. For all of us.

“Come back, babe,” Jay pleaded. “Please.”

“Okay.” Lola nodded. “But I think I should clean up. If the whole pack is going to find out about the new and improved me, it might be best if they see less blood and… viscera.”

“Great idea,” Jay replied with a grin.

My mom stepped forward, pulling a handkerchief from her pocket. She looked up at Lola with a kind smile. She didn’t show a bit of fear on her face, and even though things between us were strained, I couldn’t help but admire her grace under pressure.

“May I?” she asked softly.

Lola nodded as my mother started to gently clean the blood from her face. I watched Lola try not to breathe as my mother took care of her. I wondered if she was trying to avoid the scent of her blood. I didn’t know how any of this worked, but then again, neither did Lola, I guess.

“All done,” Mom said, finishing up. “Pretty as a picture.”

Lola snorted, and so did I. The entire time Lola and I had been friends, my mom had always given us the weirdest compliments on our appearance. Maybe it was just a mom thing, but I’d always found myself explaining that I didn’t want to look “adorable” or “cute as a button” at dances and parties.

“Oh, you two.” My mom rolled her eyes at us. Lola and I exchanged a look. After everything we’d been through, we were still ourselves. And that was a comfort.

“Let’s do this.” Lola took Jay’s hand, and we all started back toward the pack house.

But the closer we got, the worse I felt. Every step brought me closer to facing the reality of my break up with Xavier and Greyson. Closer to the guilt and the anxiety that was eating away at me. I couldn’t stop myself from sneaking glances at Lola and Jay. Even when they were facing uncertainty, he was by her side. He didn’t even have to choose to do it, he just did it. It was easy. They made “mates” look so effortless.

I was walking toward a house I couldn’t stay at anymore.

Not with the friction between Xavier and Greyson, even without Xavier there. Not with both their exes staying there and probably lying in wait. How long could I keep doing this? Waiting for a solution that seemed impossible to find?

But there was also Cassandra’s warning to consider. What if running away from the choice made everything worse? What if I was already going mad? Maybe everything happening with Lola was all in my head. It would honestly make more sense than finding out she was some kind of weird, day-walking vampire.

My worries started to snowball as I filtered through all the inconsistencies. Lola could stand in the sun without burning. She still hadn’t had a drop of human blood to drink. She’d had red eyes, but she could have just been crying, or having an allergy attack. And most of all, she still looked like Lola.

Lola with fangs, but still. Maybe there was more to being a vampire than I had originally thought.

Honestly, the more I tried to pick it apart, the more I felt like I might actually be losing my mind. Or maybe I was just stuck in a never-ending nightmare.

That was when I felt it—arms wrapped around my waist, holding me tight. Lola’s fangs pierced into my neck from behind as she drank.

**Episode 1205**

XAVIER

As if it wasn’t enough to deal with the agony of unmating with a woman I’d once loved—the same woman who’d killed my mother—now I got to be dragged through the forest by a psychotic vampire with a god complex.

“It seems fate smiles on me after all,” Gregor cried gleefully. “How fortuitous to come across the werewolf who helped kill my brother. Your little Fae girl might have slipped through our fingers, but now the Fates have presented you to me on a silver platter. Blood included. I don’t think it’s possible for this day to get any better.”

That was where Gregor and I differed. Because there were a lot of things that could’ve improved my day. But most of the potential improvements I was focusing on were the ones where I gained the strength to rip Gregor’s head clean off his body and kick it through the woods like a soccer ball. In my opinion, that would have made things pretty damn good.

I just needed to shift, and then I could tear him a new one. Luckily, I could still feel my wolf. Ava might have taken a lot from me, but at least she hadn’t taken that this time. But before I could shift, I was overwhelmed by another wave of pain.

I cried out in agony as Ava, once again, consumed my thoughts. This time it was only bits and pieces of memories. A flash of her smiling at me, her eyes soft and trusting. The hollow between her breasts, coated in a fine sheen of sweat, glinting in the moonlight. The eye of her wolf, the pupil dilated. Her throwing back her head and laughing. Her diving into a lake. Losing a race to her. Winning a race against her. All of it was tangled up like a heartbreaking movie montage.

I was at war with the bond. It was fighting to stay alive in my mind, digging its claws in and refusing to go quietly. But I knew I had to kill it.

Finally it passed, and I could breathe again. Gregor chuckled at me, dripping with superiority. I wished I could pull his heart right out of his chest.

“Seems like you have your own demons, don’t you?” he teased. I didn’t have it in me to reply.

All I could think of was wouldn’t it be ironic if, after all of this time, Ava managed to kill me like this?

When we arrived at the coven’s hideout, Gregor tossed me into a hole in the ground, and I felt myself plummeting down at least ten feet. I hit the ground with a thud that knocked the wind out of me. By the time I was able to turn over onto my back and look up, Gregor had fastened a grate over the opening.

Silver. Escape through it would be virtually impossible. It wasn’t like I was exactly in fighting shape right now as it was.

Gregor knelt down, peering at me through the bars, a twisted smile on his lips.

“How the mighty fall,” he sneered. “Even a strong Alpha like you couldn’t jump this high. But it would be fun to see you try.”

I leapt up, only to slam into the wall. My balance was off, and I was still reeling from the side effects of breaking the mate bond. But If I could just get my hands around Gregor’s neck…

I looked at the distance between Gregor and me and sighed. He was right. The pit was too deep, and I was too weak to do anything—even if I could get a hold of him.

But if Gregor made one slip up, one mistake, I vowed to myself that it would be the pompous bloodsucker’s last. Until then, I wouldn’t let him get a rise out of me. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Better for him to underestimate me. I’d been in tougher positions than this vampire could possibly imagine. I simply stared him down, my urge to kill rising with every second, but I wouldn’t let that take control. I could be patient when I wanted to be. I’d outlast him.

My little stare down was working. Gregor frowned, clearly not getting the reaction he’d wanted. Then he walked away from the pit and out of view. But I could tell he hadn’t gone far. The smell of death still lingered.

I took a few deep breaths and tried to gather myself. What could I do to get out of here?

But before I could think of anything, I heard a rattling from above and saw that Gregor had returned. This time with a long, sharp, silver-tipped spear.

Well, fuck, that didn’t take long at all.

Gregor shoved the point through the grate.

“Just in case,” he reasoned with a smirk.

I braced myself, trying to weigh the odds. If he stabbed me with the spear and opened the grate to watch me die, would I have enough time to kill him before the poison overwhelmed me? Probably not.

Gregor jabbed the spear forward, and I leapt back, pressing myself against the wall. It was instinct. I’d felt the pain of a silver blade before, and I was not eager to repeat the experience. Gregor threw back his head and laughed.

“You and your princess killed Raul,” he snarled at me, his eyes hungry. “Now I’m going to kill you. Only it won’t be fast. I’m going to take my time, you see? I plan to enjoy every excruciating minute of your agony.”

“You realize that your brother attacked me, right?” I snapped, looking up at him defiantly. “Does that make any difference to you?”

Gregor spat at me, and I narrowly avoided the spray.

“I’ve heard it all before,” he hissed, looking almost feral in his rage. “It won’t change a thing. Brace yourself for what’s to come, dog.”

“Fuck off,” I growled, baring my teeth.

A phone rang, and Gregor froze for a second before grinning down at me.

“It would appear you’ve been saved by the bell,” he sing-songed. “One moment, please.”

After taking another jab at me with the spear, Gregor stepped away and out of earshot, so I wouldn’t be able to hear his call.

As soon as he was out of sight I took the precious few minutes I had to reassess my situation. I started to look around frantically for something—anything—I could use to give myself an edge. But I couldn’t find anything. This was worse than being captured by Nolan. Worse than the chains. Worse than the anger.

A twinge of frustrated hopelessness coursed through me, but I beat that down. I had to find a way out of this hole. And not because I was afraid of dying, but because of Cali.

I needed her. I was here because of her. I was weak because I’d unmated with Ava so that this thing between me and Cali could get less complicated. No fucking vampire was going to stand in the way of me and my true mate.

I just had to stay alive long enough for the right opportunity to come along. I was good at that, right? I’d survived plenty of times. I’d gone to the Fae world and back, I’d been a fucking mercenary, I’d beaten my murderous father. I hadn’t gone through all that bullshit only to end up dead in a pit at Gregor’s hands.

What kind of archaic name was that, even? There was no fucking way someone named *Gregor* was going to do this to me. I just wouldn’t allow it to happen. A man has to have his dignity.

I heard Gregor’s voice getting closer and strained to make out what he was saying as he walked toward me. But it was no use. When I looked up, Gregor was leering down at me through the grate.

He let a slow smile spread across his lips, revealing his shiny fangs. I could tell from his eyes that he was hungry. And hungry vampires were dangerous. You never knew what would set them off. What would push them over the edge from thirsty to desperate for a drink.

And once a hungry vampire had even a drop of blood, all bets were off. They’d stop at nothing until their thirst was quenched.

“All right, I won’t touch the girl,” Gregor murmured into the phone before hanging up. I felt anger build inside me. He had to be talking about Cali.

I had to do something. I had to get out of here, warn her, protect her. But how?

“Good news,” Gregor told me, kneeling down to look at me more carefully. “It’s your lucky day. You’re all mine.”

He grabbed the handle of the silver spear, pulling it back to give himself room to jab at me again with full force. I stiffened, trying to prepare to dodge the incoming blow.

But instead, Gregor pulled the spear back up through the grate and tossed it aside.

Well, that was unexpected.

“Not so fast.” Gregor gave me a menacing smile. “You deserve a fate much, much worse than death. And I’m going to give it to you.”

**Episode 1206**

GREYSON

Cali had told me she trusted me. I’d asked her if she did, and she’d answered. But when she’d seen me and Xavier fighting, she’s still been upset. Still hadn’t believed me.

Up until now, I’d thought I had a pretty full understanding of the *due destini* curse and its impact on me. On Cali. On us. I knew that she would rather live without us both than risk either one of our lives. It was who she was. She could never live with herself if she knew she’d doomed one of us to death.

The thought was tearing her apart. I saw it in her day by day, and that was going to kill me faster than this curse was already trying to. I felt responsible for that pain. Which I knew was illogical. Because no one was at fault here. Except for maybe the universe… and that was a tough finger to point.

I heard Fenrir laughing from outside. It was high pitched and gleeful and unrestrained. The kind of laugh that you couldn’t help but smile at, because it was just that infectious. Even when you felt like shit. And I *did.* But hearing it was still nice.

That was one thing I could to do help. Deal with Maren and Fenrir. Figure out what everyone wanted and needed. I knew a lot hinged on the results of the DNA test, and that uncertainty was weighing on me—just like it weighed on Cali.

Obviously, the kid looked like me. And the timing lined up. It would be absurd not to ask, not to do everything I could to be sure. But the waiting was killing me. I needed to know now, whatever the result. Even if it meant realizing I’d missed out on years of my kid’s life. Because then I could start making up for it.

And either way, I’d agreed to help the kid learn about being a werewolf, and how to better control his shifting. It was odd—I’d never really thought I’d ever end up teaching a young wolf. But I’d told Maren I’d do it, and I wasn’t one to go back on my word.

But if I was being honest with myself, I didn’t really know how to do it. It wasn’t like it was anything my dad had taught me. Or anyone else, for that matter. For me, learning to be a werewolf had been a lonely business of trial and error. Not ideal, but I’d managed to figure most things out on my own.

But Fenrir deserved better. And helping him didn’t mean instantly turning into his dad. It was about being decent. Maybe this kind of intimacy wouldn’t have seemed so foreign to me if I’d grown up in an even remotely healthy environment.

When I walked out onto the lawn, I was immediately met with the sight of Fenrir running around in circles like a bat out of hell and whooping with sheer delight at his own speed. Maren watched him from the patio, and I made my way over to the seat next to hers.

“Would now be a good time to start those werewolf 101 lessons?” I asked her, watching Fenrir more than a little warily. It seemed I might have my work cut out for me.

“By all means,” she replied with a grin. “But I’ll warn you, the shifting has only gotten more frequent. He’s even doing it in the middle of the night. I feel like I’m dead on my feet all day because I spend every night watching him. I’m worried that if I fall asleep he’ll shift and run off. I fell asleep in my cereal the other day and dreamt that I put a leash on him.”

I huffed a small laugh, hoping it would make her feel better. But the worry in her eyes and her voice was unmistakable. I couldn’t help but wish someone had worried about me like that when I’d been a kid. But I ignored the sting of old wounds.

“And what happens when he goes to school?” Maren continued, her brows knitting together in worry. “Is he going to eat his own homework? It sounds like a nightmare.”

I chuckled at the thought of Fenrir’s wolf running circles around kids at recess—much to the horror of every teacher present. Maren gave me a sharp look, and I realized I wasn’t helping. We settled into a bit of an awkward silence. One I knew I had to break by addressing the elephant in the room.

“How long do you think it’ll take for the DNA results to come in?” I asked, forgoing a preamble and forcing myself to just say it.

I saw something flicker across Maren’s expression. Was it uncertainty? Anger? Sadness? Whatever it was, it immediately disappeared, falling behind a mask of neutrality.

“It could be a while,” she answered with a non-committal shrug.

“What does that mean?” I asked, frustrated. “A few days? Weeks? What?”

“Never,” Maren admitted, looking down at her lap.

“What?” I asked, my voice low and angry.

“I never sent it in,” she replied, her voice barely audible.

I felt a hot wave of shock and anger rush over me. I knew I’d heard her right, but I still couldn’t believe it.

“I don’t understand,” I choked out. “Why wouldn’t you—”

“I changed my mind,” Maren said.

“But you said—”

“I told you before that he isn’t your son,” Maren snapped, finally meeting my eyes. “That’s all you need to know.”

I took a deep breath in an attempt to keep my anger in check. I didn’t know why she’d changed her mind or why she thought it was okay to keep me out of the loop, but I knew getting overly pissed wouldn’t help anyone. Disappointment burned hot and fast through me even as I fought to keep my tone even. Life was already crashing around me everywhere else; I thought that at least I could get some *closure* with Fenrir.

“But we agreed that we needed proof,” I reminded her, trying my best to be diplomatic.

“My word is proof enough,” Maren snapped, bristling. “You remember when you used to feel that way, right?”

“Would you at least try to see things from my perspective?” I asked, clenching my hands into fists. “It isn’t just me that this affects—it’s him, too. And if I’m going to have some kind of relationship with this kid, shouldn’t he and I both know what that relationship is?”

“You agreed to help him,” Maren said fiercely. “It’s one of the reasons you brought us here. You didn’t ask for a test then—why now? What changed between us?”

“Everything!” I barked, my frustration growing harder to contain. “Everything has changed between us. You have a son. A son who looks like me, a son who is the right age to be mine. And you say he’s not, but I’m just asking for something that can help us both be sure. What harm is there in establishing it, one way or the other? Either way, I’ll try to help him. No matter who he is to me. I just need to know.”

“We’re going in circles.” Maren sighed. “He is not your son, Greyson, you’re just going to have to trust me.”

And with that, she stood up and called out to Fenrir to ask if he wanted a snack. He turned around to face her, his blond curls bouncing as he nodded his head eagerly. I watched, feeling powerless as Fenrir squealed with excitement and ran into the house after Maren.

Once they were gone, I just sat on the porch alone. Why was Maren being so stubborn about this? It wasn’t like the test was painful. I’d cover any expenses. And the results had no bearing on whether they could stay or not. I’d already told her that she and Fenrir were in no danger of getting kicked out.

The thought that she’d even question that made me feel like shit. I was harsh, yeah, but not cruel. How could she ever think I’d leave her and Fenrir alone with nowhere to go? I was intimately familiar with that experience and would never inflict it on anyone else.

“You look like you’re having a rough time.” Sabine’s voice brought me back to the present. I looked up at her kind smile and felt a stirring in my chest.

In a way, I had her absence to thank for a lot of these feelings. I knew that wasn’t what she’d wanted, that my bastard of a father had forced her hand, but still… The hurt was there.

“That’s the understatement of the year,” I nodded. “Things with Maren have gotten… sticky.”

Sabine sank down into the seat next to me. The one Maren had been in. She looked at me with that sad warmth I’d come to associate with her.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she told me sincerely. “But I’m not surprised.”

“That’s because you’re never surprised,” I said, giving her the ghost of a smirk. “But I’ll bite, why is that?”

“You had a very complicated past,” Sabine pointed out. “Why would you suspect the present would be any different?”

“Fair enough,” I conceded. “I just… I get that Maren’s been through a lot. I’m not denying that. But don’t I have a right to know the truth?”

“You have to know I want that for you.” Sabine put a comforting hand on my knee. “But she’s the boy’s mother, and has been his entire life. Maybe she just needs some time.”

And while I understood that perspective in a vacuum, I couldn’t help but think of all the things I had already sacrificed to ensure Maren and Fenrir’s safety. It kept me from being able to give Cali the peace of mind she clearly craved. It kept me and Xavier at odds, both with one foot in the past instead of both feet in the present, trying to solve the problem in front of us.

“I don’t have any more time to give,” I told her.

But before she could reply, Fenrir burst out of the door, popsicle in hand.

“It’s purple!” he cried, showing off his stained tongue and teeth.

“And so’s your mouth,” I teased back, unable to hide my smile. Whatever chaos was going through my head, I wasn’t about to let the kid see it.

“Let’s clean you up.” Sabine took Fenrir’s popsicle and passed it to me while she dug around for a tissue.

I looked down at the tiny stick in my hands. As I watched the melting purple mass drip condensation all over the deck, a realization hit me.

It was time to take things into my own hands.

**Episode 1207**

AVA

Devastation ravaged me.

I had curled in on myself in a small, crumpled heap. I hadn’t moved since I’d last seen Xavier, and I was sure all of my limbs had fallen asleep. But I couldn’t bring myself to care. Numbness sounded like a gift at this point.

Xavier had severed our bond and left me alone. Both literally and figuratively. There was an empty space inside me where he used to be. All night, through bouts of pain and grief, I’d been tormented by memories of him. Of our good times, our bad times, of memories I’d forgotten I even had. It was like a kaleidoscope of images. Of his eyes, his smile, his scent…

I didn’t know how to stop it. I’d screamed myself hoarse. I’d tried holding my breath, hoping I’d just pass out and get some peace. But nothing worked. It was like images of Xavier were being projected onto my eyelids and the reels just kept spinning and spinning.

I could feel the bond inside me like it was alive. It clung to me and I clung back—a parasitic relationship at best. I couldn’t see myself living without it, and now that Xavier had rejected it, I was its only hope of survival.

I knew eventually it wouldn’t be up to me. That sooner or later, holding on would cease to be an option. But I couldn’t imagine what that version of the world would look like, and I wasn’t ready to see it just yet.

I shivered in the cold air as my teeth chattered. I’d shifted back into my human form—probably out of some kind of subconscious, reckless desire to punish myself. To test the limits of my pain. A voice in my head—the small part of me that still cared about things like self-preservation—tried to remind me that I could probably get hypothermia out here if I didn’t shift back soon.

I pushed myself up onto my knees, crying out with pain at the pins and needles that prickled all over my body.

I wondered if Xavier was feeling the same way, wherever he was. My heart clenched at the thought of him cold and alone somewhere, hurting because of me. Again.

I thought about the pain he had to be feeling. He had to hate me. Every happy memory of us that flooded his mind probably disgusted him.

I wanted to scream.

I hadn’t asked for this. I hadn’t asked to be brought back to life, to be given another chance only to use it to hurt us both all over again. I’d tried so hard to make sure it all ended up differently.

I clawed my way to my feet, clinging to a tree and scraping my nails along the bark until they broke. I felt the crack of the bones snapping as I shifted.

The pain, the destruction of my human body during its transition—it all made me feel alive. More alive than I’d felt all night. Sometimes in order to make something new, you had to tear the old thing to pieces.

I stretched, enjoying the feeling of my muscles rippling under my fur. My wolf was strong. And she was still here. At least I had one small comfort, even if I didn’t deserve it.

I landed on all fours and set off, determined to find Xavier. Maybe if I found him quickly we could salvage whatever was left between us.

I sprinted toward the place where we’d separated, desperate not to lose his trail. I sniffed the ground frantically and breathed a sigh of relief when I caught his scent. Just having it in my nostrils soothed me, like the part of my body that was crying out for him felt sated by it. By the mere physical reminder of what it felt like to be near him.

I followed his scent through the forest, inhaling it greedily as I ran. I was possessed by the desire to be near him. And my careless desperation had given me tunnel vision. If I were to run into an enemy, I’d be as good as dead. But I didn’t care. I had to get to him.

I moved at a furious pace, but eventually the trail went cold and I found myself walking alone through the woods, aimless. My ears kept pricking forward and back, as if hoping to catch him stepping out from between the trees.

I wondered if he was hurting as much as I was. If it had made his movements erratic. I went backward, trying to retrace my steps in the hope that the path would branch out in another direction, that he’d doubled back and gone another way.

But out of nowhere, I felt a sharp pain in my side. It felt like something running a hundred miles an hour had just crashed into me. But when I looked down, I didn’t see a thing. It had to be the bond dissolving.

*Xavier had led me into the woods with a smirk. I should have known. I’d worn my tiniest shorts and one of his shirts to bait him. I knew he loved the look of me in his clothes, even though I had to roll up the sleeves and tie off the ends so I wasn’t swimming in the fabric.*

*I’d basked in his attention all night, enjoying the lingering eye contact we’d make across the party. Everyone had wanted to talk to him that night, but whenever we’d gotten a second to ourselves, his hands had been all over me.*

*“I love the way you look in my shirt,” he’d growled into my ear, before he’d gotten pulled away* again.

*“It’s mine now,” I’d teased back.*

*But now we had all the time in the world. Or at least it felt like it as he steered me through the dense thicket of trees. We could still hear the barbecue—people laughing, music blasting, bottles clinking.*

*“Fuck it,” Xavier growled, clearly getting impatient as he pushed me against a tree trunk and covered my mouth with his.*

*His touch stoked the growing fire inside me. I licked into his mouth, wanting to devour the taste of him. He ground his hips into mine, making me groan as he nibbled on my ear.*

*“Shh,” he warned. “Don’t wanna get caught.”*

*I grinned at him, pushing him away so I had the space to unzip my shorts and let them fall to the ground.*

*“I can be quiet if you can,” I whispered.*

*Seconds later, Xavier was buried to the hilt inside me with my legs wrapped around his waist and our hands covering each other’s mouths. I rolled my hips and felt his sharp exhale tickle the back of my hand. He retaliated with a punishing thrust that had me desperately trying to swallow a whimper.*

*It was reckless and impulsive. But that was how we always were. Desperate for each other. Always willing to let everything else fall away if it meant we could spend even a minute like this…*

I snapped my eyes open and returned to reality, only to find I wasn’t where I’d been before I’d been blindsided by the memory of Xavier’s touch. I looked around, trying to place the clearing I’d ended up in. Because somehow, it looked familiar.

I took in another lungful of air, hoping the scent might jog my memory, and then it hit me. Of course. I was by the diner. When I’d been working there, these were the woods I’d run in when I’d needed to shift and loosen up.

*Iñigo.*

Maybe he could help. I didn’t have anything left to lose, and it wasn’t exactly like I could go crawling back to the pack house after what Xavier did to me. To us. I shifted back to human and approached the diner, naked and covered in dirt. Hardly my best self, but then again, maybe I could swallow my pride for a moment and hope the pathetic angle worked to my advantage in getting me an in with the vampire.

I was met by the familiar scent of whatever Mabel was smoking with Deacon, the driver, back by the dumpsters. When Mabel saw me she did a double take.

“What the fuck happened to you?” she blurted out, clearly stunned.

“What is with wolves and their constant need to strip? Put on some damn clothes,” Deacon mumbled, unable to stop staring at me as he slouched out of his leather coat and offered it to me.

I shivered as I slid it on, suddenly aware that I was in desperate need of shelter from the cold. I felt another bout of pain and cried out as I fell to the ground.

Mabel and Deacon rushed to me, picking me up by the elbows and dragging me inside. My vision was staring to blur, and I could barely make out my surroundings.

“Iñigo,” I murmured. “Need to see Iñigo.”

My vision narrowed to a point, and I was sure I was about to black out. Mabel set me down on a cot in the back, and I heard snatches of a mumbled conversation before Deacon hustled off, probably to find Iñigo.

“Sorry.” Mabel leaned close as she apologized, reeking of pot smoke. “I have to get back on shift. Will you be okay here?”

I nodded, knowing my chattering teeth probably weren’t an encouraging sign. But I couldn’t manage any other gesture. I could feel the bond slipping away. I was still holding onto the last thread, almost breathless as I waited for it too to snap.

I was going to lose Xavier again.

The thought paralyzed me.

“What the hell is this?” I heard Iñigo bark as he entered. “What happened to her?”

“I—” I started to explain, but I was struck by another wave of pain. This one was more like a spasm, and I convulsed on the cot, desperately willing my limbs to relax.

Iñigo cursed as he tried to hold me down. He called out for help from Deacon, and then I felt two sets of hands pushing me into the cot. But all of that was secondary to the feeling of the final thread snapping, tearing…

Xavier was gone.

The bond was broken. Severed. The last strings of it were snapping away from me for good. I reached out blindly and yanked Iñigo’s collar, drawing him to me. Growling at him in a hoarse, vicious voice that sounded more like my wolf than myself.

“The deal has changed.”

**Episode 1208**

A strange, seductive pull settled over me as I closed my eyes. It was the same sensation I’d experienced when Sabyr had bitten me. I felt calm, at ease. The feeling was mixed in with a brief sharp pain and a tingling in my neck. A nearby gasp brought me back to my senses. My eyes flew open as I was seized with sudden panic.

This wasn’t Sabyr. This was Lola.

*Feeding* on me*.*

I flew back, screaming while I reached out to the others for help, but Lola didn’t release me. In fact, she seemed to dig in deeper. Her fangs were embedded deep in my neck as she sucked on my blood. We both fell to the ground with Lola on top of me. I smacked at her arms to try and break the trance she seemed to be under, screaming at her to stop.

Jay ran over and grabbed Lola’s arm hard, yanking her off me. I scrambled back as terror washed over me. My mind flashed back to the time not too long ago that Lola had shifted and tried to attack me. That had been because of the Orb, but this was different. The Orb was lost in the Fae world. It couldn’t have caused Lola’s current actions. This was something else entirely.

This was Lola being a vampire. For real.

Mom rushed over to help me up as Jay tried his best to restrain Lola. He’d pulled her arms behind her back, but he didn’t have any rope to restrain her. She was pulling and trying to escape his grasp. He grabbed her chin and turned her head so she was looking at him. She froze as she was forced to look at him.

“Look, Lola.” Jay stretched his neck so it was on full display. “You can feed on me. Focus on me, babe.”

But Lola was too strong. She turned her gaze away from Jay. Her red eyes were fixed solely on me. I took a step back without thinking. I felt blood drip down my neck.

“*No*,” Lola hissed. “I want her.” Her eyes shifted over to my mom. Lola smiled and her fangs glinted. “I want every precious drop of Fae blood.”

Shit. Well then.

Horrified, I backed up slightly. Mom squeezed my hand. The look in Lola’s eyes sent a chill down my spine, making my core feel like it was made of ice. I stood frozen.

My best friend seemed to have disappeared completely. She had been taken over by a bloodthirsty monster.

Lola roared and wrenched out of Jay’s grasp. He stared at her open-mouthed as she landed a solid kick to his abdomen, sending him flying. He landed on the ground and rolled a few times. When he came to a stop, he groaned in pain.

My mom moved to my side, shifting me so I was angled slightly behind her. She moved into a defensive stance with her hands stretched out before her. I was momentarily seized by panic. Was Mom going to *attack* Lola?! I couldn’t let that happen! She could seriously hurt her, and Lola wasn’t aware of what she was doing. She wasn’t in control. She couldn’t be. I knew she’d never attack us on purpose.

“Lola,” I said. “It’s Cali, Jay, and my mom. You know us, right? We’re your family.”

She turned on us and snarled. Well that hadn’t worked. Looking to Mom, I reluctantly lifted my hands too. Looked like I didn’t have much of a choice if Lola was set on biting our heads off. She was clearly intent on draining us both of all our blood.

“We don’t want to do this!” I said. “Snap out of it!”

“Lola, baby, focus on me!” Jay said.

She ignored her mate, advancing on us. I reached for my magic, but I couldn’t feel it. It was like I’d hit a wall; I was weak from the blood loss. My magic wasn’t coming. I glanced over at my mom in a panic. From the expression on her face, I could tell that she didn’t want to hurt Lola either. I could see the hesitation in her stance. She could’ve struck already, but she hadn’t.

She didn’t want to.

We didn’t have time to decide to do anything because Lola lunged for us. Instinctively, I reached out and swatted at her face as I dodged. I’d hoped that the contact would snap her out of it, but it only seemed to anger her more. Lola narrowed her eyes and snarled again, rearing up to strike me.

Mom moved her outstretched hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a vine dart out of the grass and wrap around Lola’s ankle. Mom jerked her hand, and the vine yanked Lola to her knees.

Jay reached out to his mate. “Don’t hurt her!” he cried.

I shot him an incredulous look. “We aren’t trying to!” I yelled at him. “We have to stop her before she hurts herself or us. *Again*!”

I knew my friend—she would be devastated if she did. She’d never want to unknowingly harm anyone, especially not her family.

Mom called up more vines with her hands. They snaked up Lola’s legs, keeping her tied to the ground. They rose up her back and her arms. Soon, she was lying flat on the ground, covered in vines. Lola muttered curses and threats under her breath as she struggled against the vines.

The immediate danger was over. As my adrenaline faded away, I rested a hand on the wound on my neck. I could feel the pain more keenly now. I swayed slightly, woozy, and I nearly toppled over, but Jay appeared at my side to steady me.

Our eyes met. I could see that my own panic about what was happening with Lola was mirrored in Jay’s eye. My best friend and his mate. She meant so much to both of us. This was a nightmare come to life.

“So,” I said slowly. “She’s a vampire.”

Instantly, I was struck by a wave of guilt. Jay and I had been so dismissive of her concerns. Lola had been right all along, and we hadn’t listened to her.

Jay stared into the distance, obviously in shock. He couldn’t speak. He seemed to be processing the same emotions I was, but on a different scale. I was sure he felt even guiltier than I did. Lola was his mate. He probably felt like he was the one person who should’ve believed her.

It had just seemed so far-fetched at the time—but standing in front of her while she’d threatened to drain our blood had made the idea far easier to believe.

Mom seemed satisfied with Lola’s containment. She walked over to join us. “What now?” she asked. “This is only a temporary solution.”

I looked over my shoulder at the house. It was packed full of werewolves. How were they all going to react? I couldn’t imagine they’d love the idea of having a fledgling vampire living in the house with them. And there was a hunter inside too, now that Charlie was back.

Jay followed my gaze and groaned. I could tell he was thinking the same thing. “What are we going to do?” I asked.

He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. I don’t.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I told him. “Lola is part of the pack—they’d never turn their backs on her.”

The pack had endured so much drama and pain from vampires. It was a known fact that werewolves and vampires had hated each other for as long as anyone could remember. Lola could create more unwanted tension. We really didn’t need more, but this was Lola we were talking about.

Jay’s thoughts were clearly on the same track as mine. “I know that Lola would never hurt any of us on purpose, but clearly she doesn’t have control over herself.” He buried his face in his hands. “Who knows how the rest of the pack is going to react? What if they reject her? Where will we go?”

I was touched. Jay had said “we,” not “she.” Even as Lola was actively trying to harm us all, Jay still thought of them as a pair. Inseparable. If Lola had to leave, so would Jay.

My heart yearned for that simple mate connection. With all the drama with Greyson and Xavier, my life was just so complicated. I just wanted that one person who would stand by me through thick and thin. I didn’t want to have to choose.

I shook my thoughts away. Now wasn’t the time to dwell on my romantic problems.

Out of the corner of my eye, I suddenly saw a flash of movement from Lola. The vines my mom had conjured lay broken on the ground.

Lola had shaken them off.

She stood. Her eyes flashed blood-red and for a moment, we all stood there, frozen. Lola stared at us as we looked back in fear. Mom’s magic hadn’t worked to contain her. She’d shoved Jay away like he was nothing. I was too weak to use my magic. How could we stop her?

Lola broke the stalemate. She snarled and rushed at us. Without time to think, I grabbed a fallen branch from the ground. It had a sharp point at the end. It was the one defense against vampires that I knew was actually effective.

The realization of what I was about to do hit me.

Oh my god. Was I really going to have to stake my best friend?

**Episode 1209**

VIOLET

Charlie winced as I clutched his hand tighter, but he didn’t let go. I was grateful. I needed the support. I didn’t think I’d be able to get through this without him at my side.

Marta was staring in our direction, but I could tell she wasn’t really seeing us. Her eyes were slightly rolled back in her head. Part of her face was in shadow from the flickering of the candles. It was all so unsettling, like we were living the plot of a horror film.

Marta opened her mouth to speak. “Violet,” she said. It was her voice, but layered over with multiple voices. Almost like an echo. And in those voices, I could *just* make out my brother’s. My twin’s.

I leaned forward and opened my mouth, but instead of speaking, I coughed instead. I could feel the walls of my throat constricting. It felt like I could barely breathe, much less speak.

“Lil—” His name was stuck in my throat like a rock. I coughed again and swallowed. “Lilac!”

Very slowly, Marta turned her head to look directly at me. I was hit by a chill. It sent shivers through my body. Marta was no longer there. Her body was, but her spirit was gone. In her place was Lilac. This was hands down the creepiest thing that had ever happened to me. The candles flickered ominously, and all I could see were the whites of Marta’s eyes. I tried to resist the urge to look anywhere but at her face.

Marta smiled. “I’d never leave you, Violet,” she—or rather, Lilac—said. “You know that.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. I tried to ignore them as they spilled over and ran down my cheeks. Oh, I missed him so much. He would never know just how much I missed him. How much I wished every day that he was still with me. And now I had an opportunity to speak to him again. There were so many things I wanted to say, so many questions I needed to ask him, but I didn’t know how much time I had. My mind raced. I didn’t know where to begin.

“Where are you?” I blurted out.

Marta kept smiling. My heart wanted to burst. It was like Lilac smiling through her. “I’m right by your side. Like I always am,” Lilac said.

A sense of comfort washed over me. I would never be alone as long as he was with me. As quickly as I thought that, I was struck by a wave of guilt. Was Lilac stuck here among the living? Was he living some kind of unseen half-life because of me? I rested my hand over my heart. It felt like it would break. I shook my head. No, I couldn’t have that. I didn’t want that kind of existence for him.

“If you need to go, you should,” I said. “All I want is for you to be happy.”

I meant it with my whole heart. It would pain me to know that he would never be by my side again, but I’d rather he be happy. Even if that meant he wasn’t here with me.

Marta, actually Lilac, shook her head slightly. “The spirit world is in turmoil, Violet,” they said in that weird, layered voice. “I’d rather be here with you.”

I frowned and exchanged a look with Charlie. He looked just as confused as I was. “Wait, what do you mean, the spirit world is in turmoil?”

Lilac ignored my question. “Besides, even if I wanted to cross over fully, I couldn’t,” he said. “Not right now.”

I huffed in frustration. Lilac was speaking, but he wasn’t really saying anything—not anything important. He just kept leaving me with more questions. “What exactly do you mean? What’s happening?”

Marta just stared. Lilac didn't say a word.

Fear suddenly gripped me, and my heart began to race. He was going to leave again. What if he had left already and that was why he hadn’t spoken? It wasn’t fair. I hadn’t had enough time with him. I didn’t know if I would ever have enough time with him.

“Lilac, I love you.” I wanted to get up and wrap my arms around him and hug him for the rest of the time we had left, but it wasn’t his body. It was Marta’s. I would never hug him again. “Is there anything I can do for you?” I asked.

I felt useless. The idea of Lilac being trapped in this state of permanent non-existence filled me with absolute horror. He couldn’t do anything except watch from afar as life continued without him. It was maddening.

“All I want is for you to be at peace,” I said. “Even if that means losing you completely for now, however that works.” I had no idea how the spirit world worked—if he’d be able to come back and visit, or if he’d be trapped there forever. The thought of never hearing from him again filled me with sorrow, but I would much rather know that my brother was at peace.

I was beginning to think that Lilac really was gone when he spoke again. “There’s nothing you can do,” he said. “There are forces at work in the spirit world that I don’t want you to get involved with. It’s too dangerous, Violet.”

My nostrils flared with annoyance. Why did everyone treat me like I was some kind of kid? Even my own twin brother! They had to trust that I could handle myself.

“I’ve fought in plenty of battles before,” I said, more forcefully than necessary. Battles that he’d probably seen me fight. “Let me help you!”

Charlie squeezed my hand. I couldn’t tell whether he was reassuring me or telling me to calm down. Maybe both.

Marta shook her head.

Big Mac leaned forward. She had been silent the entire time, but now she opened her mouth to speak. Her face was grave. “I want to circle back to what you said, too. If the spirit world is in turmoil…” She paused. “Does that have anything to do with the Orb?”

Marta’s face changed. Her expression had been pleasant, if not a little sad, but now it twisted like she was in pain. But she didn’t speak or cry out.

“Please,” Big Mac said urgently. “Tell us! We need to know!”

“Lilac,” I said. “Let us help. We just need to know what’s going on.”

Lilac finally spoke. The layered voice was soft. “I don’t know anything about the Orb. I haven’t heard any whispers about it.”

Big Mac swore.

I turned to look at her. “Why does that even matter?”

“Because *the Orb* matters!” She crossed her arms. “We don’t know where it is.”

I sat back in shock. “I thought you were getting rid of it safely!”

Big Mac clicked her tongue. “Plans don’t always work out.” She turned her attention back to Lilac. “If you know anything—*anything*—about the Orb, you need to tell us. And you need to tell us right now.” Big Mac shifted so she was right in Marta’s face. “This isn’t just about the spirit world. We need to know if the Orb is involved.”

Lilac seemed to ignore Big Mac. Marta was still looking at me over Big Mac’s shoulder. “I’ll always be with you, Violet. Remember that.” The other voices were beginning to fade. Marta’s voice was getting stronger.

“No!” I wasn’t ready for Lilac to leave. I hadn’t said everything that needed to be said. “Don’t leave!” I reached out and grabbed Marta’s arm. Her skin turned red where I gripped her.

There was a rush of air, and the candles were extinguished. Marta’s eyes rolled back into place, but her gaze wasn’t focused on anyone. She was staring at a point over my shoulder.

The séance was over.

Big Mac stood. “Looks like we’ll never get any answers,” she muttered. “Shocking.” She glared at me and left the room.

I understood the frustration she felt. I was more confused after the séance than I had been before. Charlie wrapped his arm around me and murmured in my ear. “It’s okay, it’s okay.” But it wasn’t. None of this was okay.

I looked over at Marta, just as she fell back and began to convulse.

“Oh my god, she’s having a seizure!” I burst out, and Charlie and I rushed over to her. Her arms and legs jerked wildly. “What do we do?”

“Let’s roll her on her side,” Charlie said.

Just as I touched her, a tendril of smoke began to emerge from her body. I jumped back and watched as it continued to stretch out of her. Except… it wasn’t smoke. It looked like it, but it didn’t smell like it, and there was no visible fire. I couldn’t tell what it was.

The substance pooled on the floor across the room and slowly rose like mist. It began to form a pair of legs and then a torso, and before my eyes it turned into a person. A ghost. I squinted at the figure and then gasped.

It was Lilac!

**Episode 1210**

GREYSON

As Sabine searched the house for a tissue, I handed what was left of the popsicle back to Fenrir, now sitting at the kitchen table. He smiled and furiously licked his popsicle. The purple stain around his mouth steadily grew and began to drip down his chin onto his shirt.

“Aha!” Sabine exclaimed. When she returned, tissues in hand, her face fell as she took in Fenrir’s purple face. I thought he almost resembled Maren in her Fae form.

“Oh, dear,” Sabine said. “Look at you! How did you get that back?”

I gave her a sheepish grin as she scowled at me.

Fenrir held his popsicle stick up in the air. Somehow, even his hands were purple. “I’m purple!”

“Yes you are, dear.” Sabine took the stick from him and placed it on the table. “Come here. Let’s get you cleaned up before your mother sees you.”

Maren chose that moment to enter the room. She frowned as she took in the scene.

“Mommy!”

Sabine sighed. “Too late.”

As they both fussed over Fenrir, I strode over, pretending to be interested in something outside the window. As I passed the table, I grabbed the stick and wrapped it in an extra tissue from Sabine’s stack. I carefully slid it into my pocket and continued walking. I glanced behind me at Maren, but her attention was solely focused on Fenrir.

I exhaled, grateful that no one had seen. This would have to remain a secret for now. Maren couldn’t know what I intended to do. No one could. I didn’t trust anyone else. There was always a possibility that someone would tamper with the results of the paternity test, and I couldn’t allow that.

I needed to know the truth.

I turned around with my back to the wall and looked over at Fenrir. His face was no longer sticky and purple. He waved his arms around as he chattered to Sabine, who was sitting on her knees listening to him.

“Captain America is my favorite! But I also like Batman and Wonder Woman.”

He continued to list off other superheroes on his fingers, occasionally getting their names wrong and being gently corrected by Maren. Sabine nodded and said “ooh” and “wow” as Fenrir described their abilities.

A shiver ran through me. If Fenrir really was my son, this would be such a sweet, domestic scene. My son and my mother happily playing together as Maren and I looked on in adoration.

There was a lurch in my stomach. None of this was anything I’d seen coming. It was one thing when I’d found out Sabine was my mother. That had been a shock. But to find out that I might have a son… That was nearly unbearable. All I’d ever wanted was to build a family with Cali. Now I had a family, but not with the woman I loved.

Fenrir being my son would be just one more barrier on my journey to making things right with my mate. I didn’t know if our relationship could ever recover from that.

I clutched the popsicle stick through my pocket. This wasn’t the time to spiral. I needed to keep my head on straight until I figured out the truth.

I could barely think straight. I needed a break from all the big emotions overwhelming my brain, so I eased my way past Maren, Mrs. Smith, and Fenrir and headed back to the living room. Rishika was sitting on the couch with her head in her hands. Her muscles were tense. Something was clearly wrong.

When she heard me enter, she looked up and rubbed her eyes. She looked stressed and worried.

“Hey.” I stood before her, arms crossed. “What’s wrong?”

Rishika shrugged. She didn’t look at me. “I really don’t want to talk about it,” she mumbled.

I sat down next to her on the couch and nudged her with my shoulder. “Is this about Artemis?”

She shot me a look. “Why would it be about Artemis?”

I laughed. I could tell by her defensiveness that it could *only* be about Artemis. I wasn’t so oblivious I hadn’t noticed the sparks flying. “Come on,” I said. “Everyone can see the way that you two look at each other.”

Rishika grimaced and looked away.

“It’s actually a relief,” I added hastily. “I’m glad I’m not the only one with romantic problems around here.”

Rishika’s gaze returned to me. Her eyes were narrowed. “Let’s get this straight, Greyson.” She jabbed my chest. “Artemis and I are *not* having romantic issues.”

I smirked and gave her a look that said “Sure, Rishika.”She huffed and changed the subject. “I was actually looking for Xavier,” she said. “Have you seen him?”

I winced at the mention of his name. Rishika’s eyes widened, and she stumbled over herself to speak. “Greyson, I’m sorry. You’re probably not the best person to ask about him right now.”

I held up a hand, and she stopped. “It’s fine. I’m still Alpha after all.” I scratched my head and thought back. When *had* I seen my brother last? As I thought about it, I realized hadn’t seen Xavier since last night—when Cali had broken up with both of us. He was probably out somewhere licking his wounds.

“Don’t worry about him, Rishika,” I said. “He’s probably just off on one of his moody runs.” A pang of annoyance ran through me at the thought. It was classic Xavier. He fought me, nearly killed me, and then ran off to avoid taking responsibility for his actions.

Rishika frowned. She looked at her watch. “He should be back by now…” She trailed off, looking into the distance. Maybe some of her concern really was for Xavier and not over her drama with Artemis.

I laid a hand on her shoulder. “Relax. I’m sure Xavier will be darkening our door any second now.”

Rishika opened her mouth to respond when a shout sounded from outside. “What was that?” she asked.

We leapt up and peered through the open window. There wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. I didn’t see anyone, just the trees surrounding the house. I began to turn away from the window when there was another scream. Rishika and I didn’t hesitate. First, she jumped through the window, and I followed. Hurrying, we ran around the side of the house to the front porch where the screams were coming from.

As we reached the porch, I looked out over the yard and nearly stopped in my tracks. Cali, Orla, and Jay were all running straight for us at a dead sprint. I looked around in confusion. What the fuck was going on? Were the vampires back? Were we under attack? I shifted my gaze behind them and began to step forward.

“GO!” Cali shouted. “She’s coming!”

I started down the lawn again, squinting at the figure moving in the distance. Was that Lola? Wait. They were running from… *Lola?*

I would’ve had the urge to laugh if something didn’t look very, very wrong with her. Lola’s eyes were blood-red and her lips were curled into a snarl. And there was a flash of white—were those *fangs*?

“SHE’S A VAMPIRE!” Cali shrieked as the group barreled behind me and Rishika.

A rush of adrenaline hit, and I went into defense mode. So Lola had been right all along—she *was* a vampire.

I looked back at the others. Cali was holding a stake, but she clearly didn’t want to use it. I found it hard to believe that she would ever use it on Lola, even if Lola was trying to attack them.

Beside me, Rishika seemed to be going through the same revelation I’d had. She looked over and caught my eye. Her gaze was grim. I nodded to her. I didn’t need to say a word. We had the same thought—we needed to stop Lola.

Together, we both shifted and leapt forward, placing ourselves between Lola and the other three. Lola stopped short with a snarl. She leaned forward like she wanted to lunge at us. I looked into her eyes, but I didn’t see any trace of her. She wasn’t herself. The bloodlust had completely taken over.

The other three had stopped running as soon as we’d shifted. Cali was screaming at me. “Don’t hurt her! Greyson, *please*.”

Jay shifted and moved to stand in front of Lola. He angled his body so we wouldn’t be able to reach her. Lola snarled and swatted him aside as if he were weightless. He landed a few feet away and was slow to rise to his feet.

My mind raced. How the hell was she this strong? If she was throwing Jay around like he was nothing, we were all just a bunch of toys to her. Was it because she was a new vampire? If she was too strong for Jay, how would we ever subdue her?

I didn’t have much time to think. Lola quickly turned her terrifying blood-red eyes on me. She bared her teeth. Her fangs glinted in the sun, and she pounced.

I tensed, preparing for the impact. This might have been Lola, but she was posing a threat to the pack, and specifically in this moment, *me*.

“NO!” Cali screamed.

Before I could move out of the way, there was a burst of bright Fae magic. It hit Lola square in the chest, and she crumpled to the ground, motionless.

**Episode 1211**

AVA

I sat in a cracked booth, across from Iñigo. The table was dusty, like no one had sat there in all the time the diner had been open. The place was empty except for the two of us. I was still wearing the leather coat Deacon had given me, with nothing else underneath. There was an air conditioning vent above the table, but I didn’t feel a breeze. I barely felt anything. I was nursing a cup of mediocre coffee, taking tiny thoughtless sips. The steam from the mug kept me warm.

My whole body was shaking, less violently than before, but I couldn’t make it stop completely. I still couldn’t believe Xavier had actually gone through with it. I supposed it had always been a possibility, especially after everything that had happened between us. He’d found someone to replace me. *Cali*. His bond with her was strong, but I’d thought our bond was stronger.

I’d thought we could get past our issues. I’d never imagined that Xavier would actually break our mate connection. I didn’t think I knew anyone who’d ever even considered doing such a thing. My heart had shattered into a million pieces when he’d uttered those words in the forest to break our connection. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to put the pieces back together. I’d had no idea it would hurt this much to lose him.

I’d been staring at the thick layer of dust on the table this whole time. Iñigo exhaled. I could feel him eyeing me carefully. His gaze was practically boring a hole into my skull. He was trying to figure out what to make of my sudden, disheveled appearance. I knew we wouldn’t sit in silence much longer.

As I slowly lifted my gaze, he drained his mug and spoke.

“The deal isn’t up to you,” he said, cracking his knuckles. “You don’t get to make the call that the deal has changed.” He pointed to his chest. “I’m the boss around here, and when I say a deal’s a deal, it’s a deal.”

I looked him in the eye. I was struck by the authority in his voice. Something about it was almost seductive. This was a man who could take charge of a situation. I shook the thought from my head. Now wasn’t the time.

I leaned forward. “I don’t understand,” I said. “Everything has changed. My mate, Xavier—” Saying Xavier’s name sent a pang of sadness through me. “He broke our mate connection,” I continued. “*Nothing* is the same.”

Iñigo snorted. “I couldn’t care less about your archaic werewolf traditions,” he said, waving my concerns away and staring out the window. “That has nothing to do with me.”

I pressed forward. “I know that you have connections.” Iñigo glanced at me from the corner of his eye. He could help me get Xavier back. I knew he could. The question was, would he be willing to? “I need your help to restore our mate bond.”

I couldn’t lose Xavier. Our relationship was the one thing I had always wanted. It was the one thing that had brought me true happiness. Now that it was gone, I realized that I didn’t know who I was without it. I couldn’t remember who I had been before I’d met Xavier. I had already lost so much. I couldn’t lose this too. I had to get him back.

“Please,” I begged, hating that I was doing it to him of all people. “I’m nothing without him.”

Iñigo eyed me with a look of deep disdain. “You’re nothing without your mate?” he asked. “Seriously? You’re pathetic.”

Feeling like I might cry, I scrunched up my face to keep the tears away. He was already disgusted with my pain. I couldn’t let him see me cry too. I didn’t want to give him anything else.

“You don’t understand, Iñigo,” I began.

He stood. “And I don’t want to,” he said, shrugging. “This is your problem. If you want to make it mine as well, you’ll have to make it worth my while.”

Somehow his words didn’t make me feel hopeless. If anything, it helped my spirits perk up. Making it worth his while meant there was a chance. Nothing in life was free. “So there *is* something that you could do?” I asked. “Someone you know who could help?”

“What’s in it for me?” Iñigo repeated, raising an eyebrow.

I straightened in the booth, shoving aside the cup of coffee. I needed to offer him something he couldn’t resist. “I can get Fae for you.”

Iñigo waved a hand dismissively. “You already promised me two, remember?” He started to turn away.

“Wait,” I called out desperately. He was right. I had to up my game. “What if I could make it six?”

Iñigo turned around and eyed me with a little more interest. “Six? You know *six* Fae?” He shook his head. I’d somehow managed to actually surprise him. “I doubt it, Ava.”

I hastily stood, nearly tripping over my feet. “I do. I really do.” I spoke quickly. I was losing him. “Back at the pack house, there’s the girl who trashed your diner—”

Iñigo interrupted with a growl. His expression darkened. “I wouldn’t mind getting my hands on her.”

“She’s all yours.” I began to count everyone out on my fingers. Their faces appeared in my mind, but I shoved them aside. They were nothing to me. They were a means to an end. “There’s also her mother and her sister. There’s a Dark Fae, and a healing Fae, and a glamouring Fae.” Now Iñigo looked bored. I needed to put some marketing spin on it. Really hit it home. “I’d imagine that their blood all has different flavors, right? This is really rare, having them all so close like this.”

Iñigo stared at me. I could see the wheels turning in his brain as he tried to gauge whether or not I could possibly be telling the truth.

“Why on earth would six Fae be hanging out at a werewolf pack house?” He squinted at me and said, almost to himself, “I’ve never heard of such a stupid thing.”

I resisted the urge to smile. I could tell he still didn’t fully believe me, but I had his interest. Now I just needed to secure the sale and bring Xavier back to me.

“I agree. It doesn’t make any sense.” I rolled my eyes. “The pack has been full of chaos and drama ever since the first Fae came to them. But I promise, they’re all there. And I can bring them to you. If you help me.”

Iñigo shifted a little closer, his eyes narrowed. He was so close, I could smell him—he had a woodsy scent, like pine trees. He bared his fangs, and I resisted the urge to run. The razor-sharp points glinted in the light. He could’ve sunk them into my skin if he wanted, ended things then and there.

“If you’re lying, you know what will happen to you.” He rested his hand on his pocket. It bulged like there was something in there. My mind raced. What did he have? A gun with silver bullets? He could kill me that way and cast suspicion on someone else. Maybe I’d misinterpreted the entire situation. “And you won’t be able to run from me. I’ll find you anywhere.”

I knew that he could. “I promise,” I said quickly. “I’m not lying. I swear it’s the truth.”

Iñigo moved even closer. He leaned down so that he was right in my face. I was hyper aware of the closeness of his body. His muscles were taut. His tattoo peeked out from beneath the sleeve of his shirt. His eyes bored into me like he was seeing right through me. It was wrong, but I felt an inexplicable pull to him. Something about him was so magnetic…

“You can trust me,” I breathed. But could I trust him?

He reached a hand up to my cheek and gently stroked my skin. His fingers were surprisingly soft. “You’ve proven to be more interesting than I first thought.” He lowered his voice. “I think you might be very useful. We could do some very interesting things together.”

I was absolutely spellbound. I stared into his eyes, getting lost in the darkness. All I could do was nod. I couldn’t find the words to speak. I was amazed that I had managed to convince him to help me. I was more than a little surprised he hadn’t just killed me. There was hope that I’d be able to achieve my goal after all.

Iñigo reached into his pocket, and I watched in slow motion as he pulled out a knife with serrated edges. I recoiled slightly, afraid he’d had a sudden change of heart.

He brought the knife up to his palm and sliced the skin open. Blood dripped onto the floor. He motioned for me to hold out my hand.

This would be the test. There was no going back.

Iñigo held the knife over my palm. “Do we have a deal?”

**Episode 1212**

My hands shook violently as I stared down at them in horror. What had I done? Lola lay crumpled on the ground. She didn’t move. I couldn’t feel my own heartbeat as I dropped to my knees by her body. It felt like my heart had stopped the second my magic had struck her. I might as well have been dead. If I had killed Lola, I’d want to be dead too.

Jay, Greyson, and Rishika crowded around us. My mother stood off to the side, her eyes full of concern. I ran my hands over Lola’s neck as I scrambled to find a pulse. Jay was crouched on Lola’s other side, staring at me. His eye was wide with panic.

Did vampires have a pulse? Jay said he’d been able to hear her heartbeat earlier, but… What if he was wrong? What if it was gone now?

Hysteria rose in my chest and up my throat. It sat heavy like a rock and threatened to fill my throat completely. I could barely choke out the words. “I-I didn’t mean to! It wasn’t on purpose.” My eyes stung as I fought back tears. “She was going for Greyson, and I couldn’t let anything happen to him.”

I felt more than saw the look Greyson shot me, and my cheeks heated furiously. I tried to ignore him, sparing him just one glance. His eyes were focused completely on me, unreadable. I quickly looked away. This wasn’t the time. I needed to focus all of my mental energy on Lola. I would have to talk to Greyson later.

I wasn’t having any luck finding a pulse in her neck, so I pressed my hand to Lola’s chest to feel for her heartbeat. Greyson leaned in close. I could feel his breath on my neck. A shiver ran down my spine.

“If she really is a vampire,” Greyson whispered, “there won’t be a heartbeat.”

I wanted to scream. This was all wrong. This shouldn’t have been happening.

But then, as I pressed down harder on her chest, I felt it. There! The strong thump of Lola’s heart. It beat steadily beneath my fingertips. Relief surged through my body. She wasn’t dead! I hadn’t killed my best friend.

I looked up at the others with a wide smile. “She’s alive! I feel a heartbeat!”

Jay fell back with a sigh of relief. He had tears in his eye. He wiped them away and placed a hand on Lola’s forehead.

Greyson frowned. “Wait, really?” he said. “She has a heartbeat?”

I nodded.

He shook his head. “But that doesn’t make any sense. I saw her. We all did. She’s definitely a vampire.”

I glared at him. Couldn’t he just be happy that my best friend wasn’t dead? Why did he have to question everything? “Who cares about that right now?” I said. “She’s alive!”

I looked down at her. Even though she had a heartbeat, Lola was lying completely still. She hadn’t moved a muscle. Her eyes were shut tight. I met Jay’s gaze. Something was wrong.

He scooped her up in his arms. “We need to go see Big Mac.”

We all followed him inside. I looked over my shoulder. Greyson was lingering behind, staring at the ground where Lola had just been. There was a line between his eyebrows. He was clearly deep in thought. He looked up and caught my eye, and I quickly looked away.

A hand rested on my back. I looked up. Mom.

“It’s okay,” she said as she rubbed circles in my lower back. “She’ll be okay.”

I wanted to believe her, but I just didn’t know how that could be true.

Inside, Big Mac was coming down the stairs. I shoved past the others and gripped the railing so hard I nearly broke off one of my nails. I gestured wildly to Lola, unconscious in Jay’s arms. “Please, do something!”

Big Mac paused on the final stair and looked at Lola before glancing at me. She lifted a single eyebrow. “What do you want me to do?”

I wasn’t thinking straight. I didn’t have time to fill Big Mac in on what had just happened. I just needed her to help Lola. I needed her to wake up, and most of all, I needed her to be herself again when she did.

“I don’t know, tell us what’s going on with Lola,” I said, tripping over my words. I rested my hand on Lola’s leg. “Is she a vampire or not?”

Big Mac shrugged. She walked closer to Jay and peered at Lola. She lifted up Lola’s lip and examined her fangs. “She sure looks like a vampire. The process is pretty straightforward. You drink a vampire’s blood, they drink from you, you die. Bam. Vampire.”

Jay shook his head. “But she didn’t die. She has a heartbeat—I felt it. What does that mean?”

There were so many questions. I was beginning to feel super overwhelmed by the events of the day. I was also still really woozy from my earlier blood loss. I swayed in place. Without thinking, I reached out and grabbed hold of Greyson’s hand to steady myself.

Greyson and I locked eyes, and I looked down at my hand in his. My eyes widened. Oh no! What had I done? I tried to pull back, but Greyson gripped my hand tighter and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

For a moment, as I stared into his eyes, everything around us melted away. I couldn’t take my eyes off his. The room disappeared and, in its place, I saw flashes of the dream we’d shared. His hands on my face, on my waist, everywhere. His lips on mine and the desk deliciously pressing into my skin.

And then the moment broke and Xavier and Greyson’s huge brawl floated into my mind. I saw myself trying to break them up, and Xavier trying his best to kill Greyson.

I closed my eyes. The dream had turned into a nightmare.

I had to let go of Greyson’s hand. I’d broken up with him, after all! His touch only brought me pain, reminded me that I couldn’t have him. I could never have him, either of them.

But I just squeezed his hand. I couldn’t bring myself to let him go. A pang of grief stabbed my heart. Would this be the last time I would ever hold his hand? The thought made me grip him even tighter. I thought I’d never be able to let go.

Until I felt Lola shift beneath my other hand.

I released Greyson’s hand for the last time and looked up at Jay. “Did you…”

He nodded and sucked in a breath. “Yeah, I felt that too.”

Everyone in the room held their breath as Lola shifted in Jay’s arms. He quickly walked into the living room, and we all followed. He gently laid her down on the ground and stepped back. None of us knew whether she would wake up as herself or with those horrifying red eyes.

Lola slowly stirred and let out a small moan. Her eyes fluttered open. I couldn’t help but gasp. She looked completely normal again. Her face wasn’t twisted up in a vicious snarl. Her eyes had returned to their normal soft brown. She sat up and looked around in alarm at everyone staring at her. She rubbed her hands against the floor.

“What happened? Why am I on the floor?”

Jay knelt at her side and took her hand. His expression was cautious as he looked at her. “You don’t remember anything?”

Lola’s eyes widened with fear. She shook her head. “What happened?” she asked desperately. “Did I do something wrong?”

Big Mac snorted and gestured to the open wound on my neck. “That depends on whether you consider trying to suck all the blood out of your best friend ‘wrong’.”

Lola gasped and scooted backward. She tried to stand, but her legs gave out and she fell back against the wall.

“I did *what*?” She looked at me, and her eyes were full of tears. “Oh my god, Cali. I’m so sorry! I never meant to do that. What’s happening to me?”

She was starting to hyperventilate. One hand covered her mouth and the other rested on her chest as she tried to suck in air.

I leaned down and rubbed her knee. “It’s okay,” I said. “Well, not like, OKAY okay, but I know you didn’t mean it. You definitely weren’t yourself.”

Lola’s eyes flitted from one person to the next. She looked totally lost. “Does that mean I was right? I’m a vampire?”

Silence blanketed the room. I looked for my mom, but she had disappeared. Jay had covered his face with his hand. No one seemed to know what to say, but our silence gave her the answer she needed. Lola let out the loudest, most painful wail I’d ever heard. I could practically feel her heart shattering into a million pieces.

“What is that going to mean?” she asked between sobs.

Greyson stepped forward. His expression was grave. My heart dropped just before he spoke. “It means you can’t stay here.”

**Episode 1213**

ARTEMIS

I felt like I was slowly losing my mind.

I was holed up in my bedroom, debating whether or not I should get up and lock the door. I wasn’t in any mood to see anyone. I needed to think things through, and I needed to be alone to do that. I was snuggled under the covers, lying on my side with my knees curled up to my chest. It was the most comforting position I’d been able to find, even though I was on the verge of breaking into a sweat underneath all my blankets.

I’d tried my hardest to ignore the voice in my head, but it was all I could think about. I was only becoming more terrified the more I thought about it—and more confused.

The voice… I’d heard it before, but only when the Orb had been in my head. So why was I hearing it again now? It wasn’t possible for the Orb to be back. I’d felt it being taken from me into the Fae world. It was lost to us all now. There was no way it could still be messing with me. Right?

I groaned and buried my face in my pillow. I wanted to scream. None of this made any sense. I felt a tiny stab of fear in my heart.

I was afraid for myself. I was afraid of what would happen next. I could still hear the voice so clearly in my mind. *“Do you want your magic back, Artemis? If so, you know what you must do.”*

I did want my magic back, but at what cost? And could I trust the voice? It was difficult to know whether it had malicious intentions. I had no idea what to do about it, about my magic, or about anything else in my life.

I couldn’t stop thinking about what I’d heard from the tree. It had told us that the Orb was no longer in the Fae world. Just like with the voice, I had no idea whether the tree was trustworthy. All I could trust was myself. I knew the Orb had been taken from me into the Fae world. I needed to believe my own experience. If I started to doubt myself, everything would fall apart.

Even so, there was clearly so much going on that I didn’t understand. The only thing I knew for sure was that this voice was bad news. Hearing voices meant I was losing it. And if I truly was losing my mind, then I was a danger to my family and the rest of the pack.

I jumped as a knock sounded at the door. I held my breath. If I stayed quiet, hopefully whoever it was would assume I wasn’t there and leave. I wished I’d locked the door. Just in case. They knocked again.

“Artemis? Are you in there?”

I groaned. Under normal circumstances, I would have loved to see Rishika, but I was just too confused. I didn’t have the energy to carry on a conversation with her—or anyone. I just needed to be alone with my thoughts.

“I know you’re in there,” Rishika said. She pushed the door open and looked around. Her gaze landed on the bed, and she spotted me peering out from my mound of blankets. She quickly shut the door behind her and sat down on the edge of the bed. Her eyes were full of concern. “Hey,” she said. “How are you doing?”

I had no idea how to respond. If I told her the truth, she’d know immediately that I’d lost it. She’d tell the pack. But if I lied, she’d know it too.

“Oh, you know,” I said sarcastically. “I’ve lost my magic, a medium told me that death was following me, and now…” I trailed off. I didn’t want to get into the creepy voice in my head. That would be going too far.

Rishika eyed me carefully. “You know you can talk to me about anything, right?” She rested her hand on the bed close to me but didn’t touch me.

I looked up into her eyes and felt a tiny flutter in my stomach. Her face was so earnest. Rishika really did care about me. My mind flashed back to the question I’d asked myself earlier: did I want us to be exclusive?

Rishika had seen me kiss Vander. In the aftermath, she’d told me it was fine and that we weren’t exclusive, but I *knew* she hadn’t been entirely okay with what she’d seen. Or maybe I was only hoping she hadn’t been okay with it? I could have been projecting my own mixed up emotions onto her.

Rishika and I had so much fun together. I loved what we had. Maybe I wanted her to be more than just a fun time. Maybe I wanted us to be more. My cheeks grew warm. I really did like her. Rishika felt like the first person to really *see me* in a long time—to see beneath the walls I had put up. I could see us being something great.

But then I shook my head. No. I didn’t have the luxury of time to figure out whatever was going on between us. If I really cared about Rishika, it was better that I distanced myself from her now—for her own safety. I didn’t want to hurt her, and I didn’t want her to get hurt because of me. I needed to figure out what was going on in my head. That was the first priority.

I stood up from the bed abruptly. My blankets fell to the floor around my feet. Rishika looked at me quizzically.

“It’s nothing,” I told her. “Really, I’m totally fine. I just need to go clear my head.”

I left the room, but not before noting the small beat of hurt that crossed Rishika’s face. It was only visible for a second before she concealed her feelings, but it had definitely been there. I felt a guilty twinge in my gut. I hadn’t meant to hurt her.

I made my way downstairs. What I needed was a long walk in the woods alone to think. No one would bother me there.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I paused. Loud voices were coming from the living room. I peered in and found more people than I was expecting. Jay and Lola were holding hands. She was sitting on the floor. They looked terrified. Jay was whispering something in her ear. Cali was staring at Greyson open-mouthed. She looked pissed. Big Mac seemed both confused and amused by the entire situation.

I didn’t have the energy to deal with whatever new drama they were all going through. I looked in again and spotted Orla in the corner. *Shit.* I tried to tiptoe past the room, hoping no one would see me, but when I stepped on a squeaky floorboard Orla turned her head and spotted me. She uncrossed her arms and moved toward me.

I picked up the pace. Maybe I could disappear before she caught up to me. I’d just made it to the porch steps when she opened the door.

“Artemis,” she called. “Wait.”

I sighed and turned around to face her. “What do you want?” I was blunt.

Orla stopped and raised her eyebrows at my tone.

“I want to make sure that you’re okay.” Her voice was gentle, if not a bit cautious. She didn’t come any closer. It was like I was a bomb that could go off at any moment. “You’ve been through so much recently… I’m so sorry, sweetheart.” She bowed her head. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

I stayed silent. Hurt coursed through me. “It’s fine,” I said. “For a while, I thought that maybe I wanted the kind of loving family other people always seem to have, but now I know that it’s better for me to be on my own. The way I’ve always been.”

Orla frowned. “You don’t mean that,” she said softly. “Artemis, you’re a part of our family, whether you want to be or not.” Orla was growing more and more upset. “You’re an equal part, an important part.”

I felt my heart twist at her words. I wanted to believe her so badly, but I couldn’t. I balled my hands up into tight fists and forced myself to harden my heart against her words. I didn’t have time for this mushy nonsense. There were more important things happening.

“I don’t need you right now,” I said stiffly.

Orla looked at me closely, cringing at my words. She was obviously hurt, and a part of me felt guilty for causing her pain. I nearly opened my mouth to apologize, but then another voice spoke to me from the recesses of my mind.

*Don’t feel bad*,it said. *You have to get what you need. It’s better not to be weighed down.*

“What do you need?” Orla asked.

I didn’t respond. I just turned away. I needed answers.

I needed to find my father.

**Episode 1214**

XAVIER

Gregor hadn’t moved me from the initial location he’d dumped me in. I was still stuck in the pit with no visible way to escape. I was used to being able to get myself out of anything, but now I was absolutely helpless, and I hated it more than anything.

I paced the tiny space what seemed like over a thousand times. I examined every nook and cranny for any kind of escape route, but it was useless. The sides of the pit were packed hard. There would be no tunneling out. There was no obvious exit other than the grate above me. I was trapped and I was fucking pissed off. I had no way to get myself out of this mess. And worse, no one knew where I was, and no one was expecting me back at the house.

Gregor’s words kept replaying in my mind. How I deserved a fate worse than death. I was starting to lose it, not just because of the hopelessness of my situation, but because of my spiraling thoughts. I couldn’t stop thinking that Gregor’s master plan was to kidnap Cali. He would torture her in front of me and then when her body gave out, he would force me to watch my mate die. It was the only thing I could think of that would be worse than death.

Even though Cali had broken up with me, I could still feel our bond. It felt even stronger than ever, now that I’d severed my last tie to Ava. The pain from breaking my bond with Ava was beginning to ebb away. I could think more clearly, could feel my strength returning. I flexed my muscles. I was ready to fight.

Gregor had captured me when I was weak. That would never happen again. At my full strength, I knew I could take on a bunch of simpering bloodsuckers. They were no match for me. I was an Alpha.

With renewed vigor, I looked up at the silver grate covering the top of the pit. I paced beneath it, searching for any weakness in the bars. I couldn’t see anything obvious, but I’d just have to give it a try. A piece might give way under force.

I took a deep breath to gather my strength and quickly shifted. I had never been more grateful to have my wolf. At least breaking my mate bond hadn’t taken that from me.

I tensed and then erupted upward, slamming my body against the grate. The silver immediately burned my skin, and I hissed in pain as I hit the ground. I looked up.

The grate was holding firm.

I growled in frustration. This was the only thing I could do. Breaking that grate was my only chance at freedom. I tensed again, preparing to throw my body against the barrier once more, but then I looked up to see Gregor looming over the entrance. The sound must have gotten his attention. The smirk on his face sent my blood boiling.

Gregor shook his head. “Save your energy, mutt. It won’t do you any good here.” He dropped something into the pit.

I moved closer and squinted down at it. It looked like a small gold ball. Almost immediately, it began to fill the small space with a choking gas. I shifted back to human and tried to wave the noxious smoke away from my face, but it was no use. The gas was everywhere. I collapsed to my knees, choking and coughing as the smoke overwhelmed me and burned my eyes.

I scraped my hands as I fell to the ground, and I heard the silver grate scrape as it was opened. If only I could find the energy… I shut my eyes and lost consciousness.

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I woke with a start. My eyes were open, but I couldn’t see anything but darkness. I lifted my hand and bumped against what felt like solid wood, just inches from my face. My breath hitched. I tried to move my legs but ran into more wood. I couldn’t move. I was in a small confined space—a box of some kind.

Had they buried me alive? Would I die in this box?

I had no way of knowing how much time had passed. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. I hoped it hadn’t been days. I was hyperventilating. I knew I probably had a limited amount of air, but that didn’t matter. I couldn’t help it.

I was jostled to the side and realized the box was moving. Gregor was taking me somewhere, the fucker. At least I hadn’t been buried alive. Not yet, at least. I tried to calm my breathing. I sucked in one deep breath after another. I needed to think rationally.

My eyesight had gradually adjusted to the darkness. As I looked around, I thought back to when I’d saved Ava from that vampire’s diner. I thought I’d recognized the box.

I kicked at the bottom. It didn’t budge. I tried banging at the top and the sides with my hands. No use. I didn’t think I’d even made a dent in it. The walls were too thick.

New plan. I needed to wait until we stopped moving. They would have to open the box eventually, and that would be my only chance to escape. I would be in an unfamiliar environment, but if I could just get out of the box, I’d have a chance to shift. Whoever was out there would be taken by surprise.

As much as I wanted to kill every single person involved, I would need to stay focused. I had to find an escape route. A door, a window, anything.

The box stopped moving. There was a loud thud, like it had been set down. Unfamiliar voices spoke. I didn’t recognize any of them.

“He’s awake,” someone said loudly.

I tensed my muscles, ready to leap out when they opened up the top. But then something tickled my nose. I inhaled and immediately began choking.

It was the smoke from before. I coughed and wheezed as it hit my lungs. In the enclosed space, I couldn’t hold on. I passed out again.

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When I awoke a second time, I could barely see. The light was so bright I had to close my eyes. I tried to move my arms and legs and quickly realized they were firmly strapped down. I was tied up on some sort of table. After a series of rapid blinks, my eyes adjusted to the light, and I had to stop myself from jerking away.

A man’s face loomed over mine. He had a wicked grin. With a start, I realized that the man hovering over me was the guy from the diner—Ava’s old boss.

The man grinned again and this time showed his fangs. My head was still really foggy from breathing in that smoke. It was pounding. But even through my confusion, I wondered why the man didn’t smell like a typical vampire.

The man—Iñigo was his name, I suddenly remembered—opened his mouth to respond and I realized I’d asked the question aloud.

“Oh, that?” He chuckled. “I find it inconvenient for others to be able to recognize my true form.” He pointed to a chunky gold chain with a strange amulet that hung around his neck. “It’s not too hard to find a covering charm when you’ve got the resources I’m working with.”

I groaned internally. It would be a pain if more vampires got their hands on amulets like that. They were dangerous enough—they didn’t need to be able to mask their scent. It would put a lot of my pack members’ lives at risk. I would have to warn the pack, if I ever escaped from my current predicament.

I sensed movement from the corners of my eyes and was suddenly hit with a wave of garbage. At least, that was what it smelled like. The room filled with that rotting smell. There were more vampires. These ones weren’t lucky enough to have the charm Iñigo possessed.

Iñigo looked up from me and grinned wickedly at the others. “Eat up, everyone,” he said. “But remember—don’t kill him.” My blood ran cold. “He’s here as a permanent buffet.”

Iñigo stepped away out of sight, and I immediately began to struggle helplessly against the silver chains holding me down. My skin burned the more I struggled. I wasn’t going to stop. I had to show this bloodsucker that he wasn’t shit

But the more I struggled, the bigger his smirk grew. The chains were too strong, and I yelled as I tried to charge Iñigo despite the hold on me. I needed to wipe that smug look off his face.

A horde of vampires descended on my arms and legs. I screamed as countless fangs dug into my flesh. With horror, I realized that this was the fate Gregor had planned for me. It had nothing to do with Cali. She was safe, but I was far from it.

I was going to be a blood bag for my mortal enemies. Fuck.

**Episode 1215**

I stood, gaping at Greyson. His words spun around in my head as I tried to make sense of them. I could barely believe that those words had just come out of his mouth. Was he seriously saying that Lola—my best friend, a member of the pack—had to *leave*? He was out of his mind if he thought anyone would ever agree to that plan. I would raise hell before I let my best friend be driven away for something so completely out of her control.

I finally found my voice as my anger took over. “Are you kidding me right now?” I glared at Greyson. If looks could kill, he would’ve already been dead. “What, you’re going to banish Lola from the pack?”

Greyson sighed and I pressed him.

“You can’t be serious!” I said, stomping in front of him so we were face to face. All I could see was red. “How can you be so heartless?! Lola didn’t mean for any of this to happen. She doesn’t deserve this!”

I was so deep in my anger I didn’t notice that he was holding up his hands. He tried to get a word in edgewise, but I wouldn’t stop.

“If Lola isn’t going to be a member of the pack anymore,” I said, “then maybe I won’t either!”

Greyson stared at me as I tried to catch my breath. He crossed his arms. “Are you done?”

The others had formed a sort of loose circle around us. Lola, Jay, and Big Mac glanced between the two of us. Shit, I’d just shouted in front of all of them, hadn’t I?

I mirrored Greyson, crossing my arms defiantly. “Yeah,” I said, feeling the slightest bit sheepish. “For now.”

Greyson took a deep breath. “Well, if you’d let me finish, I would’ve told you that I certainly wasn’t saying Lola would be banished from the pack.” He looked at Lola and his expression softened. “What happened to you isn’t your fault, and the pack won’t abandon you unless you knowingly do anything that causes the pack harm or puts anyone in danger.” He looked back at me. “What I’m saying is that she can’t stay here *until* she can figure out how to get this under control. Because right now, even if she doesn’t want to be, she’s a danger to us all, and us to her.”

Lola’s eyes were fully focused on Greyson. Tears welled up in her eyes and she buried her head into Jay’s chest as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

I couldn’t accept what Greyson was saying. I had to fight for her. “I think it’s best if Lola gets to the bottom of all this around the people who love her.”

“Wait,” Lola said. “Cali, he’s right.”

Lola was staring at me, but not at my face. Her eyes were on the wound on my neck. She wrung her hands. She was so distraught. She gestured to the wound. “Look what I did to you, Cali! I know I’ve had some problems controlling myself before, but this… This is a step too far.” She looked up at Jay and they locked eyes. Lola huffed and her eyes took on a determined air. She removed Jay’s arm from her shoulder and stepped away from him.

“I need to figure this out before I can be around anyone,” she said.

Jay’s eye flared wide with alarm. He took a step closer to her. “You’re not going anywhere without me.

Lola looked at him for a long beat as she went over her thoughts. Finally, she nodded with a grateful look in her eyes. Jay took her hand in his and squeezed it.

Big Mac stepped forward. “I’ll try to find a way to curb the hunger so she doesn’t go bloodthirsty on everyone until then.” She gave Lola a firm nod and left. I knew she would do everything she could for her—it was moments like this that Big Mac showed her true, less grouchy colors.

Lola looked down at her hand in Jay’s and then shot a look at the rest of us. I got the message. She wanted some space with Jay to process this huge change.

I didn’t want to leave her. A part of me was terrified that she’d slip away without telling anyone. Before I had a chance to say goodbye. None of this was fair. This shouldn’t have been happening.

I walked over to her and took her free hand. I squeezed tight and looked deep into her eyes.

“Remember, Lola,” I said, “I love you.” She closed her eyes. A tear fell down her cheek. “I know you didn’t mean to hurt me, and if there’s anything I can do to help you, I will.”

Lola let go of Jay’s hand and threw her arms around me. I hugged her tight.

“You’re part of this pack, and you always will be,” I whispered into her ear.

She pulled away and gave me a watery smile. “Thank you.”

Greyson turned to leave, waiting for me at the door. I followed.

Greyson opened the front door, and we both stepped out onto the front porch, where we could find some privacy. There was a small beat of awkward silence. I didn’t know what to say, but I knew I needed to say something. Anything. I was still slightly angry about the situation with Lola, but I was also thinking about the situation between us and Xavier. Everything was just so complicated.

I opened my mouth to say his name, but he beat me to it. He turned to look at me.

“Cali,” he said. “You know that we’re meant to be together. We were both in that dream, remember?” He took both my hands in his. “It’s fate—we’re *mates*, and I’m going to fight for us as long as there’s breath left in me.”

My heart twisted with pain. This wasn’t where I wanted this conversation to go.

“I can’t,” I said softly. “I can’t be with you.” I looked up into his eyes, which were full of so much pain. I wished more than anything that I could throw myself into his arms. They were where I wanted to be, but it wasn’t safe. For anyone.

I forced myself to tear my eyes away from him. He let go of my hands and walked over to the porch steps and sat down. I could hear him lean against the railing. I felt his eyes on the back of my head.

“I would rather be miserable than do anything to harm you—or Xavier,” I said.

I heard him sigh in response.

I hated to hurt him, to hurt either of them, but there was nothing I could do. I momentarily considered telling him that Marta had channeled Cassandra, but there was little point. Telling him would only make things more confusing and more complicated.

I looked out over the yard. What a day it had been. One of the longest of my life.

“I can’t say what’s going to happen in the future,” I said. I hoped that I would be able to find a way out of this whole mess. I wanted so badly to get to the bottom of everything. I just couldn’t say for sure that I would ever figure things out. “Right now,” I continued. “I can’t be with either of you, and you both need to respect that.”

Greyson didn’t look at me. His mouth was set in a firm line. Tears began to blur my vision. I wanted to reach out and touch him, to comfort him, but that wouldn’t have helped the situation. It would’ve only confused him more.

I left him alone on the porch and headed back into the house.

I knew I was right. Both Xavier and Greyson needed to respect my wishes, even if those wishes weren’t really what I wanted. But when I thought about it, I realized I still hadn’t seen Xavier since last night. In fact, I didn’t think anyone had seen him. No one had mentioned running into him, and Violet had come looking for him.

I chewed on my lip with worry. Even if I had broken up with him, I needed to know that he was okay. Even *if* he had run off with Ava.

I pulled out my phone, then paused. I knew I shouldn’t call him. It was probably a really bad idea. If he really was with Ava, it would hurt. I didn’t know if I would be able to get over it. But at least I would know that he was okay. If he wasn’t with her, though, then I’d need to worry. I scrolled to his contact and dialed the number.

The line didn’t ring. It went straight to voicemail. I sighed. It was for the best. I’d hurt him. He deserved some space.

Just as I went to slip my phone back into my pocket, I doubled over, hit with a wave of pain. But the pain didn’t feel like it was coming from me. It was like someone else was hurt, but I’d felt it. Something was wrong. I knew it deep in my gut—I couldn’t explain it.

I just knew then with certainty that Xavier was in danger.

**Episode 1216**

VIOLET

I could hardly believe my eyes. I blinked rapidly, trying to clear my vision. This had to be a mistake. I was seeing things. I had to be. There was no way my brother was actually standing in the room with me.

I rubbed my eyes and opened them wide. Nothing had changed. I felt tears well up. It wasn’t a mistake. It really was Lilac. He wasn’t in my head. He was here, standing directly in front of me! Sure, I’d seen his ghost a couple times before, so this shouldn’t have come as such a surprise, but I was standing there in pure shock. He didn’t look like a true ghost this time. He looked like a physical being—a person.

When the not-smoke had risen from Marta’s body and formed a figure in the middle of the room, he’d looked hazy, almost like he was barely there. One ill-timed puff of air and he’d disappear into nothing. Now, he was becoming more solid. Color filled his cheeks. The furniture behind him slowly faded from view as he filled in. Before I knew it, I couldn’t see through him at all. He looked firm, as if I could actually touch him and feel real skin beneath my fingertips.

My heart was in my throat. I couldn’t believe this was happening—what I was seeing. Was I getting my brother back?! I needed this to be real. I needed *him* to be real.

I leapt up and hurled myself into his arms. I expected to feel his warm embrace. I wanted to wrap my arms around his neck and feel his heart beating in his chest. He would hold me tight and tell me everything was going to be all right.

I didn’t get that.

Instead, I passed through what felt like a cold mist and ran directly into the armchair behind him.

“Ow!” I yelled, clutching the arm of the chair as my knees throbbed. I’d banged into the chair pretty hard.

Disappointment settled heavily over my chest. It felt like there was a two-ton weight sitting on my lungs. I could barely breathe. I’d been so sure it was him, that he’d come back for real. It hadn’t mattered that it was impossible. For a moment, I’d believed in the impossible. I’d had faith. But that faith had been shattered as soon as I’d hit that armchair.

I whirled around to see Lilac still standing in the same place. He’d also turned around to look at me. His face was full of such love and longing, but his eyebrows were knit together in confusion.

Tentatively, I reached out a hand toward him, and he did the same. Our fingers slowly closed the distance between us. I grew impatient. I reached forward to grasp his hand but felt only air. I wanted to cry out. The world was taunting me. Lilac was here standing before me, but he was impossible to reach.

I shook my head. This didn’t make any sense.

“How is this happening?” I asked, just soft enough for Lilac to hear.

In response, Marta sat up on the floor. Charlie was still kneeling beside her. His eyes were wide with concern. “Easy, easy,” he said as he patted her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

She winced in pain and massaged her temple. “What happened?”

Charlie looked up at me. It was clear he didn’t know how to answer. I didn’t know what to tell her either.

“Did I faint?” She rubbed her eyes. Before either of us could answer, she said, “I think I need some water. I have a major headache.”

Marta stood and began walking to the door. She didn’t look over in our direction. She seemed completely oblivious to the fact that there was a ghost in the room with us. As she moved, Lilac was tugged along behind her, almost as if there was an invisible rope binding the two of them.

“STOP!” I shouted as I rushed forward.

Marta froze and turned around. She clutched her chest. “What?” Her gaze shifted between me and Charlie. When she finally spotted Lilac, she started in surprise. “What the hell?”

Charlie got up from the floor and stared at Lilac too. I sighed in relief. I had been so preoccupied with Lilac and figuring out whether he was real that I hadn’t even looked to see Charlie’s initial reaction. For a moment, when Marta had headed to the door, I’d been worried that I was the only one who could see him. But Charlie and Marta were both staring at him with as much surprise as I’d first felt.

Charlie shook his head and leaned against the wall. “Your guess is as good as ours, Marta,” he said.

I took another step toward Lilac. He was looking around at his surroundings in absolute shock. He slowly turned in a circle, taking everything in. His eyes were wide. He stopped when his gaze landed on Marta. “How am I here?” he asked.

Marta just stared back in equal confusion. She shook her head slowly. “I honestly have no idea,” she said in amazement.

Anger flared and coursed through my veins. I whirled on Marta. “What do you mean you don’t know?” I snapped. “You’re the medium. Explain this!”

Marta didn’t even look at me. Her eyes were still on Lilac. She shook her head. “Nothing like this has ever happened before. At least not to me.” She shrugged. “I can’t explain it. It shouldn’t be possible.”

Some medium she was. What use was she if she didn’t know anything? Big Mac knew more than Marta did, and she wasn’t even a medium!

I reached out again to touch Lilac. He just looked so real, standing here in front of me. It seemed impossible that he wasn’t. I had this visceral urge to wrap my arms around him and give him the biggest hug ever. I needed to reassure myself that he was actually here with me. I’d tried to touch him twice before, but my mind kept telling me to try again. I exhaled and tried to touch his shoulder, but my hand passed through him like air.

No one spoke. I trembled as I stared down at my hand. Slowly, I lifted my gaze up to exchange glances with Charlie and Marta. They both looked shocked and confused. I didn’t think they could feel the way that I felt, but it looked like they were pretty close.

“Um,” Charlie began. “Should I go and get Big Mac?” he asked slowly. That honestly sounded like the best option. If anyone could figure out what was going on, it was Big Mac.

But it was too much of a risk.

“No, no!” I shook my head vigorously. “This is all so unpredictable. What if Lilac disappears if someone leaves the room?” I worried that we were under some spell and if anyone moved, the spell would be broken. I clutched my chest and looked at Lilac. His eyes were so sad. “I don’t think my heart could take it if you disappeared again.”

Marta’s frown deepened as I spoke. “Let’s try this again.” She gingerly walked to the other side of the room, as if she was testing her connection to Lilac. Just like before, Lilac was tugged along behind her. It was clear there was an invisible tether tying them together. Where Marta went, Lilac followed.

Lilac frowned. He was still looking around the room. He didn’t look like he was completely there. He seemed out of it, and even more confused than I was. “None of this makes sense,” he said slowly. He looked down at himself. “I shouldn’t be here. It’s not… *right*.”

Desperation clawed at me. I had to keep him there. He had to stay. “But you said the spirit world is a mess right now, right?” I took a step closer to him. “Maybe this is for the best.”

Lilac still looked unsettled. “No,” he said. “This is wrong.”

I reeled back, fighting tears. How could being reunited with my twin possibly be wrong? How could he say such a horrible thing?

Lilac wrung his hands. “I need to go back. I can’t stay here.” He began to pace. “I need to go back.”

If only I could touch him! I’d grab his hand and never let go. I clapped my hands. “Please, Lilac,” I begged. “Don’t go. Stay here with me. Please!”

“No, no, no!” Lilac whirled on Marta. “Send me back!” he screamed.

Marta stumbled back. “I—”

Lilac ran toward her. I cried out when I realized what he was doing. He was trying to merge back into her, to return to wherever he’d come from. Marta’s eyes were wide. She tensed up as Lilac closed the distance between them. Then there was a loud smack, and he bounced right off her. I watched as both Lilac and Marta fell to the floor.

What? How was that possible?!

**Episode 1217**

ARTEMIS

I hadn’t meant to hurt Orla. That was the last thing I wanted do. The words had just come out so easily, and now I couldn’t take them back. Or at least, the voice wouldn’t *let* me take them back.

I’d gone silent after Orla had asked me what I needed. Without an answer, she’d gone back into the pack house, and I’d made my way to the woods surrounding the house. I hadn’t wanted to go too far and end up lost, but I hadn’t wanted to be too close either. The last thing I needed was someone else coming to find me. I’d already hurt Orla and Rishika—I didn’t want to hurt anyone else.

I’d walked until I couldn’t see the house anymore. And then I’d walked a little further to be on the safe side.

Finally, I found a good spot, then stopped and stared up at the sky. All I could see was blue. Not a cloud in sight.

I exhaled and let my guilt take over. My hands were shaking. I rested them against my legs to try to still them, but it didn’t work.

I shouldn’t have left things with Orla the way I had. All she wanted to do was help me, and I’d pushed her away.

A series of emotions washed over me. I tried to parse them. There was lots of hurt and anger.

I could feel myself retreating back into the hard shell I’d built up for myself during all those lonely years in the Fae world. I was moving backward, not forward. It hurt. It hurt so much. I fell to my knees, my body shaking with sobs.

*You don’t need any of those people.* There it was again. The voice in my head. I couldn’t escape it. *They’re all weak*,it said. *You’re different. You’re strong.*

I tried to ignore it. I knew I shouldn’t respond. That would only give it permission to continue to haunt me. But I couldn’t help it. The voice was right. “I am strong,” I said. I always had been.

I wasn’t like Cali. She’d grown up coddled by doting parents. She hadn’t needed to be independent until much later. I’d never had that. I’d always been forced to make my own way—and I knew I could make my own way now.

I stood and stalked through the threes. “You can get through this, Artemis,” I said to myself. “You’re strong. You can handle anything life throws at you.”

I stopped, taking a deep breath. I needed to come up with a plan.

The first order of business was my father. Recently, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him. He was this huge part of my life’s puzzle that had always been missing. I couldn’t shake the feeling that he would have information for me—information *about* me—that would help me figure myself out.

Thoughts of the Orb popped into my head. I closed my eyes. I thought about how it had made me feel when I’d had it.

I shook my head. No. The Orb was gone. I’d felt it being taken from me. I hadn’t imagined that.

If I found my father, there was a chance he could help lessen the pain inside me. All it was doing now was oscillating and growing. Soon, it would be too much. It would overwhelm me.

But there was one major problem: the portal was closed. How on earth could I possibly find my father without any way of getting to the Fae world? It was a nearly impossible task.

I sat cross-legged on the ground and shut my eyes to think. Witches were an option, but I didn’t trust them. And even if I did, they wouldn’t help me anyway. I opened my eyes, and my gaze landed on a small patch of grass. Suddenly, an idea came to me. Vander.

He’d said he couldn’t reopen a portal, but surely the Keeper of All Nature would be able to help me, somehow.

I closed my eyes and said his name. “Vander.”

A twig snapped behind me. I jumped to my feet and whirled around to find him standing right before me. He looked at me with a twinkle of curiosity.

“You called?” he asked. Vander’s voice was upbeat, but something was off. His shoulders were hunched, and he’d gained dark circles around his eyes. I frowned. He hadn’t looked this tired before. He was clearly stressed.

I cleared my throat. “I need your help.”

Vander made a noise of irritation. “Yes, I know. We talked yesterday.” He leaned against a tree and crossed his arms. “If you can believe it, I’m actually dealing with quite a few things that are a little more important than a Fae who can’t do magic.”

I held up my hands. “Whoa, whoa,” I said. “What’s with the attitude?” Something was definitely bothering him. I knew there was a lot going on, but this wasn’t like him usually at all. In my experience anyway. “I was looking for an update on the portals. That’s it.”

Vander stood up straight and stared at me. His expression was more serious than I had ever seen it. His eyes had turned grey and stormy. His voice was low. “Something is wrong with the fabric of nature, Artemis, and I need to fix it.”

I swallowed roughly. That sounded significantly more serious than my issues.

“Is there anyone who could help you?” I asked. “Anyone who could help me find a way to open the portals?”

Above us, storm clouds were beginning to gather. The previously blue sky was now dark. Thunder boomed in the distance. This change in Vander was unnerving and terrifying. I’d thought of him as all-powerful, able to handle anything. If something was off enough to be stressing even him out, it had to be something monumental.

The thought didn’t sit well with me. It only added to my fear and uneasiness.

Vander eyed me impatiently as the storm above us grew.

Hesitantly, I asked again, “Is there really no one else who can help us?” Vander scowled. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Vander laughed. “*You?* A magicless Fae?” He shook his head. “I doubt it.”

I cringed. His words stung, but I was determined to press on. “I need to get back into the Fae world, and I need a portal to do that. Isn’t there anything you can do?”

Vander stared at me. “I just told you—we’ve been over this already. I’m working on a lot,” he said. “And no, I can’t open a portal just for you. Is that all?”

I stared back as anger rose within me. It wasn’t regular anger. It was strange, like someone was removing my emotions and refilling me with pure rage. Without thinking, I rounded on him.

“Wow! Okay. Fine.” I stabbed a finger at his chest. “Guess you aren’t as powerful as I thought, huh? What *can* you do?”

Vander gave me a look of disgust, shaking his head. Without a word, he disappeared with a loud pop. I stumbled back and was immediately filled with hopeless regret.

Why had I said that? Vander was the only person who could have helped me, and now he was gone. If I called him again, he probably wouldn’t come. I was completely helpless now. I didn’t even have my magic. What the hell was I supposed to do?

I sank down to the ground. My mind was lost in swirling dark thoughts. Nothing ever went the way it was supposed to go. I could never do anything right. There was probably no chance that I’d ever find my father.

*Have you given any more thought to my offer?* It was the voice again. Great.

I started and sat upright. “Get out of my head!” I shouted. “I don’t want or need you!”

Fear rose in my throat. I was no closer to figuring out what the voice was and why it continued to speak to me. I clutched my head. I needed it to just go away!

*You need your magic*,the voice continued. *If you had your magic you could find your father, and your destiny.*

I didn’t want to listen to the voice, but it had a point. If I had my magic, I could actually try to help Vander. I could work to open the portal. I wouldn’t be the useless shell I was now. All I wanted was to actually accomplish something. *Anything*.

The voice knew more than I did. If it was telling the truth, then it knew how to give me back my magic. The voice was possibly my only choice. More than anything, the idea of my destiny was pulling at me. I was so tired of feeling helpless. I was tired of not knowing who I really was.

Maybe I needed to give the voice a chance.

I took a deep breath. “I’m in.”

**Episode 1218**

“You know, this could be a lot of fun if I were more into kinky stuff,” Lola mused, glancing down at the magic shackles that Big Mac had rigged up to keep her—and her blood lust—contained. It was actually an ingenious contraption—it kept Lola’s wrists and ankles locked together so all she could do was hop around. Even with her vampire super-speed, Lola had never been less of a threat.

*Which is kind of the point, I guess.*

But now Lola just looked kind of pathetic. And watching her hop around had gotten old pretty quick. And since I didn’t have to worry about Lola turning me into an afternoon snack, I could now put all my energy into worrying about Xavier.

I’d tried to ignore it, but I couldn’t shake the feeling I’d had earlier—the one that had told me Xavier was in danger. And there didn’t seem to be anything I could do to shake the feeling. I’d tried calling him again and again, but his phone was either off or dead. He was either cutting me off and purposely ignoring me, or…

I didn’t want to think about the alternative.

“Earth to Cali!” Lola called. “Come on, space cadet! Aren’t you supposed to be my keeper?”

*Crap.* I really was trying to keep my focus on Lola—my best friend, who I *knew* was in danger and needed my help and was literally here in front of me—but the lingering questions about Xavier were taking up all the space in my brain. There wasn’t much left for Lola.

I shook myself. “Sorry. What were you saying? Something about wishing you were kinky?”

“*You* wish.” She winked, adjusting the shackles on her wrists so she could sit up. Big Mac had put the magical set on to prevent any… ahem, vampire mishaps. “You’ve been distracted all day, and P.S., you’ve done a pretty crappy job of hiding it. So what’s wrong? What could possibly be more interesting than your best friend turning into a murderous monster who wants to drain you like a Capri Sun in a kindergarten lunchbox?”

I snorted. “Um, is that a compliment?”

“It means you’re sweet.” She rolled her eyes. “Now spill. What’s up, girl?

“I’m sorry I’ve been so distracted. I just… I’ve been getting this feeling that Xavier is in danger.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “I can’t really explain it. I just have this feeling in my gut that something is really wrong with him. And I can’t get ahold of him on the phone, and I haven’t seen him since our fight, and I’m just really worried about him.”

“Hmm.” She bit her lip. “Well, you broke up with him, right? Maybe there’s nothing actually wrong with him. Maybe that bad feeling you have is just your mate connection breaking?”

My jaw dropped, and I felt all the breath rush out of my lungs like she’d just sucker punched me. Was this her attempt to *comfort* me? Out of all the worst-case scenarios rushing through my mind, my mate connection with Xavier being destroyed had never occurred to me. And somehow this seemed even worse than Xavier being in danger.

“Seriously, Lola? Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

She held her hands up, though since they were still shackled together it looked more like a jazz hands move than anything else. “Well, you did break up with him! I’m just saying that the feeling you’re getting is probably related to that.” Then she hastily added, “I’m sure he’s fine.”

The thought of losing my mate connection with Xavier—something that had been a foundation of my life here in Oregon—filled me with grief. *It’s not possible he’d do that, is it? I know I broke things off, and he was so upset, but breaking our mate connection… That seems so extreme.*

I knew, somewhere in the back of my mind, that if Xavier wanted to break our mate connection, he was well within his rights to do so. After all, I’d ended things with him and told him we could never be together. It was only fair.

Except the mere thought of losing that connection to Xavier made me want to curl up and die.

I tugged at my connection to Xavier. It didn’t *feel* broken. But that weird feeling was still lingering in my chest. Maybe it was just regular breakup grief and nothing else?

I took a deep breath. *You can’t be selfish right now, Cali. Lola needs you. You need to be here for her.*

Xavier was probably just fine. I was probably worrying over nothing. He was an Alpha—he could take care of himself. And it wasn’t like this was the first time he or Greyson had run off without telling me. I didn’t have to like it, but I did have to try to deal with it so I could support my best friend through what might be the biggest and scariest change of her entire life.

I took a deep breath to calm myself. “How are *you* feeling?” I asked.

Lola’s eyes narrowed, and she pursed her lips. “Do you want the honest answer or the polite one?”

“Um, what’s the difference?”

“Well, the polite one is that these shackles are really uncomfortable, but I’m glad to no longer be a threat to everyone around me.” She pasted on a fake-looking smile, and I couldn’t help but snort.

“Okay, that does seem polite. So how do you really feel?”

The smile disappeared, and Lola rolled her eyes. “Like I want to eat you! How do you *think* I’m feeling?”

I sighed and dropped my head. “Okay, fair enough. But what are you and Jay going to do?”

“Jay and I have talked it over and we agree that Greyson is right—it’s not safe for me to be here right now.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I mean, you were scary, but that doesn’t mean you need to leave, does it?”

“I’m pretty sure the bandage on your neck is a pretty firm answer to that question,” she deadpanned, then blew out a long breath and sank deeper into her mattress. “I can’t explain what came over me—it was so fast, so overwhelming… Pure bloodlust. It was like my entire world narrowed and the only thing that mattered was that I drank your blood. Like I *needed* it.”

She eyed the bandage on my neck thoughtfully.

“I mean, okay, hear me out,” she added. “Now that I’ve already gotten started, it’s like the seal is broken, you know? There’s no going back to before. So maybe I could have just a little bit more?”

Lola gave me the puppy-dog look she used whenever she really wanted something, and I gasped, clapping my hand over my wound. “Absolutely not!”

It was all too easy to remember what my blood had done to Sabyr, how quickly he’d gotten hooked on it and how he’d been willing to do anything—including betray his own coven—to have more of it. Lola had been through enough already, and her control issues had been a problem for far longer than she’d been a vampire. The last thing she needed was to become some kind of Fae blood junkie.

My friend rolled her eyes with an easy grin. “Fair enough. Just thought I’d ask.”

The door opened and Jay walked in, a determined look on his face. Poor guy. He’d really been through the wringer for his mate, and he’d never been anything but completely supportive. I hoped he and Lola could catch a break soon.

He took a seat next to me on the edge of the mattress and took Lola by her cuffed hands.

“Lola tells me you two are leaving?” I asked.

He nodded. “Ever since we agreed that it wasn’t safe for Lola to stay here at the pack house, until we can figure out how to get Lola’s new… *diet* under control, I’ve been trying to think of where we can go to figure it all out.” He squeezed Lola’s hands reassuringly. “I’ve been thinking that maybe we could head back to the Obaltarion, try to convince Hypatia to help us out. She’s an ancient vampire-witch lady, right?”

“Oh!” I perked up. “Actually, I just had an idea. I called Mikah the other day—maybe he could help!”

Lola brightened. “That’s not a bad idea. He’s a vampire who isn’t, like, the absolute worst.”

“Right!” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed Mikah, but the message went to voicemail. “Hey, Mikah! It’s Cali. So… uh, big news! Lola turned into a vampire—long story, I won’t bore you—but she’s out of control, biting us left and right. Call back please, thanks!”

I hung up to see Lola and Jay both glaring at me. “What? That’s basically it.” I pointed to the wound on my neck. “Am I wrong?”

My phone started buzzing in my hand, and I saw Mikah’s name on the display. “Oh, hey, Mikah! Thanks for call—”

He cut me off. “What the hell is going on there?”

Jay snatched my phone out of my hand and put it speaker, then gave Mikah a rundown of Lola’s irregular shift from human to vampire, and the murderous rampage she’d gone on when the bloodlust had kicked in.

“We need your help to find someone who can help Lola get herself under control,” Jay finished. “Do you know of anyone who can help us?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “I know just the place.”

**Episode 1219**

MARTA

I couldn’t lie—being a medium was a pretty shit job.

I stood in the room with Violet, Charlie, and Lilac—who was only corporeal to *me*—while his sister threw a hissy fit.

“Why can you touch him but I can’t?” she demanded. “Lilac, come here!”

I stayed exactly where I was, watching as Lilac tried to take a couple steps forward before he seemed to hit a wall. As if he were connected to me by some kind of chain, I felt a tug as he tried to move forward and join his sister. I tugged back, and he stumbled back toward me.

*Great, so we’re connected somehow, as in, I can’t go to the freaking bathroom without tugging Lilac along!*

This was a part of being a medium that nobody had ever told me about. Well, now that I thought about it, there were a lot of parts like that. But still! Was it too late to opt out of this supernatural nonsense?

Lilac didn’t seem to be thrilled about the situation either. He looked around wildly, flinching at the slightest movement from anyone in the room. He shook his head. “No, this is wrong. I need to go back. Send me back. This is wrong.”

Violet turned her furious gaze back on me. “What’s wrong with him? Why is he attached to you now? What did you do?”

No good deed ever went unpunished. This was what I got for trying to help this werewolf girl and her mate. I threw my hands up in the air. “I have no freaking clue! And there’s no need for you to act all pissy about it. It’s not my fault you can’t hug your twin and I can. As if I even want to!”

After decades trapped with Bert, I had less than *zero* interest in having some kind of weird corporeal ghost man following me around everywhere.

Violet scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. She threw me a glare, but then her focus zeroed in on Lilac, who was yanking at the tether connecting us. “Lilac?” Her expression shifted to concern and fear. She moved forward, reaching for him even though she knew she couldn’t touch him.

He cowered back, clutching his head. “This is wrong. I shouldn’t be here. I need to go back.”

What the hell was going on? Had I really done all of this all on my own?

Well, this was a story for the books—somehow bringing a ghost from the spirit world and tethering him to myself, and then being stuck with him while he had a complete meltdown about being back in the physical world.

That part at least made sense. It was jarring enough for spirits to communicate with the living world. For them, it was like sticking a finger in a light socket and then trying to hold a conversation with the electricity. I couldn’t even imagine how traumatic it would be to be torn from the afterlife and plonked back into the living world.

Lilac spun to face me. “Take me back.” His voice broke. “Please.”

Beyond him, Violet and Charlie were looking at me like I held all the answers—like I was an expert on channeling the undead and not a quasi-teen with no clue about what the hell was going on.

I shook my head helplessly. “I’m sorry. I don’t… I don’t know how to send you back. I don’t even know how I brought you here. I’m still pretty new to all of this—”

“Seriously?” Violet snapped. “Even after all that time you spent working for Bert?”

“First of all, I was his prisoner, not his employee. Second, I never had a chance to get a handle on my skills. In fact, he mostly just leeched power from me. Do you think all those years were on-the-job training or something? I was a living spiritual battery for a crazy poltergeist!”

Violet’s nostrils flared, her lower lip quivered, and I honestly didn’t know if she was going to attack me or burst into tears. She slowly approached Lilac.

“I’m so sorry, Lilac,” she said. “All this time, I’ve been comforting myself by believing that you must be happy now, content and finally at peace.” She looked him up and down. “But it’s clear that you haven’t been.” Large tears began to roll down her face, and her face scrunched up. Her voice broke. “I wish I could help you move on.”

Charlie’s hands closed over her shoulders. “Hey, if the spirit world isn’t safe, maybe it’s a good thing that he’s here…”

Violet spun in his arms with a growl. “Look at him, Charlie! He’s a mess! You really think this is a good thing?”

Oh, boy. That couldn’t be a good sign. I’d never seen Violet and Charlie fight before—even after his parents had tried to murder them and he’d still reconciled with them, which seemed like as good a reason as any to be mad at somebody.

*Those two always seem so lovey dovey—maybe Violet’s twin coming back is causing some tension, upsetting the balance of their bond. Or maybe it’s about his parents who wanted to kill them…*

If their entrance into my life hadn’t come with a hefty dose of freedom, I didn’t think I’d be able to put up with the rollercoaster they were living.

*This is why I’ll never date anyone. It’s too much drama.*

After snapping at Charlie, Violet had approached Lilac, trying to soothe him and talk him down. Thankfully, it seemed to be working. Either that or he was getting used to being in the living world again. But either way, he was slowly calming down.

“—and you should stay here so we can figure all of this out together, okay?” Violet said softly, speaking to her brother’s ghost like he was a small child.

He nodded slowly. “This… This *could* be a good thing,” he said. “Things *are* chaotic in the spirit world right now, and I’ve missed you more than I can possibly say.”

Violet beamed at him and stepped forward like she was about to throw her arms around him—but then she stopped suddenly and her smile fell. “I wish I could hug you so badly.” She turned to me. “Marta, hug him for me!”

*Jesus H. Christ. I am so* not *a hugger.*

Unfortunately, the love and hope in Violet’s eyes was too much for me to resist. God, I was getting so soft. Where had my backbone gone? Violet and Charlie had been the ones to break me out of Bert’s clutches and bring me somewhere safe. They’d given me a second chance at my life. What was a hug with a ghost compared to all that?

“*Fine*,” I bit out, glaring at the ghost.

“I’m not thrilled about this either,” Lilac said.

Rolling my eyes, I closed the distance between Lilac and myself and wrapped my arms tight around him for one literal second before stepping back. His body felt unnaturally cold, if solid, and I was left with a chill when I stepped away.

Violet sighed. “That wasn’t as satisfying as I hoped it would be. But,” she said, her face lighting up again, “if this is all I can get, I will definitely take it! There’s so much that I have to tell you!” She gestured toward Charlie, probably ready to tell Lilac all about their love story.

*Gag*.

“Hey,” I said, cutting in. “Don’t get too attached, okay? I’m clearly acting as some kind of anchor for Lilac, but I can’t promise that things will stay that way—especially with all that chaos in the spirit world.”

“What do you mean?” Violet asked. “He’s here now, away from the spirit world.”

“But he’s still connected to it. Yanking him out of there and bringing him here doesn’t change the fact that he’s dead. He’s still a spirit, and that world is where he belongs. And who knows what keeping him here will mean? He might stay here until we figure out how to send him back, or he might disappear any minute.”

*This is so weird! All of this anchoring stuff is so new to me.* Then a thought hit me. *But* is *it new? Didn’t I actually serve as an anchor for Bert, all that time?*

Fury pulsed through me at this realization. I already knew Bert had been using me, but this was a whole other level of evil and manipulation. Not only had I been his battery, I’d been his freaking connection to the living world!

“No!” Violet shook her head. “No, he can’t leave!”

I frowned. “Violet, it’s not up to me.”

“Well, if that’s the case, then we need to figure out how to get him to stay! Let’s all settle in for some brainstorming!” She sat down on the floor, clearly ready to dive right into things.

“Come on,” I groaned. “Listen, I’m starving. If we’re going to be doing any more spiritual mumbo-jumbo, I need to eat first.” I headed for the door, and Lilac was tugged along with me.

Without missing a beat, Violet stood up and followed. “Okay. After lunch, then.”

I crossed to the door, awkwardly aware of the spiritual tether pulling Lilac along, but then Violet let out a horrified gasp.

I spun around. “What?”

Violet had a hand over her mouth and her eyes were wide open in shock. “He’s gone!”

I glanced at Lilac, who was standing right next to me, looking confused. Then I looked at Violet and Charlie, who were searching all over the room.

*Oh no. I’m the only one who can see him.*

I could still feel that tether, that anchor, connecting the two of us, holding us together. What did that mean? I’d never felt a connection like this to Bert, even trapped with him as I’d been.

If anything, I was even more trapped now.

*Oh god.*

Suddenly, my vision went dark, and I slumped to the floor.

**Episode 1220**

XAVIER

I’d never felt more drained in my entire life—or more alone.

It was kind of ironic to think that one of the reasons I’d found myself here was because I’d wanted space to work through all the changes to my relationship status with Cali. Now it was looking like I’d have all the time and space in the world while these vamps used me as their literal blood buffet.

Super.

My head spinning, the world winking in and out of my vision, I only knew that I was still strapped to the table because I could still feel the cold manacles holding me in place—the one steadying, grounding constant in a world that seemed to be slipping away from me more and more each time one of these fucking bloodsuckers sank their teeth into me.

The vampires who had descended on me drank from me until I was at the brink of death, my heart racing, desperate to keep enough blood pumping through me that I could stay alive until the next time they decided to drain me nearly dry. And I knew there would be a next time—there was no doubt about that. The vamps had only backed off, had stopped short of killing me, on Gregor’s orders.

He wanted me to have a fate worse than death, and he was certainly delivering on his promise.

I tried to breathe slowly and steadily, to calm my racing, tired heart that was sputter-thumping too quickly, too weakly, to be sustainable for much longer. My healing factor needed to kick in. If it *could* kick in.

*Focus, Xavier*. I took another deep breath. They’d left me alone for now. No more draining and no more toxins from their fangs. This was my chance to clear my head, to figure out a way to escape while they weren’t watching me. They’d assumed that—since they’d stopped just short of actually killing me—I was no threat to them, not even worth babysitting anymore. And as much as I wanted to take advantage of their lowered guard and use it to escape, I worried in the back of my mind that the vampires were right.

I was so low on blood I could barely think. Could barely string a thought together. Could barely keep my eyes open. How the hell was I going to be able to physically break through my bonds? And if I somehow managed that, and all of the other obstacles to my escape were miraculously removed, then how was I going to be able to carry my body out of here?

I tried to lift my wrist, but my hand barely twitched. The bonds weren’t even necessary right now.

*No, take a breath. Stay calm and focus. You need to get out of here.*

Gregor was right—this existence was so much worse than death. My head flopped over to one side, and, trying to see through the way the world was spinning on its side, I looked around the bright, clinical room.

My suspicions were confirmed. The whole room was empty—save for the gurney I was strapped to.

*Just gotta break these bonds, and then maybe I can escape…*

I tried to lift my arms again, but they barely moved. When I tried my legs, I got the same result.

Bonds or not, I wasn’t going anywhere until I recovered from what they’d done to me.

Against my will, my eyes fluttered closed. They were too heavy to keep open for any longer.

*This is a fucking nightmare.*

This *was* worse than death—it was being forced to live half a life. And in a stunning moment of clarity, I realized that *that* would be my fate. To be pushed to the brink of death over and over again, my body wasting away, until perhaps one day they actually killed me. But that release wouldn’t happen until Gregor grew tired of me, and I didn’t see that happening for a long, long time.

Another wave of dizziness passed over me, the world spinning even though my eyes were closed.

*Cali, I’m so sorry…*

“Xavier.”

That voice. My eyes fluttered open on a gasp. Cali was there, standing next to the gurney and leaning over me.

“Xavier,” she said again. “Wake up. Keep your eyes open, okay? Stay with me.”

I stared up at her in awe. My mate looked just like an angel. Her hair fluttered gently around her face, and her skin seemed to have an unearthly glow to it. She looked too good to be true.

*Maybe I’m dead, and this is heaven.*

Cali unfastened the straps securing me to the gurney. “Come on, Xavier. You need to get up. You need to *move*.”

Instead of doing what she asked, I just stared at her, drinking her in with the same desperation the vampires had had when they’d drained me. Her fingers skimmed over my skin when she freed me from my restraints, and that simple glancing touch sent ripples of sensation across my body.

And suddenly, I couldn’t remember exactly why it was so important for me—for us—to get out of here.

“Xavier.”

I stared at her face, narrowing my eyes to focus my vision. Everything had gone soft and hazy around the edges, but I couldn’t bring myself to worry about it. Not when Cali was here, standing in front of me. Her hand was warm and soft on my arm, and her voice was the sweetest melody I’d ever heard.

*She’s all I’ll ever need.*

My hand and arm shaking, I reached up to touch Cali’s face, to draw my cold, callused fingers across her cheek. She froze beneath my touch, staring down at me, and I gently—because that was all I was capable of right now—pulled her down for a soft kiss.

If she was tense and uncertain at first, she relaxed into the kiss in almost no time at all. Her lips moved gently against mine with growing urgency, and in a blur of movement, she climbed onto the table and my lap, straddling me.

I couldn’t help but moan against her lips as she draped her body over mine and deepened the kiss. She was so warm, so soft, so mine. I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but I felt myself hardening in response to her hips pressed against me. She was barely moving, barely doing anything other than kissing me and warming my body with hers, and yet I couldn’t remember the last time I’d wanted her, needed her, so desperately.

I couldn’t believe how good it felt just to be here with her, to have her pressed against me, making little sighs and moans as our lips moved in tandem. Our mate connection felt stronger than it ever had. Everything about this moment just felt so *right*. Like this was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Suddenly, she pulled back. “Xavier, we need to go.”

I blinked sluggishly, confused by her sudden shift, but I nodded. “O-Okay.”

Cali was my mate. I trusted her—mind, body, and soul. She helped me off the gurney, and when I was too weak to stand upright on my own, she wrapped an arm around my waist and helped support me as we moved to the door.

This was it—she was getting me out. Freedom was so close I could practically taste it. She pulled the door open and sunlight poured in, bathing my body in its warmth. The scent of evergreens tickled my nose.

*She saved me*,I realized, my heart tightening with excitement and relief and a love so strong it almost hurt—

“Wake the fuck up!”

My body was knocked around—hard—and my eyes flew open, my chest heaving in panic. Where was I? Where was Cali?

And then realization sank in and my heart plummeted. I was still strapped to the gurney, still locked away in the creepy, empty room. Only it wasn’t empty anymore. Gregor was standing over me, blocking the harsh fluorescent light overhead.

*It was just a dream.*

I could have cried, but I would never give Gregor the satisfaction.

He sneered. “Vivid dreams? That’ll happen. I recommend that you lean into that—your dreams are the only place where you’ll ever be free again.” He laughed, the sound so loud and harsh that I flinched.

All I wanted to do was rip Gregor’s head off, but I could barely lift my own head, much less break free and put up a fight against this monster.

The vampire jostled the gurney again, and the rough movement made my head pound. Oh god. I was going to be sick.

“You’re in for quite the surprise.” His grin was absolutely feral. “You’re about to be the guest of honor at an exclusive event!”

I frowned. What the—

Gregor grabbed the gurney and began to wheel it roughly toward the door.

*The door.* The mere sight of it sent a pang through me, reminding me of my dream, and how Cali had almost gotten me out. I winced as bright sunlight hit my face, and my eyes slammed shut.

When I opened them again, I saw that I was on a lawn that had been decked out with tables. There were people everywhere. Blearily, I looked around. The tables were laden with food, and there was a fountain that appeared to be full of blood.

Party guests ladled the blood into champagne glasses, talking and laughing as if there weren’t a living, breathing person right in front of them.

As I looked around the party, my eyes landed on a familiar face. Iñigo.

And then a horrifying jolt went through me when I recognized the woman standing next to him, laughing with him and touching his shoulder.

*Ava?*

She turned toward me, and our eyes locked.

**Episode 1221**

ARTEMIS

I stood in the woods, staring down at my hands in wonder. They looked different now, somehow. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but I could have sworn there was something new pumping through my veins. Something powerful.

The second I’d told the voice I was in, I’d been filled with an indescribable burst of energy, magic, power… It was so strong it had almost lifted me off me feet, so strong that for a brief few seconds, I’d felt as though my body wasn’t enough to contain it all.

I wriggled my fingers. My entire body tingled, and I knew it was my magic. Well, not *my* magic, not really. Stronger magic. But after losing my Fae power and becoming essentially human—an empty vessel—I wasn’t about to complain. I reached down to the magic humming and buzzing inside me, a smile tugging at my lips.

I could practically see sparks flashing on the tips of my fingers.

And I felt… *incredible.*

All of the indecision that had plagued me for so long had evaporated. I couldn’t even remember why I’d felt that way in the first place.

*This is my purpose*, I thought. *This is why I left the Fae world.* For so long I’d felt so lost, wandering from one person to another, attaching myself first to Greyson, then to Cali, then to the Redwood pack, looking for belonging, looking for a place that answered the call inside my heart. I hadn’t found it with my long-lost family, and in the end I hadn’t found it with the Redwood pack either, or even Rishika. But I’d found it now.

And for the first time in my life, I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that I was strong enough to do anything I wanted to do, strong enough to shape the world to meet my desires.

As I savored the new power thrumming through my veins, a tiny voice at the back of my head—one that sounded suspiciously like my own, but weaker, mincing, pathetic—whispered, *this isn’t right.*

I frowned. What did a stupid, mousy voice know anyway? This was the *most* right thing I’d ever done, the most right I’d felt since the day I’d set foot outside the Fae world. I raised my hand and, with barely a thought, blasted an enormous old tree, severing the trunk. The tree groaned its way to the ground with a *boom* that shook the forest on impact. Countless rings circled the interior of the tree. It had been old and powerful, and I’d brought it down.

I grinned.

The tiny voice came back, this time much more insistent. *This is wrong. This isn’t your magic. It’s unnatural.*

I frowned again, and the deeper voice, the one that had offered me everything, answered back. *You’re strong now, Artemis, and you’re exactly where you should be, doing exactly what you should be doing. If you truly want to make something of yourself, you must quash your inner weakness. Then you’ll be unstoppable.*

I nodded slowly. Yes, that was right. Of course. I reveled in the power pulsing through me and pushed that tiny voice aside, imagining myself as a great wave smashing it against a rocky shore.

*I have a mission to complete, a great purpose that must be served. And I won’t be able to complete it if I have no magic. This is the right call, the right thing.*

And gods, it felt so good.

I grinned and threw my hands up in the air, sending off another blast that knocked down another ancient tree, sending birds screeching up into the sky.

*Shit! This is* so *awesome!* Giddiness poured off me, despite the groan of the dying tree and the cries of all the creatures who had just lost their home.

I’d struggled all my life just to survive, but now my struggle was over. I had nothing left to worry about. I was the most powerful I’d ever been—perhaps the most powerful *anyone* had ever been. And with that power, I could do anything. I wasn’t even worried about finding a portal anymore—I was invincible, unstoppable, and I would find a way back to the Fae world, even if it meant bringing the entire world to its knees.

And once I finally found my way to the Fae world and reunited with my father, he would be so proud to see how great and beautiful and powerful his daughter had become. And he would be the family I’d always wanted, the one I deserved—the family that loved me truly and wholly, instead of just giving me what was left over after loving Cali.

*Yes*, the deep voice agreed. *Imagine what you and your father can do together. All on your own, you destroyed the Orb, made the world a safer place for all the creatures in it. And now with this added power, imagine just how much good you can do for the world—both worlds. You aren’t the Kollector’s bounty hunter anymore, or Orla Wrenthorn’s discarded child. You are a queen—and you will be a champion for the people.*

I nodded. Yes, a champion *and* a queen.

*This is my time, and I’ll use it well.*

Suddenly, a twig snapped behind me and I whirled around, my hands lifting defensively. To my surprise, Arlo stepped into the clearing, staring wide-eyed at the wreckage of fallen trees around me. What was he doing here? He and Rishika usually lifted together around this time.

His eyes narrowed in confusion. “Artemis? Hey… What happened here?” He looked around again, his jaw slack. “What are you doing out here? I thought I heard you talking to someone…”

I shook my head. “No, it’s just me. I was going for a jog, gotta keep the cardio train rolling.”

The deep subconscious voice whispered urgently, *He’s here to take this away from you. He wants the power for himself. Take him out!*

I raised my hands, then hesitated. What was I doing? Arlo was harmless, and I had more than enough power to destroy him if he tried something. He couldn’t take me anywhere I didn’t want to go…

Still, the voice urged me on. *Artemis, hurry! Before it’s too late! Do you want to lose your power all over again?*

That thought sent chills running down my spine. But… Arlo wouldn’t do that. He couldn’t.

He took a step forward, holding out a hand. “Come on. I’ll take you back to the pack house.”

I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

“It’s not safe. Please, just come with me.” He took another step, close enough that his fingers brushed against my wrist.

*Now!* the voice bellowed.

Instinctively, I motioned toward Arlo and sent him flying backward. He crashed into a tree with a sickening squelch. A bloodied tree branch protruded from his chest.

That tiny voice in the back of my mind screamed, and the world went white for a split second. I blinked rapidly, my head clearing from the power-drunk haze.

And then I realized what I’d just done. “NO!” I cried, sprinting over to Arlo. “Oh my gods, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. It was an accident!”

Arlo’s face had gone a strange ashen color, and he opened his mouth to speak, but nothing but blood came out. It bubbled over his lips and down his chest.

“Just hold on,” I said. “It’s going to be okay! I’ll take care of you.” I eyed the wound in his chest, which was also dripping blood onto the forest floor. Should I try to pull him off the branch and carry him back to the house? Maybe Torin could heal him?

“Arlo.” I lifted my gaze from his chest. “I’m going to—”

I stopped.

Arlo’s eyes were clouded over, unfocused. His chest had ceased to rise and fall. Blood no longer poured from his mouth, or from the gaping wound in his chest.

He was dead.

And I’d killed him.

I stumbled backward with a gasp, my breath coming in short bursts. “What did I do?” I mumbled. “What did I do? What did I do? What did I do?”

This wasn’t what I wanted! I wanted to help people, not kill them!

The deep voice slipped smoothly into my mind. *Don’t worry. You can fix this.*

I froze. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

*Just try it*,the voice suggested. *Think about him waking up.*

I stared at Arlo, my thoughts a wild, hot rush of raw emotion and unrestrained power. “Wake up,” I whispered, my entire body shaking. I meant the words. I wanted him to open his eyes. “Wake up, Arlo. *Wake up now*.”

Suddenly, his eyes snapped opened and in one fluid movement, he slid off the branch and stood. I watched in awe as the gaping wound on his chest knitted back together. His shirt was torn, but the skin beneath it was unblemished. Like nothing had even happened.

Arlo raised his head and locked eyes with me. “What happened?”

**Episode 1222**

I held out a cheery yellow top for Lola’s approval. “What do you think of this one? It’s cute, it doesn’t scream ‘I’m a bloodsucking vampire,’ and it’s winter appropriate.”

She scowled from her place on the bed and sat up. Her legs and arms were still shackled together, and she only just stopped herself from jumping to her feet. “No, not that one! Pack the sexy blue one—you know it brings out my eyes!”

I rolled my own eyes but put the yellow top back in her closet, pulled out the blue one, folded it up, and placed it in her luggage all the same.

I’d been helping her pack for her upcoming trip. She could hop around herself, of course, and awkwardly try to pull out the clothes she wanted with her limited mobility. But after watching her topple over half a dozen times and knock over just about everything in her path on the way down, I’d decided it would be much easier if I just stepped in and helped.

“And the dark jeans in the third drawer down. Not the ones with the hole in the knee, the other ones,” she added.

I followed her instruction. “Hey, I just realized something. You’re probably going to go through clothes half as fast now that you’re not a werewolf anymore.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Lola tilted her head to the side, considering. “It’s a small perk, but I’ll take it. I guess I’d better start practicing getting blood out of clothes, then.”

“Cold water,” I supplied with a gentle smile. “And we’ll get you some Tide pens.”

“Ugh, laundry.” She lay back on the mattress and stuck out her tongue. “I think I’d rather stick to buying new clothes.”

I laughed and tucked the aforementioned pants into her bag. I was glad that Lola seemed to be in a better mood now that we actually had a plan to help her get control of her vampire side. I could only imagine how she must be feeling about the change after everything she’d been through—first her wolf taking control, and now the blood lust. It had to be a relief that there was perhaps an end in sight to having to fight so much against her own nature.

*I hope Mikah’s contacts can truly get her the help she needs.*

“Hey, Cali?”

“Hmm?”

Lola sat back up, shimmied off the bed, and hopped over while I continued to pack for her. “I feel really under control now, and I’m starving. Can I have a snack?”

I scowled. “I get that you enjoyed my blood, but please stop calling me a snack.”

I loved Lola like a sister, and I’d do anything for her—short of feeding her my blood on the regular. Even when she joked about it, I didn’t like it. It reminded me too much of Sabyr and how one hit of my blood had reduced me to little more than a delicious meal in his eyes.

*Not that he probably viewed me as much more than that to begin with, but still! I’m a person—not a snack.*

Lola snorted. “Slow your roll. I was talking about the potato chips on the dresser.” She nodded at the dresser, where an unopened bag of salt and vinegar potato chips was sitting.

I eyed her in confusion. Could vampires eat human food? “Seriously? You’re hungry for potato chips?”

She shrugged. “I’m starving for anything, and since you’re not putting out then maybe those will do the trick.”

I threw her a dirty look at “putting out,” then turned and looked at the chips, then eyed Lola. Was this some kind of trick? Was she trying to get me to turn my back so she could jump on me and have the snack she really wanted?

*She’s still chained up, though. She can’t do much with those magical shackles in place. And she* does *look pretty hungry.* Lola’s cheekbones seemed more prominent than I remembered them, and her eyes looked a little sunken.

I sighed. “Okay, fine. But you have to sit over there.” I pointed at an armchair on the other side of the room, and Lola obediently hopped over and sat in the chair, giving me puppy-dog eyes.

“Please, Cali?”

I grabbed the bag, opened it, and then dropped it into her lap as fast as I could before backing up. But she didn’t pounce on me. Instead, she awkwardly dug her shackled hand into the bag and then popped handful after handful of chips into her mouth.

“Oh my god,” she moaned, almost pornographically. “Yes… So good.”

I felt my face heat. “Guess you were hungry, huh?”

“Mm.” She awkwardly grabbed the bag and tilted it up to dump the rest of the contents directly into her mouth. Crumbs and bits of chips flew everywhere, and she kept chomping away contentedly.

I’d seen a lot of strange things in my life, but somehow watching my newly vampish and shackled best friend nom down on a bag of potato chips like they were giving her orgasms was the strangest thing yet. I dropped the shirt I was folding for her and just watched, almost entranced.

I was so entranced that I didn’t even notice Jay come in.

“Wait, you’re eating potato chips?” he said.

I turned to look at him, my eyes wide. He dropped a duffel bag on the floor and slowly approached his mate.

Lola’s mouth was totally full, and crumbs and salt coated her chin, neck, and shirt. “I was hungry!” she mumbled.

He just stared. “And… they taste good to you?”

I snorted. *That’s an understatement.*

She nodded, her eyes wide. “Oh, totally! Bring me more, Jaybay.”

“Uh huh…” Jay blinked a few times, and then shook his head. “We really need to figure out what the hell is going on with you.” He turned to me. “I guess I’ll go grab more snacks for the road…”

“Sounds good. We’re just about finished in here. Though she might need a shower when she’s done eating.”

“Ha ha,” she deadpanned.

Jay left for the kitchen without another word, passing my dad as he came into the room.

My dad didn’t even blink at the sight of Lola tied up in the corner. *It’s weird how normal all of this is for us now—even for my parents.*

“I’m starting to plan for Thanksgiving dinner,” he informed me. “I figure we’ll all still be around in a few weeks for that, right?”

I nodded. “Probably.” Going back home to Minnesota was definitely a possibility, but with so many other things going on, I didn’t see us making it back anytime soon.

“I was hoping to pick up a heritage turkey in town, maybe with a nice cranberry-citrus sauce to complement it, and some baked fennel stuffing like I make at home. What do you think?”

I didn’t stop packing as he described his plans for the dinner. “I think that sounds great.”

Dad’s eyes narrowed on me. “What’s going on? Are you going somewhere?”

I’d opened my mouth to reply when Greyson walked in. He eyed my dad and Lola, who was still licking crumbs from the corner of her mouth like a starved animal.

Then Greyson’s gaze landed on me and the bag I was packing. He frowned. “What exactly is going on here?”

Lola piped up. “She’s packing for me! Jay and I are leaving in an hour.”

I watched my mate’s expression and felt a twinge in my chest. Being around Greyson while obsessing over wherever the hell Xavier had gone was messing with my head.

*Is it unfair that Xavier’s gone and Greyson’s here? Was it unfair when Greyson was in Portland, too?*

I didn’t know how to balance any of this. I didn’t want any interaction with Greyson to somehow hurt Xavier, wherever he was. But I couldn’t stop feeling a pull toward the mate who had stayed.

And then I realized that both Greyson and my dad were staring at me, putting me on the spot.

“Excuse me,” I said.

I closed Lola’s bag and brushed past them and into the hallway. I needed some air.

But of course, Greyson followed me out.

“I know you’ll be worried about Lola while she’s gone,” he said, stopping me in my tracks. “But you know that Jay will look after her, and she’ll be back safe and sound. There’s nothing to worry about.”

I bit my lip and slowly turned to face him. He was right; Jay and Lola were a good team, and they could get out of just about any sticky situation they found themselves in. Plus Mikah wouldn’t send them anywhere he didn’t think was safe… Right?

But with Lola’s track record, there were bound to be some sticky situations.

I frowned, knowing Greyson wouldn’t like what I was about to say next. “I’m not going to worry about it because I’m going to go with them.”

**Episode 1223**

VIOLET

I rushed over to Marta, catching her before her head could thump against the ground.

“Marta!” Charlie yelped and hurried over.

My head was spinning, trying to make sense of all the impossibilities that had taken place in the last five minutes. *What the crap just happened?*

One minute Marta and Lilac had been walking out the door, and the next moment Lilac’s form had fused again with Marta and completely disappeared—and then she’d collapsed? Obviously some crazy spirit stuff was going on, and despite it being the cause of my brother being back in my life after far too long, I couldn’t help thinking that none of this boded well.

“Marta, are you all right?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t think she can hear you.” Concerned, I gently eased Marta’s limp form onto the floor, then shook her shoulders. “Can you hear me? Wake up!”

“What are we going to do?” Charlie asked me. “Should we call someone? Should Torin come heal her?”

Marta’s eyes fluttering open spared us the necessity of bringing Torin into this. It was a good idea on Charlie’s part, and I knew that if Torin were to get involved he would do so out of a desire to help, because he was a nice guy like that. But who knew what would happen if his Fae magic was added to the mess we’d created? Maybe it would react badly with Lilac’s spirit energy…

I’d only just gotten my brother back; I didn’t want to lose him all over again.

The medium let out a groan. She clearly wasn’t dead, so she at least had that going for her. I grasped her shoulders again and shook her harder this time, trying to wake her up.

“Careful,” Charlie warned. “She’s still human, I think. Right?”

I bit back a growl but shook her with a bit more gentleness. I could only hold back so much of my desperation. I needed to know what had happened, that Lilac wasn’t truly gone for good after flickering back into my life so suddenly.

Hearing his voice and having him stand before me, so close I could’ve touched him if only he were corporeal to me—which was yet another bone I had to pick with our resident medium—just to have him yanked back out of my life just as abruptly as I’d lost him the first time… It just seemed unimaginably cruel. I had to hope that he was still here, one way or another. That we could still have some kind of connection, still be Lilac and Violet again. Even if it was only for a little while longer.

After a lot of Charlie gently murmuring her name and me shaking her increasingly harder, Marta finally opened her eyes with another low groan.

“Hey, Marta?” I asked. “Are you okay? What happened? Are you hurt? Where’s Lilac? Is he still with you? Can you see him?”

Charlie put a hand on my arm and gently but firmly tugged me back. I felt his voice slip into my thoughts through our mind link. *I know you’re worried about Lilac, but you need to give her some space, okay?*

Frustration continued to bubble inside me, drawing gradually closer to a boiling point and threatening to spill over. But I knew my mate was right, even though I kind of hated it. I relented and sat back to give Marta some space.

She slowly sat up, rubbing her face. Then she looked around blearily. “W-What happened?”

“You tell us!” I blurted out. My eagerness and fear and frustration couldn’t be contained a moment longer, and all the words I’d been holding back since Marta had hit the floor came pouring out of my mouth. “One second Lilac was there, then it looked like he went… back into your body? Maybe? Are you okay? He is okay? Can you still feel a connection to him?”

Marta blinked and gave me a weird look. “What are you talking about?” She gave a pointed look at the empty space beside her. “He’s right here next to me.”

Her words filled me with hope, but the literally empty space next to her smashed that feeling to pieces. I looked at her, my eyebrows knitting together. Had Marta lost her mind? “That space next to you is empty,” I told her. “You’re not looking at anything at all.”

She frowned at that and then cocked her head like she was listening to something. Or some*one*. Then her expression cleared. “Ah. I understand.”

Just like that, my frustration boiled over. “‘Ah,’ what?” I snapped. “What do you understand, oh wise teenage medium?”

Charlie put his hands on my shoulders, probably more to restrain me if I lost my shit than to comfort me. I shrugged him off, staring at Marta, desperate for answers.

“Lilac just said that it looks like you guys can’t see or hear him anymore,” she explained breezily. “Which explains a lot, really.”

“He said that?” I repeated. “No one said anything!”

The look Marta gave me—one that said she was seriously doubting my intelligence—made me see red. “Yes, that’s what I just said. You guys can’t see or hear him. I’m the medium, remember?”

I looked back at the empty space beside her, straining my eyes, trying to will myself to see my brother there next to her, but it was useless. There was nothing and no one there. Or, at least, nothing and no one that I could see.

I looked back at Marta with a frustrated groan. “You’re saying that Lilac is still here?”

She nodded. “He says it’s back to how it was before—when he was with you but you had no idea, except for times when you needed help. “

I thought back to the few times I’d seen Lilac before this spirit debacle: I’d seen him when the Rogue werewolf had been about to kill me, and when I’d been escaping back to Minnesota and had gotten a ride from that older man who’d turned out to be Silas.

An idea was beginning to form in my mind. “So… you’re saying I can only see him or hear him sometimes? Why? When are the sometimes?”

Charlie looked at me. “Like Marta said, she’s the medium, not us,” Charlie said. “Your brother’s right here, he’s fine.”

Except that wasn’t even remotely true. My brother wasn’t *fine*. He was dead, and beyond that, he was somehow spirit-glued onto Marta. And even if he wanted to leave us and go back to the spirit world, that place didn’t sound great right now either.

I threw my hands up. “But why is any of this happening? We’re getting to the bottom of this right now.”

“Hey, it’s not like I want to have this dude tagging along with me everywhere,” Marta muttered. “I’d much rather he was with you. But like I said, I have no idea what’s going on or why your brother is stuck to me like glue.”

*Yeah, that much is pretty damn obvious.*

I blew out a breath and tried to think. “Okay, then it’s time to find Big Mac and rope her back into this. Maybe there’s some way to… transfer his spirit from you to me?”

Marta’s eyebrows rose. “Um, you’re not a medium.” And then she shot an irritated look at the empty space again and added, “*Normally* once the spirits visit, they leave. I guess someone doesn’t know when they’ve worn out their welcome.”

“Don’t say that!” I hissed. “Don’t let him leave! We’re have to figure out how to keep him here. With me. Do you hear that Lilac?!”

I leapt to my feet. New urgency and purpose pulsed through my veins. I needed to get to the bottom of this, and fast. We had no idea when or if Lilac would up and disappear entirely. I knew I was being a little intense about all of this ghost business, but… he was my brother. My *twin*. He was the only piece of my family that I had left. Sort of.

I offered Marta my hand and pulled her to her feet. “Come on, let’s go find Big Mac—”

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Then again. Who even came all the way out here? Who leaving a delivery even rang the doorbell anymore?

“Should we get that?” Marta asked when the doorbell sounded again.

“Someone else will grab it. Let’s find Big Mac.” I marched her out the door.

“Fine, fine. We’ll go talk to the witch,” Marta grumbled.

Then the bell rang again, and I huffed. “Don’t, like, twenty million people live here? Why isn’t anyone grabbing it?” I tried to keep Charlie and Marta hustling in the right direction, but the doorbell just *wouldn’t stop ringing*.

“Fine!” I groaned. “You two go find Big Mac, I’ll deal with the door.”

I raced down to the entryway, ready to send whatever salesperson had found their way to the house packing, and threw the door open.

And on the doorstep stood Iris and Paul Kim.

**Episode 1224**

ARTEMIS

I stumbled back, staring at Arlo in pure shock. *How… how is this even possible?*

Arlo, by contrast, was standing in front of me as if nothing had ever happened to him. As if he’d never been impaled on an unfortunately sharp branch. As if he’d never bled out in front of me. All traces of the gory injury that had resulted in his death were completely healed over, without even a scar to show for the experience.

If his shirt hadn’t been sporting a gaping, bloodied hole, and the ground around the tree hadn’t been splashed with his blood, I could almost have believed I’d imagined the entire thing.

*What did I do? How…* I could barely form the words to describe my shock, even in my mind.

Arlo looked at me and cocked his head, and then he looked down at his shirt and back up at me. A crease appeared between his eyebrows. A new, icy-cold fear slipped down my spine.

Did he remember what I’d done to him? Was he going to attack me, to try to get revenge for hurting him? Killing him? Or, worse, was he going to go back to the pack house and tell everyone all about my new power?

He finally broke the silence between us, looking somewhat sheepish. “Um, Artemis… Why are you looking at me like that? Do I have something on my face?” He patted his pink cheeks and chin with a small, goofy smile.

“I-I… You… There was…” I stammered. What was I supposed to say? “Whoops, I accidentally murdered you, but don’t worry because I immediately brought you back to life with my shiny new dark magic, so no harm done”?

He didn’t seem to mind my stumbling, and in the back of my mind I remembered why I’d never gotten to know Arlo particularly well. He was just so *boring*. Nice and friendly and unassuming and obsessed with the gym. Never got into trouble. Not ambitious enough to rise through the ranks, but too nice to end up on the bottom rung. For the most part, he blended in with the crowd and had good friends, like Rishika.

He looked around the clearing and his eyes widened. He let out a low whistle. “Wow. What happened here? I’ve never seen trees smashed like this before.”

My jaw dropped. Did he truly not remember anything that had happened? The truth of what I’d done to him?

On the one hand, an overwhelming sense of responsibility pressed in on me. I’d hurt this poor man. No, that wasn’t right—I’d *killed* him in a fit of… I still didn’t know what, honestly. And even though I’d also somehow brought him back to life, didn’t I owe it to him to be honest about what I’d done? I mean, what long-term effects could one experience after being brutally murdered and then brought back from the dead? Arlo was a nice guy—he deserved the truth about what had happened to him.

But on the opposite side of things, relief washed over me so fast it made my head spin. *He doesn’t remember. He doesn’t know, and he doesn’t ever* have *to know.* I’d screwed up, definitely, but I’d fixed it too and had literally put poor Arlo back together again. And… wouldn’t it do more harm than good to tell anyone what had happened here?

I also wondered if it were possible that he did remember but was pretending otherwise. I still hadn’t strung a single complete sentence together, and he’d been playing the whole thing so casually. Maybe too casually. Maybe his plan was to sneak away from me and then go to Greyson or Cali with the truth.

I sighed. What the fuck was I going to do now?

Arlo still had that goofy, harmless smile on his face. “It’s such a coincidence to run into you out here. I was just out for a run, stretching the old glutes, you know.” His smile widened and he struck a pose. “Anyway, I didn’t think anyone else ever came out this far.”

I just stared back at him, shock and relief pulsing through me. I wasn’t sure what the “old glutes” were, but I was fairly certain that if Arlo possessed them, I did *not* want to see them.

But really, the important thing was that Arlo was still alive to say inane things to me in the first place. And, if he was to be believed—and I wasn’t entirely sure he was capable of lying with any amount of skill—he didn’t remember anything, either.

*What luck!*

Mixed in with my fear of getting caught and receiving retribution, I could still feel the lingering horror that had broken through into my conscience when I’d thought I’d killed him. The guilt that he’d never been anything but perfectly nice to me, and how had I returned the favor? By blasting him onto a tree branch and ending his life. Painfully.

“Well, I, uh… I’m gonna head back to the house,” he said, after another long silence stretched between us. “Do you want to come with me?”

I couldn’t think what to say. I was still in such shock that words seemed beyond me, so I just shook my head. Arlo gave me another winning smile and then with a wave of his white hand, he ambled off into the forest—though not in the direction of the pack house—making sure to wave goodbye as he left.

I was barely even paying attention.

I needed to get my thoughts together, get my story straight, get a handle on… *everything*. Besides, I wasn’t going back to the pack house, was I? The power-drunk haze that had settled over me was clouding my memories, but I was pretty sure I was leaving the pack house to go somewhere else…

I looked down to see my own pale hand nestled on the bloodied patch on the ground. Tearing it away, I stared after Arlo. I still wasn’t entirely sure what the hell had happened. But before I could try to process things any further, I heard another twig cracking behind me.

My heart racing, I spun around. *What now?*

A gorgeous woman with midnight skin stepped into the clearing and faced me.

I frowned. *Who the hell is this?*

The woman was wearing some kind of blue flowing gown that was as gorgeous as it was a poor fit for walking through the woods, which begged the question: who was this woman, and what was she doing here?

I put my hands up in front of me, ready to blast her if necessary, and the woman stopped, her eyes locked onto mine.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

The woman cocked her head, her cloud of dark hair swaying gently with the movement. “Oh, I thought you were smarter than that.”

I bristled. “Tell me who you are, or you’ll be sorry!” I could feel my magic pooling in my limbs, pulsing and thrumming, just itching to be used.

The woman laughed without much humor. “Oh, I doubt that. Don’t you recognize me?”

“No?”

The woman sighed. “Vander? I thought Fae were smart. Look closely.”

I took a step forward and saw that the woman had Vander’s brilliant green eyes. I relaxed a bit and scowled. “What are you doing here?” I sniped.

“I’m here because I felt magic here—dark magic. Unnatural magic,” she frowned. “I’m afraid it’s connected to everything that’s happening with the Orb, and the portals… And why exactly are *you* here? Did you see what happened here?”

A burst of fear flashed through me. It must have been me that Vander had felt, right? That tiny voice in the back of my head whispered, *Tell her everything. She can help you.*

I opened my mouth, the words on the tip of my tongue.

Then the deep voice piped up. *Be very, very* *careful.* *The Keeper of All Nature won’t help. The Keeper can only harm. The Keeper will only get in your way. Do you really think that if you explain what you’ve become, the Keeper will be forgiving? The Keeper will destroy you. You know that*.

I froze. I didn’t know what to do, but I had a sneaking suspicion that the deep voice was right. Vander wouldn’t react well to knowing how powerful I’d become.

The deep voice purred, *Yes.* *The Keeper would be threatened by you and eliminate you.*

“Artemis?” Vander pressed.

“I’m not sure what happened,” I lied. “Can you trace whatever it was?”

Something flashed in her eyes, but it disappeared too fast for me to read. “I still need to do some investigating, but you know how to reach me.” And then, as quickly as she’d appeared, she vanished.

I let out a shaky breath and then sank down to the forest floor. All the fear I’d been pushing down began to bubble up inside me. I was terrified—of myself. “What’s happening to me?” I whispered.

*Your destiny.*

The small, weak voice suddenly thundered through my mind. *No! You know this is wrong! Call Vander back!*

But I couldn't. I needed answers. “Why are you doing this?” I asked the deep voice. “Who are you?”

*You already know.*

**Episode 1225**

Even though the circumstances weren’t ideal, it sure was nice to be out of the pack house and driving somewhere new. I’d been cooped up at the pack house and on the property for far too long.

*And who knows? Maybe this will be a smooth trip and Lola will be a natural at the self-control required to be a vampire who doesn’t drain people dry.*

I mean, Lola and self-control were pretty much polar opposite concepts, so I wasn’t holding my breath for an easy journey. But still, there was reason to be hopeful, reason to feel joy and the relief of freedom bubbling in my stomach—even though my best friend had been turned into a bloodthirsty quasi-vampire. We’d get through this problem just like we’d gotten through so many others.

And in the meantime, I got to drive one of Xavier’s cars.

I looked at Lola and Jay in the rearview mirror. “How are you two doing back there? No fooling around just because you’re sharing the back seat!”

Jay huffed and glanced at his mate, who was still in shackles for her—but mostly Jay’s and my—safety. “Right. Because magic chains are a huge turn-on for me.”

I shrugged and gave him a playful wink. “Hey, no kink shaming here.”

He frowned and looked out the window, probably worrying and planning ahead for our next steps, and what would happen once we reached our destination. Lola, at least, was in high spirits. Based on the information Mikah had shared with us, she seemed to be feeling confident that she’d be able to get everything figured out and under control. Mikah had sounded pretty confident too, which had assuaged a lot of my own worry.

And in the meantime, Jay was worrying enough for the rest of us.

Lola leaned forward, her chains clanking as they caught on her seat belt. “Faster! You gotta pick up the pace if you want that five-star rating.”

“Hey, you and Jay get rated too,” I said, eyeing them in the back.

She turned to her mate. “We aren’t getting less than five, do you hear me?!”

Jay slipped an arm around her and smirked, but he didn’t say anything. I caught a glimpse of Lola leaning her head on her mate’s shoulder, a smile tugging at her lips, before I returned my eyes to the road.

Lola and Jay were such an amazing match. Always tempering each other, always such a great team. Even when they hit rough patches, they faced them together and seemed to come out stronger for it on the other side.

My grip on the steering wheel tightened, and I felt my own high spirits begin to dip as I thought about my relationships with my mates. Once upon a time, I’d thought Xavier and I could have tempered each other, but it seemed like most of the rough patches we’d hit just drove us apart. Greyson and I, on the other hand, worked well as a team. He always included me, and our connection had been strengthened by everything we’d been through together. But unlike with Xavier, I still wasn’t quite sure where I fit in Greyson’s life.

He was so hot and cold. He’d told me to pick Xavier, but then he’d still fought for me. Even now that we were broken up and I was trying to figure out how to navigate things without the impossible *due destini* hanging over me at every turn, he still wanted to be involved in my life. Wanted to have a say in the things I did.

And Greyson sure hadn’t been happy when I’d told him I was going along with Lola and Jay.

“It wasn’t all that long ago that you were kidnapped by vampires,” he’d said. “And now you want to run off and get involved with *more* vampires? When the one who attacked you is still out there?”

“I’m going with Jay too,” I’d reminded him. “And Lola is a vampire now, maybe they’ll… I don’t know, respect her territory.”

“Cali,” he’d said, his voice strained. “Why don’t you understand that I’m trying to protect you? Even though things are the way they are, I need you to be safe. You know that, right?”

I’d heard the unspoken question in his words: how could I leave, the way things were between us now? Honestly though, that argument had only made me *more* determined to put some space between Greyson and myself for the time being.

“Yes, I *know* that, Greyson,” I’d said. I knew he would move mountains for me, but I still had to help my friend, too. “Things *are* so confusing and up in the air right now with both you and Xavier, which is why I think… a little space will be a great thing for us.”

He hadn’t had an answer for that, so I’d packed up and left with Lola and Jay. And Greyson must have taken what I’d said about space seriously, because he hadn’t even seen us off when we’d left.

It was difficult to reconcile this hot mess of a reality with the dream Greyson and I had shared—the rehearsal dinner, the night before our wedding. We’d seemed like completely different people, living lives completely incompatible with our present circumstances.

I was honestly still pretty freaked out about it. I had no idea what it meant, or what to make of it all. First there was the dream where I’d seen myself kissing Xavier through Greyson’s eyes, which had been weird enough. But the other one had felt different. I’d actually been in the dream as myself. We’d both been ourselves—but in a strange, happy version of reality in which we were about to get married. A version in which the *due destini* didn’t seem to be a factor.

What did it all mean?

I shook my head. Yeah, distance was definitely a good thing right now.Just the thought of being alone with Greyson made me blush. I still loved him, but I knew that I needed to stick by what I’d told both him and Xavier—I couldn’t do this with either of them right now.

Not even if it meant losing my mind.

“We’re going to want to take a left at the next intersection,” Lola piped up, looking down at her phone, where she’d been mapping our journey.

*Focus, Cali. You wanted some space, and you’ve got it. Now Lola needs some help, so get your head in the game.*

I pulled up to the intersection and turned left, continuing to head north. Mikah had told us he knew a family of vampires in northern Oregon who lived a “nontraditional vampire lifestyle.”

According to Mikah, the rest of the vampire community thought the family was soft in the head, but he actually thought that what they were trying to do was really interesting.

According to him it was like an experiment. This group of vampires banded together because they all believed that being a vampire doesn’t mean that you need to live a violent lifestyle. It sounded good to me at least.

I hoped this would help Lola solve her problems, but I knew from my own experiences that seeking out answers like the kind Lola needed didn’t always go smoothly…

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It took several long hours to drive to Astoria, where the vampire group lived. I pretty much had to pick my jaw up off my lap as we pulled up to a gorgeous Victorian mansion high on a hillside, with beautiful views of the Pacific Ocean.

I parked the car, then got out with a long stretch and looked around. *Wow. I’ve literally never seen anything that reminds me* less *of vampires.*

The hillside was covered in flowers and lush vegetation, and the air smelled of fresh, crisp sea air. The whole area felt vibrant, thrumming with life.

*Okay, I know that this isn’t supposed to be, like, a fun vacation. But it sure feels like one.*

Lola and Jay spilled out of the back seat. Lola was agog at the beautiful views, and even super-protective Jay seemed awed by the sight.

“Are you sure we’re in the right place?” I heard him ask Lola.

“According to my GPS, yeah.”

An old woman beelined straight for us, holding up a broom that she’d been using to sweep her walk. She held it out at Jay, broom bristles pointing forward at the cuffs around Lola’s wrists. “Are you in trouble, miss?”

I opened my mouth to say something, like “it’s a birthday surprise!” or “we lost the key!” But Lola beat me to saying anything. “Oh, it’s just a kink, don’t worry, ma’am.”

The woman made a hasty—and speechless—exit.

“I really wish you hadn’t told her that,” Jay muttered. He knelt down next to Lola’s shackled feet and pulled a key out of his pocket. He must have realized we were going to keep getting strange looks and questions and decided it was probably better to remove one of the shackles so she could at least walk. He looked up at Lola. “Did you eat enough on the way over?”

She nodded. “I think so. I’m not thirsty right now, in any case.”

“Good enough.” He unlocked the shackles around her ankles and stowed them in the car. “Okay, ready?”

We all looked up at the gorgeous Victorian house and then made our way up the walk to the front door. Lola rang the doorbell, and for a few long moments, there was nothing.

“Maybe they’re out?” I suggested.

Suddenly a face appeared at the window next to me, making me jump back in shock. It was a *very* white face. Moments later, the door opened with a crack and a woman’s head popped out. She smiled. “Can I help you?”

“Um, hi,” I managed. “Mikah sent us?”

The woman’s eyes widened. “Mikah Navarro?”

I nodded, and the woman opened the door wider.

“In that case, you’d better come in.”

Jay and Lola glanced at each other in excitement before heading straight in, but my attention was caught on a dark, shadowy figure standing in one of the windows.

But the moment I tried to look at the figure head-on, it vanished.

**Episode 1226**

AVA

Never in my life had I thought I’d find myself at a daylight party for vampires. To be quite honest, blood fountains aside, the party didn’t seem all that different from a swanky human party.

The party was in full swing now, and I looked around the open area that had been set up with countless tables full of food and blood fountains, places to sit and chat, and there was even live music. And it was all taking place in daylight. The concept was as mind boggling as it was terrifying.

Humans were scattered through the party, dressed as waiters and mingling with the vampires. Only instead of carrying around food or drinks, they were offering up their necks to any vampire who seemed a bit peckish.

I’d never seen anything like it in my life.

Mabel was standing with me at the edge of the party. As usual, she was as cool as a cucumber.

“How on earth have they managed to brainwash all these humans into being walking lunch boxes?” I asked her.

She laughed. “Believe me, there was no brainwashing required. Some humans just get hooked the first time they’re bitten.” She raised her eyebrows at me suggestively. “I mean, don’t you remember the pleasure of it?”

Heat rushed to my face as I thought back to my brief stint as a blood bag for Iñigo. After the diner had been wrecked, he’d been furious and looking for someone to take out his rage on. I must have seemed like a good option at the time.

I’d known going in that teaming up with a vampire posed all kinds of risks, but back then, just like now, I hadn’t exactly had a wealth of options available. My brother was dead, my home pack was essentially destroyed, and in the aftermath of the fight against Silas, neither the Redwood pack nor my mate had wanted anything to do with me. I fought the urge to wince, thinking of Xavier, and shoved him out of my mind for the time being.

There hadn’t been a lot of paths available to me after Silas had died, which had left Iñigo.

The memory of him draining me wasn’t a pleasant one, despite all the lust that had been bubbling between us for so long. Locked in his arms, my body weakening with each passing second, fearing that he’d go too far and I’d be sent back to the dark cold of death…

It certainly hadn’t been a pleasurable experience, that was for fucking sure.

But now, looking at Iñigo across the lawn, handsome and charismatic and commanding in his own right—an Alpha among vampires—I could sort of see why some people might be into it.

I caught the gaze of one of the human entrees—a woman who looked to be in her late twenties, who was draped across the lap of a gorgeous, elegant female vampire. The two women made a striking pair, and the human’s eyes were glazed over. Her pale lips were curled up slightly at the corners, like she was happy, relaxed.

The female vampire pulled away from the human’s neck, her lips shiny and dark with blood, and whispered something into the human’s ear. The human shifted on the vampire’s lap, her movements sluggish, and then offered up the other side of her neck. There was an intimacy in the way the vampire nuzzled at the woman’s throat for a moment, as if drinking in the scent of a fine wine, before sinking her teeth into her skin.

*Did I look like that with Iñigo?* Looking back, it was difficult to view what he’d done to me in such a sensual and intimate light. But maybe being there willingly made all the difference? Or maybe there was something else at play, something more nefarious that made these humans offer themselves up to the predators of their species.

The heat in my face began to spread down my neck, and I forced myself to look away. I glanced up at Mabel, an unspoken question in my eyes.

She nodded. “Yeah, once you’re hooked on the stuff you can never really be free of it. Blood junkies are everywhere.”

That nagging thought of vampires drinking from someone who enjoyed it shoved itself to the front of my mind. They might have liked it, but not everyone did. I glanced over at the one thing, the one person, I’d been avoiding since I’d arrived at the party.

Xavier.

He was strapped down to a gurney situated next to several of the food tables, like he was just another entree option at the vampire buffet. Various vampires had already drifted over to sample him. Every time I saw my mate—my *ex*-mate—being feasted on, it felt like someone was dragging my heart through broken glass.

Xavier had broken something inside me when he’d ended our mate bond, and I honestly didn’t know if I’d ever be able to recover from that, but that didn’t mean I wanted to see him like this—pale and weak, barely clinging to consciousness. Would he turn into a blood junkie when this was all over? Judging by the bruises covering his neck and limbs, he’d certainly been fed on frequently enough.

*Or maybe only humans can become blood junkies.* I hoped that was the case, for both our sakes. Xavier’s glassy gaze drifted over to me, and I looked away before our eyes could lock again. Instead, I looked down at the cut on my hand.

*This is all part of Iñigo’s deal*,I reminded myself. This was an important step in getting what I wanted, but it still hurt to see Xavier like this. The very idea of anyone being strapped down to serve as a living blood bag against their will absolutely turned my stomach. I knew firsthand how awful it was, after all.

I knew that Xavier had seen me. Our gazes had locked, and shock and horror and betrayal had flashed through his glassy eyes. But I needed to continue the ruse, so I’d just turned away from him and pretended to laugh at whatever Iñigo had said.

But the truth was, I’d been just as shocked to see Xavier as he’d looked at seeing me. I was still trying to recover from that shock, and that was why I’d drifted over to Mabel instead of continuing to mingle with Iñigo. Mabel didn’t give a rat’s ass about anyone or anything. I’d known she wouldn’t care if I was quiet or kept looking over in horror at the buffet.

Initially, I’d tried to get close to my ex-mate, tried to talk to someone to get him removed from the party, but everyone had brushed me off. I was here as Iñigo’s guest, and without him at my side, I held no power over any of the others.

Still, I wished someone had told me Xavier would be here. Maybe I could have stopped things before they’d gotten this far.

I glanced across the party and saw that Iñigo was standing alone.

*Finally.*

I approached him and caught his arm. “We need to talk,” I said.

His lips twitched. “By all means, lead the way.”

Enough was enough. I needed to put a stop to this.

I dragged him over to a quiet corner of the party, where nobody would be able to overhear us.

“You didn’t tell me Xavier was going to be used as a blood bag,” I hissed. “This wasn’t part of our deal.”

His lips twitched again. The bastard was trying not to *laugh* at me. “I thought it would be a fun surprise. Didn’t he just break your mate connection? I thought you’d get a kick out of seeing him suffer.”

I glared at him. “You thought wrong. You can’t just keep him there like some kind of living buffet—it’s not right!”

Iñigo snorted at that and glanced around. Was he seriously acting like I was wasting his time? “It’s not up to you. You want to talk about what’s right and wrong? When you’re the one who made not one, but two deals with me?”

“Yes, I made a deal, but this wasn’t part of it!”

His expression darkened, and he moved closer to me, pulling me farther away from the party and into the wooded area. My heart skipped up into double-time. The intensity in his gaze made my stomach flip-flop, and not in an entirely bad way. Iñigo was practically radiating power, and dammit if that didn’t do it for me.

I shook myself. *Come on, Ava. It’s time to think!* I jerked out of his grip and showed him the cut on my palm.

“I know the terms of our deal, and I’m saying you have to get him out of here. Now.” I met Iñigo’s gaze defiantly and didn’t back down.

His dark expression shifted. It was no less intense, no less intimidating, but something warm and sinful slipped into his gaze, and his lips pulled up just the tiniest bit. “I like this side of you, Ava—it’s feisty. Like a kitten with claws. Or I suppose a wolf pup?”

I swallowed roughly. He clearly wasn’t intimidated by me, and I wasn’t exactly in my element right now, surrounded by so many vampires. God, I wished I could feel the true disgust and hatred he deserved, instead of the lust that brought heat to my face and simmered low in my belly.

I shook my head, confused and horny and pissed off at myself. *Xavier is right over there. Xavier, my true mate. My goal.*

Iñigo’s breath washed over my face, and I realized how close I was to him. His pupils were dilated as he stared down at me, and I couldn’t help remembering our kiss in his office. He’d said he wasn’t stupid, that he’d known what I was trying to do.

But the thing was, I knew what I was doing too.

I tipped my head up, grasped the front of his shirt, and pressed my lips to his.

**Episode 1227**

*What fresh hell is* that*?*

I blinked, staring at the place where the shadowy figure had been, and then tried to look at it from the corner of my eye again. It was gone.

*Okay,* that *seems more like what I expected from a house of vampires… But what was it?*

I was more than a little unnerved by the shadowy figure in the window, but we’d driven all the way out to Astoria of all places to get Lola somebody who could teach her to wrangle her bloodlust. I wasn’t about to back out now—and besides, Jay and Lola were already all-in. Literally. They were walking into the gorgeous house with matching looks of hope. I couldn’t just bail on them.

I took a deep breath and followed them inside.

As soon as I stepped into the gigantic, stunning house, I had to pick my jaw up off the floor for the second time in about three minutes.

*I don’t know what I was expecting, but this house was* not *it.*

Light streamed in through stained-glass windows, patterning the hallway and foyer in shades of pink and green and blue. As the woman led us through the house and into what I could only assume was the receiving room, I saw fresh-cut flowers on every shelf and table, and amazing, vivid oil paintings covered the walls. In true Oregon fashion, there was plenty of pottery scattered around too.

*Maybe I should become a vampire too…* I mused. Living here certainly wouldn’t be the worst of fates. I didn’t have all that much experience with vampire lairs, but Sabyr’s cabin had been dark, with lots of heavy furniture. If I thought about it, that was much more in line with my expectations for a vampire commune—heavy drapes, lots of candles, and probably a bunch of coffins scattered around.

But this… This was exquisite.

As Jay finished taking Lola’s handcuffs off, a small group of gorgeous children raced by, and one of them knocked a pot off a table. The pot shattered on impact, and the little girl skidded to a stop.

“Oh!” Lola bent down to pick up the pieces. “Don’t cut yourself, sweetie. I’ll help you sweep it up.”

The little girl, who didn’t look a day over nine, glared up at Lola. “Bitch, I’m eighty-six. I don’t need your help.”

Lola stumbled back in surprise. “I’m sorry!”

The woman who’d let us in just laughed and turned to the “little girl.” “Your kiln is probably overheating. You’ll want to get out to the garden.” Then she turned to face the three of us, who were all wearing matching “what the actual fuck?” expressions.

“I think we’d better all sit down and get to know each other.” The woman smiled and led us to a gorgeous living room with large, west-facing windows that overlooked the ocean. We all sat down, and she eyed us one by one, seeming to size us up. Then she motioned to a man who was lurking in the corner of the room. I hadn’t even noticed him until she called him forward. “We’ll take two teas and two Bs, please.”

*Say what?*

The man nodded and disappeared, and then the woman settled back against her seat, crossing her legs. “I’m Irma. I take it that Mikah sent a werewolf, a Fae, and a vampire here for a reason.” Her shrewd—but not unkind—gaze settled on Lola. “And I’m guessing that reason is you.”

Lola sat forward. Excitement was etched into her face, and her body was practically buzzing with it. “I’m Lola, and I was bitten by a vampire and drank some of his blood, and now I get these uncontrollable urges…” She motioned to me with probably more eagerness than was appropriate for describing how she’d tried to “drain me like a Capri Sun.” Still, I peeled off the bandage on my neck to reveal the wound beneath.

“I’m Cali, by the way,” I added, nudging the werewolf next to me. “And this is Jay.”

Irma nodded in understanding. “I’m glad that Mikah sent you our way.” She gestured grandly to the house around us. “I created this family to help wayward vampires, to lead them down the right path.”

“The right path?” Jay asked.

Irma leaned forward. A passionate gleam brightened her eyes. “For many of us, this way of life was never a choice. It was something that happened to us.”

A few more “kids” rushed by on their way to the nearby staircase that would presumably take them to the expansive back yard I’d glimpsed through the windows. I was struck by the sheer number of people I’d already seen running around.

*How many people live here?*

Irma gestured to the gaggle of children that had just raced past. “Take these people, for instance, who were attacked as children but have since matured mentally. What are they to do? Where can they live? No one can understand them, but we’ve created a home that is safe for everyone. We’d be happy to welcome you into our home.”

*Wait, what? Welcome her into their home? Lola’s not going anywhere!* I turned to look at my friend, whose eyes had gone wide.

“Oh,” Lola began, presumably to assure Irma that she had no intentions of moving in, but then the man returned with a tray and interrupted her. He was carrying two teacups full of what looked like tea, and two teacups full of what looked very much like—

*Ew, is that* blood*?*

The man passed the cups of tea to Jay and me, and the cups of the thick red liquid to Irma and Lola. Lola glanced at Irma questioningly and then took a deep sip. I couldn’t quite contain my grimace. I loved Lola like a sister, but it was gonna be a long while before I got used to the sight of her chugging a cup of O-negative.

Lola came back up for air, smacking her lips contentedly. “Sorry, I actually meant that I just wanted some help on how to control my… urges,” she clarified.

“Oh.” Thus far, Irma had only sipped daintily from her own teacup. She set it back down on its saucer. “I see. I imagine that all of this must be much more complicated than you’re saying, given the company you keep.” She gave Jay some very polite side-eye. “It is, after all, rather unusual for vampires to spend time with werewolves.” Then her side-eye extended to me. “And Fae.” But then that same excited gleam came back into her eyes and she leaned forward, grasping Lola’s free hand. “I must admit—this is very exciting for me. You are a living embodiment of the ideals that I aim to propagate here: that supernatural creatures can live together in peace and harmony.”

I wondered what she would think if we told her that back at the pack house, werewolves, humans, witches, mediums, and Fae alike were all living together in relative peace.

*And for a werewolf pack house, “relative peace” is pretty much the gold standard.*

From what I understood, our situation at the pack house was pretty unusual, so it was great to see another group of supernaturals trying to live in harmony with each other and the rest of the world. Lola, for her part, seemed thrilled at the opportunity to learn from someone like Irma.

Jay, on the other hand, was looking very uncomfortable. “Do you mind if I use your restroom?” he asked.

“Of course. Up the stairs and the second door on your right.” She smiled and then turned back to Lola, peppering her with more questions about her transition from human to vampire.

The longer I sat alone, sipping my tea, the less I could ignore the uneasy sensation that crawled up the back of my neck. Everything seemed to be going too smoothly for my liking. It all just seemed too easy.

I hated to be the suspicious naysayer, but since when had anything involving me or the Redwood pack gone so seamlessly? And what kind of person—vampire or not—just invited strangers into her house and then immediately invited one of those strangers to live with her?

I thought back to the shadowy figure in the window and sat up a little straighter, my body tense as I waited for the other shoe to drop. We were laughably outnumbered in a house stuffed to the gill with vampires.

*And I’m probably the tastiest snack they’ll have had in a long time.*

But the longer I sat, watching and waiting to be attacked, the longer I was met with more placid small talk and enviously striking views. Irma’s focus seemed entirely on Lola—she didn’t seem to be at all worried about Jay or me.

“I want to hear everything about you three,” Irma gushed. “There’s so much that we can all learn from those who live together peaceably!”

Lola nodded with a bright smile. “Well, we—”

A shout from upstairs cut her off, and I jumped.

That bad feeling returned tenfold. *What is this place, exactly?*

Lola stood upright. “That was Jay! Something’s happened to him!”

**Episode 1228**

CHARLIE

I could not believe this was happening. My mother and father were standing at the pack’s doorstep, peering at me and my mate. I had not told them to come over. Not now, not ever.

“Mom? What the hell are you doing here?”

I felt Violet stiffen behind me. I was certain that she was just as freaked out as I was.

“Did you just say *hell*?” My mother arched an eyebrow. “To your own mother?”

My parents usually didn’t try to murder me, so swearing was the least of my worries.

“Mom, Dad, what is happening right now?” I asked, looking between them. “Why are you here?”

My mother was trying to see past me and into the house. At the same time, she said, “We were worried about you.”

I felt Violet squeeze my shoulder. She wasn’t buying this, and I wasn’t either. Trying to sound as patient as possible, I said, “Why would you be worried? I told you that I was going to be gone for a couple of days…” I tried to remain calm but serious. “It’s clear that you don’t trust me.”

Dad cleared his throat. “Of course we trust you, Charlie. Are you going to invite us in?”

*Don’t do it*, Violet told me through our mind link. *This whole thing is very sketchy.*

I had to agree with my mate. My parents were being extra weird—they had *followed* me here. What kind of display of trust was that? I doubted that the other pack members would love to have hunters in their home, and it would probably not improve my standing within the pack. Not to mention that Violet would get stressed out. I doubted my parents would hurt me at this point, but I didn’t know how they would react around other werewolves.

“I don’t think you coming in is a good idea.”

My mother frowned. It was the kind of expression that she used to use whenever she wanted me to do something for her. And I’d always been a sucker, listening to her every single time. Not anymore. But I had Violet now, and if it was my weakness to never say no to vulnerable women, I preferred to have her benefit from that. Mostly because I trusted her.

I didn’t trust my mother anymore.

Which honestly sucked.

“It’s not that we don’t trust you, Charlie,” Mom said, right on cue. “You were being followed, and we’re here to tell you that.”

I gave her a skeptical look. “I was followed… By you guys, you mean?”

Dad shook his head. “By vampires.”

The back of my neck prickled. I looked past my parents, scanning the woods behind them. This whole werewolf vision thing came in handy when it came to stuff like that. Was there another coven of vampires out there? Stalking us? Maybe they’d heard about Cali and her amazing fairy blood—apparently Gregor was still out there salivating over it.

But what did that have to do with me and Violet?

Why would anyone follow us here from Portland?

*I don’t know if I believe them*, Violet said. *Something’s wrong. I can tell.*

I stared at my parents and cleared my throat. “I need to talk to Violet for a moment. We’ll be right back.”

Before either of them could speak, I closed the door in their faces. I did it softly, no slamming or anything dramatic like that, but I still pulled the move smoothly.

Violet blinked at me in shock. “Did you just shut the door on your parents?”

Marta shrugged. “Eh, I would too. Didn’t they try to kill you?”

“That was amazing. Didn’t think you had it in you,” Violet said, offering me a proud smile. I loved the way she looked at me, but I didn’t have the time to get all moon-eyed over her at the moment. Unfortunately.

“I don’t know what to do with them, though,” I said.

Violet’s expression grew serious again. “They can’t stay here. A *werewolf* pack house?”

I nodded, rubbing my forehead. “Do you think they’re telling the truth, though? Could vampires have followed us? Is it possible they escaped from Bert’s?”

Violet didn’t answer. She just turned to Marta, who said, “Vampires are crafty, and very hard to kill. Like cockroaches. Bert had a hard time dealing with them because they were able to resist him, probably because they’re the undead.”

“Well, that helps,” I said awkwardly, because this didn’t help. Or it did help, but it made things even more complicated considering what was happening right now. Both with my parents and with any vampires potentially sniffing us out. Could they be telling the truth about that?

“Either way, we have to tell your parents something right now.” Violet pointed over her shoulder. “The other pack members are going to notice them, or sniff them out. What do you want to do?”

I contemplated my options for a moment. “If any vampires did follow us from Bert’s house, they need to be dealt with.”

I opened the door and faced my parents again. They seemed stoic but expectant. Very different from the happy-go-lucky couple I had grown up with. I was still worried that the pack would hear our conversation, though, so there was one thing I had to deal with right away.

“We should take this conversation somewhere else,” I said.

Everyone agreed, and Violet clutched at my arm as I led my parents toward the lake.

“I should sit this one out. Good luck dealing with your family problems!” Marta called after us, waving.

I wanted to slap my forehead. I sure hoped nobody from the house would ask her what that was about.

As all four of us silently walked by the lake, I glanced around. I was supposed to be a hunter, right? Then why wasn’t I sensing any vampires? Plus, since I was also a werewolf, shouldn’t I have been able to smell them? Shouldn’t Violet?

*Are you smelling anything?* I asked Violet.

Violet frowned, shaking her head.

I hoped Greyson and Xavier weren’t around—Greyson had made how he felt about hunters pretty clear, and Xavier wasn’t exactly the friendliest guy on a good day, much less toward someone he considered a threat.

Our silence was finally broken when my mother spoke up. “The pack house is very nice. I can see why you and Violet like it here, but…”

Of course there was a *but*.

“You are still expected to come back to Minnesota.”

I pressed my lips together to stop myself from letting out an awkward chuckle. This was such a *mess*.

“We will be happy to have you with us back home,” Dad added. Meanwhile, my mother slid the backpack off her shoulder and opened it.

She pulled out a massive crossbow, and for a second, every atom of my body saw her as a threat. There was something seriously fucking wrong with this entire situation if I had to look at my mother this way. Violet seemed to agree, because her grip around my arm was suddenly vice-like. *Shit*.

“I know you haven’t had the time to train with your crossbow,” Mom said, “but you need to start learning the tricks of the trade.”

Dad shrugged. “Crossbows are too much of a fuss. I prefer a good ol’ stake—both kinds.”

Wait, there were two kinds of stakes? *What?* Also, what was happening right now?

Violet and I exchanged a look.

*Do you think they’re gonna casually kill us right now, by the lake?* Violet asked me, half-joking. *Why is she showing off that crossbow, and why is your dad talking about stakes?*

I cleared my throat, staring at my parents. “Are you going to explain what’s going on right now? Why are we talking about weapons?”

Mother pinned me with her stare. “Sorry, son. We had hoped to do this in a more structured, planned way. But now we don’t have the time for that.”

I blinked. “Time for what?”

Dad arched his eyebrows at me. “We thought you understood what was happening here. Your mother just explained that you were followed by vampires.”

“And vampires are a threat to everyone,” Mom said. “Even to your precious *Violet*.”

The slight disdain in my mother’s tone did not escape me. But she was right. I didn’t want vampires to attack Violet. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders more tightly, protectiveness overcoming me. I wanted to stick by her side, always, but at the same time, I felt the urge to be with my parents, to train, to be the person I was supposed to be, before I’d been bitten. This was a family legacy, something that was literally coursing through my blood.

I stared at my mate.

I hoped that she would understand this. It was similar to her need to help Lilac, and I would never expect her to abandon her brother.

“I need to do this,” I told her.

Without another word, Violet nodded. My heart swelled up.

“I’ll see you later,” she said and kissed me on the cheek. I hugged her tight and was going for a real kiss when my mother cleared her throat.

“Well, Charlie,” she said. “Are you ready to go on your first official hunt?”

**Episode 1229**

We ran toward the sound of Jay’s scream.

*Is this a trap?* I asked myself, alarmed. *But then why would Mikah send us here?*

“That way!” Lola exclaimed, pointing down the hallway.

We moved around the corner, only to see Jay lying on the ground with a bunch of vampire children crawling all over him like bloodthirsty roaches. If I hadn’t known that they were trying to eat him, it would have looked like fun.

“LEAVE MY MATE ALONE, YOU DISGUSTING LEECHES!” Lola screeched and started grabbing the kids two at a time. The teenaged and childlike monsters buzzed over him like vultures. How were we going to get him out of there?! I didn’t want to use my Fae powers and accidentally hurt my friend, but I realized that I had no choice.

I raised my hands and aimed at the mountain of vampires on top of Jay. I took a deep breath, and energy streamed out of my fingertips, blasting them away. They flew in every direction, hitting chairs and walls and the fancy lamp in the corner.

*Victory!*

“Jay!” Lola rushed to her mate and helped him fix his eye patch.

Jay seemed fine, apart from a few little scrapes on his arms and wrists. He glared at the kids.

“He’s a werewolf!” one of the kids shouted.

“He smells like a wet dog!”

“You don’t smell so peachy yourself,” Jay grumbled as he got up.

“You’re Fae…” another of the older vampire teens said. She had curly blonde hair and porcelain skin. An angel, but supremely fucking creepy.

“Yeah, what about it?” I asked her, taking a step back.

All the vampire kids were now staring at me in wonder.

Little Blondie licked her lips, revealing her fangs. “You smell like candy…”

*What the hell?* I wondered. *Isn’t this supposed to be a safe haven? Because I sure as hell don’t feel safe right now!*

“You’d better stay back!” I ordered. “Don’t think that the whole angelic face thing you’ve got going is gonna trick me!”

The girl ignored me, looking like she was in a trance as she stepped closer, her pale blue eyes fixed on me. *Oh no no no!* I thought, looking around for something to defend myself—funny how there weren’t any wooden objects around.

“Is it true that Fae blood is delicious? That’s what the stories say,” the girl asked, and the rest of the vampire children started asking questions in the same vein. Pun intended. I remembered Sabyr going wild over my blood, and Lola, my actual best friend, going crazy trying to feed on me. This did NOT look good!

“It’s okay,” the little girl told me. “I just want a tiny bite.”

She said the words so innocently, so sweetly, that her vampire magic—whatever the hell it was—actually affected me and I started to feel safe around her.

Then suddenly, a loud voice boomed down the hallway.

“Winifred, you stop feeding on our guests right this minute, young lady!” Irma bellowed, and all the vampire kids jumped away from me and Jay.

*Took her long enough to come over and save us from these heathens!*

The teen devil—Winifred was her name, of all things—pouted like the brat that she was. “I just wanted a little taste.”

Irma stared at the girl seriously. “Here at the Tottenville School of Etiquette, Fae are not snacks—they are our friends. Now, you apologize to Cali right this minute.”

Winifred stared at me, licking her lips again before grumbling out an apology.

“Hey!” Jay said. “What about me? They attacked me!”

A different vampire brat spoke up then. “That wasn’t our fault! He’s a werewolf. We were scared!”

A third one—I decided to call it Leech 3—piped up as well. “They’re scary!”

Leech 4 exclaimed, “And we had never seen one before, so we didn’t know what to do!”

“How about you *don’t* eat him?” I asked these annoying children, eyebrows raised. Of course they ignored my question and kept making derogatory comments about werewolves.

“They’re very rude!”

“Like massive beasts!”

“And they don’t even taste that good, so what’s the point of them existing?”

“Silence!” Irma barked, interrupting them. “No more yelling. These are our friends, and they have come here for help.”

Winifred slowly stepped up to Lola and sniffed at her. “What about this one, though? She smells funny.”

Lola glared at the girl. “Excuse me?”

I did not like the way the curly-haired vampire was looking at my best friend. What was up with this kid? I had never met a more entitled child in my entire twenty years of life. I wondered how old she actually was.

“There there, Winifred, no more talking now.” Irma waved the kid off and gestured for me, Lola, and Jay to come with her. “Ignore the children and let me give you a tour. You probably have a lot of questions.” She turned toward the children, eyebrows arched. “The rest of you, go tend to your studies! Professor Laurence has high expectations.”

I could barely wrap my head around the fact that there was a professor here. Teaching vampire children. What exactly did this teacher teach them? Because “visitors are friends, not food” did not seem to be on the curriculum.

All of them started walking away, grumbling at the same time.

“And don’t forget to behave yourselves!” Irma called after them with a glare. Then she turned to my friends and me and beamed. “Anyhow, let’s get going.”

*Talk about mood swings*, I thought, bewildered.

Irma started showing us around the house, which was far more luxurious than I’d expected. “Apologies again for what just happened,” she told Jay. “Some of the children are still struggling with self-control.”

Lola pinned her with a stare. “Struggling? That’s a mild way to put it. Is it even safe here for Jay?”

Irma didn’t answer Lola’s question, which was encouraging. Instead, she said, “Why don’t we continue the tour?”

“This doesn’t feel right,” Lola whispered in my ear. “Are we even sure that Mikah wouldn’t send us into a trap?”

Mikah had never been bad to me, so I had no reason not to trust him. But at the same time, I felt like we needed to be super careful around here. Vampires were extremely unpredictable and dangerous in general.

“I really have no idea,” I whispered back to Lola. “We just need to make sure to be careful.”

Just then, Irma led us into a library that was decorated with plants. It was full of sun, the greenery rejoicing under its warmth. I stared at it all, alarmed as I remembered Sabyr’s reaction to sunlight.

“Um,” I said to Irma. “Isn’t that risky?”

Irma nodded. “Indeed, but it’s a good way to remind the residents to wear their daylight item at all times. This is the sunroom-slash-library—a place where students can come and relax, read a book, study, et cetera.”

“Charming,” Jay in the driest tone I’d ever heard him use. He was probably still salty about the vampire children attack, and who could blame him?

“It’s also a favorite hangout for Fluffy, our cat,” Irma added.

Irma gestured at a large house cat that was stretched out in the sun.

“Is Fluffy a vampire cat?” I asked.

Irma chuckled. “No. She feeds on mice only.”

The cat yawned, clearly uninterested. I was kind of jealous. I’d never been that relaxed in my entire life.

“Now, let’s go look at the garden,” Irma said, leading us outside. We moved across the massive patio and through the greenery in the back. The garden was the sort of place you saw in movies, full of trees and flowerbeds and fountains.

“Gardening is one of the many ways that our residents can connect with the earth and get used to the sun,” Irma explained. “And while our residents can’t grow, their plants can. There’s nothing more rewarding than raising your own vegetables.”

That didn’t sound all too bad. It sounded kind of sweet, actually, like gardening was some sort of therapy for these restless bloodthirsty entities. Maybe this place wasn’t the nightmare that I’d originally thought.

But then I felt a chill run down my spine.

As Irma kept talking about the garden, I turned around and faced the house. I felt that someone was watching us, but I couldn’t see anything. There was just a passing shadow in the upstairs window.

“… and that completes our garden tour,” Irma said. “Do you have any questions about any of the things you’ve seen today?”

“I mean, I’m still kind of freaked out by the vampire kids trying to eat me, but otherwise it was fine,” Jay said.

Lola shrugged. “It’s not like I have any other choice right now if I want to learn how to control myself, do I?”

“Not really,” Irma replied casually.

“So where are we staying?” I asked Irma.

Irma looked at all three of us, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, I think you misunderstood. This is a home for vampires only. Lola can stay, but the rest of you must leave before the sun sets.”

**Episode 1230**

AVA

Iñigo’s lips were cool—very different from a werewolf’s, but not unpleasant. I was flooded by the memory of our first kiss, when I’d thought that I could seduce him, only to have him figure out my motives very easily.

This felt different, though.

This felt real—I could tell from the way he grabbed me and let his tongue dance with mine. He pulled me closer with hunger. I could tell that he wanted to kiss me, and for some reason I wanted to kiss him too. Maybe it was because Xavier was a few feet away, bound and helpless, forced to watch, an Alpha powerless to do anything. An Alpha who had severed his bond with me for someone else. And she wasn’t even a wolf.

Xavier would be able to hear me with Iñigo. I knew it.

He’d unmated with me, so why shouldn’t I be allowed to indulge? Why could I not show him what he was missing? Exactly who he gave up. I’d show him that unmating meant nothing to me. Xavier would let his guard down; I’d have my chance.

I’d reclaim him as my mate—one way or another.

Iñigo was the perfect candidate to rub in Xavier’s face. Not only was he a vampire, but he was undeniably sexy. The way he devoured my mouth and moved his hands all over my body without any hesitation or restraint made my blood race, right along with my heartbeat. Iñigo moved his hands under my shirt, reaching up to graze my breasts, before moving back to my hips. I let him. I let him reach up my skirt and between my thighs and start teasing me.

“So this is a werewolf in heat, huh?” He chuckled in my ear, dipping his fingers past my panties to push inside me. “You’re so fucking wet, pet.”

I moaned, digging my nails into the back of his neck. His touch felt so good. This was the first time I’d been with anyone since Xavier and Greyson—and I’d regretted those encounters. But now, I was myself, not stuck inside Cali’s body, with her annoying little doe eyes making me appear innocent when I was anything but.

Iñigo could see me for who I was.

And I could see him for who he was as well. He didn’t hesitate to face me and let his fangs drop. “I won’t take much,” he said.

I stared at him for a moment, panting as the realization of what he was saying hit me. He wanted to drink from me. There was something titillating about hooking up with a vampire—something dangerous but sexy. It was like welcoming an enemy into my home. It could turn deadly at any moment, for any reason.

As someone who had already died, I needed that.

The second I nodded, Iñigo grinned.

“That’s a good girl,” he whispered, leaning closer to kiss me.

My breath hitched as he took my bottom lip between his lips, his teeth scraping along the sensitive skin. Then he broke the kiss and flipped me so my back was to his chest. My hands met the rough bark of a tree as he pushed my hair from my neck. Without any hesitation, he flipped my skirt up, digging his hands into my hips, and then I felt it—his teeth against my skin.

He bit me, right at the nape.

I cried out at the sensation and reached a hand back up to grab onto him for support. The feeling was intense, but it filled me with ecstasy. It made me feel alive. Heat spread from my neck throughout the rest of my body the more he drank. I was whimpering, feeling the hot pressure of him all over, starting from where his hands held me and ending at my neck.

“*More*.” I barely recognizing the rasp in my voice.

Removing my hand from his neck, I put my hand over his, pushing it downward. I needed the pressure of his fingers inside me again. Still drinking from me, his fingers began to tease my clit before sliding a finger inside me again. I started to find a rhythm against him, but as soon as I had, he was gone. His lips, his teeth, his hands.

“Patience, pet.” His belt jingled and there was a distinct rip of a condom’s foil. Then I could feel his erection pressed against my back. “Ready?”

“Please,” I said.

Without waiting another second, Iñigo slid into me from behind. He started to fuck me in earnest, the buckle of his belt digging into the back of my thigh with every sharp, relentless thrust. And his fangs were back at my neck, making me moan.

He drank from me, entering me in two different ways, and the euphoric feeling was multiplied by a million. My first orgasm was so intense that I almost lost my balance, but he kept me standing, kept pumping into me like he wasn’t done, like he *wouldn’t* be done until he’d had his fill. I hadn’t.

I moved my hips back to meet his thrusts, seeing stars. He stopped drinking, his lips at my ear. “I wonder where else I could taste you.”

The thought of his face between my legs pushed me over the edge again. He grunted in my ear, holding my ass hard enough that I wouldn’t be shocked if I had indents from his palms. He turned me over again, making me face him. In the afternoon sunlight, I took in his hungry eyes and the line of his jawline.

My back hit the tree, and he kissed me. He tasted like me, like my blood, and it would’ve been nauseating if I hadn’t been high on the adrenaline, the danger, and the toxic drug that was getting bitten by a vampire. He picked me up, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, seeking purchase as he slid into me again, making my entire body jolt with every pump of his hips.

Iñigo was a lot of bad, deplorable, and disgusting things, but I had to admit that right now, I loved it.

“You’ll come for me again,” he said, growling.

Nodding deliriously, I reached for my neck, finding the wet blood trickling down my skin. I offered my blood-covered fingers to Iñigo, who dragged his tongue up them, clearly savoring the taste as he kept eye contact with me. I couldn’t stop my moan as I went over the edge again, but this time so did he.

When we finished, he set me back on the ground. I readjusted my skirt, running fingers through my hair. My lips felt swollen and the rest of me shaky. Had I really just done that with him? Had it really been that good?

“I hope you realize this doesn’t change anything,” Iñigo said, breaking the silence as he zipped up. “You still owe me six Fae, and I intend to collect.”

Was I seriously hearing him right? I wasn’t sure if he was saying that for my benefit, or his own. Yes, we did have a business arrangement, but he seemed to enjoy bossing me around a little too much. The way he kept stealing glances at me now, even after we’d finished having sex, said a whole lot about his attraction toward me.

I could use that, in theory. It wouldn’t be easy to wrap him around my little finger—not a man like that, not a vampire—but it wouldn’t hurt to try. Xavier was my long-term goal, obviously, and Iñigo would eventually get him for me. That was my understanding of our deal.

Did I… Did I really want to get Xavier in that way, though?

“Are you listening to me?” Iñigo almost snapped, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I arched an eyebrow. “You don’t have to be so rude, you know. My legs are still shaking, give a girl a moment.”

Even though he scowled at me, I could see a glint in his eye. “I know what you’re doing.”

“What?” I asked innocently.

“Don’t try to flatter me.”

I laughed, straightening my skirt. “I don’t need to flatter you. You saw how much I enjoyed it.” I traced my neck, at the small holes there, wiping the blood away. “Even this part.”

He moved closer, tilting his head. “Well, it wasn’t bad for me either.”

I smiled, snorting. “Not bad, huh?”

He glared. “That’s what I said.”

“You claimed me. Inside and out. Didn’t know that vampires could be as territorial as werewolves.”

He advanced toward me until my back hit the tree. He was trying to intimidate me, but I saw through it. “Don’t fucking compare me to your dogs. You’d better watch your tongue, or—”

I glanced at his mouth, his fangs. “Or what? I promised you six Fae, didn’t I? Can’t get those if you kill me now.”

His eyes narrowed. Then he pushed his hair back with a chuckle. “Clever girl.”

“On occasion,” I told him, flipping my hair over my shoulder before adjusting the straps of my bra. He stayed silent, watching me as I straightened myself out. It was pretty heady to have that kind of effect on someone so dangerous, but I didn’t kid myself.

I knew he’d kill me if I made one wrong move.

“So?” he said as we started walking back toward the clearing where the rest of the vampires were. “What’s the timeframe on those Fae?”

“What’s the rush?” I asked.

“I have a lot of potential buyers—buyers who aren’t used to waiting long.”

“How lovely.”

He grabbed me by the arm, pulling me close. His eyes turned sinister. “Don’t make me wait too long.” He traced a finger down my cheek, grazing my neck, where the bite marks were slowly healing. “I’m not a very patient man, Ava.”

Apparently, I’d made a deal with the devil.

*Shit*.

As we emerged from the woods, I glanced over to where Xavier was. Had he heard?

But then I froze. The gurney was empty, covered in blood.

Xavier was gone.

**Episode 1231**

GREYSON

The punching bag in the basement was my personal enemy at the moment.

I kept going at it, because even though it didn’t really make me feel better, it was giving all my fucking frustrations an outlet. Maybe not a healthy outlet, but at least I could blow off some steam without hurting anyone or myself.

Cali had broken up with me.

And Fenrir could be my son, no matter what Maren said.

Getting the kid’s DNA for the test had been the easy part; now I had to wait for the results.

The possibilities were *gnawing* at me.

And then of course, Cali had gallivanted off to that vampire school. So I also had to worry about that. After what had happened with Sabyr, the idea of her being anywhere near vampires again made my hackles rise. But then again, Cali loved Lola, and I knew that there was no way that she wouldn’t have gone with her friend. I knew that Cali was loyal to a fault to those she loved…

Would she be loyal to me, though?

The question made me clench my jaw. I punched the bag so hard that it fell off the chains, revealing Arlo standing in the corner, staring at me.

How long had this guy been there, looking all creepy?

How the hell had I not heard or scented him earlier?

“How long have you been here watching me?” I asked.

Arlo blinked at me slowly. His eyes had a vacant kind of look that wasn’t his usual vibe. He wasn’t a drama queen or anything, not like Lola, but he was never shy or overly quiet. Usually he was pretty vocal in the gym. He stared at me for a beat and then flinched, as if he’d just seen me for the first time.

“I…” Arlo seemed lost. “I actually don’t know.”

I stared at his furrowed brow and confused expression. Was this a joke? Did I look like I was in the mood for jokes?

“What do you mean you don’t know how long you’ve been here?” I snapped.

Arlo shrugged, looking unfazed. “Actually, I’ve been having trouble remembering things lately.”

Right.

Of course.

Seriously, was this guy always so spacey? If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought that he was high or something. But his pupils weren’t dilated, and he didn’t smell funny. He was usually way too bro-y even for my taste. He didn’t “hit that grass,” but now that I thought about it, maybe he did, based on that phrasing. I contemplated telling him to buzz off, but then I thought that perhaps Arlo could be just the distraction I needed.

Also, as a good Alpha, I knew I should probably pay more attention to someone other than Cali.

“Do you want to work out…?” I asked him, gesturing at the weights.

Arlo paused. And then he said, “Yeah, that would be cool.”

He approached me, but that vacant look remained on his face. I made a mental note to ask Rishika about his attitude. Or lack thereof.

I was up first at the bench press. I took up the position and did my first rep. The weight of it felt grounding, unlike most of my life lately. I did a few reps, but each time I came back up, I thought of Cali. Her face, her mouth, her eyes… Exercise was supposed to help me forget, to keep me distracted, but it wasn’t working so well anymore. The punching bag had been better, actually—I’d have to get it up and running again ASAP.

As I kept going with the reps, I told myself to focus on something else other than Cali, but that was bullshit. I couldn’t stop thinking about the dream we’d shared. The idea of Cali being mine forever, and me hers. Our souls were connected, and I wanted us to share a life together, not just dreams. After everything we’d been through, how could she not want that too?

I *really* needed to talk to those witches.

I had no idea what kind of spell they ultimately had in mind for me, but at this point I couldn’t avoid seeking their advice. Not with Cali determined to stay away from both me and my brother.

But first, I needed to settle the situation with Fenrir.

I didn’t want to pursue a life with Cali without knowing the truth about the kid. I wanted to be able to put myself all in with Cali, in whatever way that might be. Whether I was a father or not. I needed to be honest, have no shadows in my past that could come back and bite us in the ass. I needed her to know that I would always be honest with her, to show her why she could never give up on us. To show her that I could be a good man for her, and for myself as well. Doing the right thing had to be a priority.

“Shit,” I grunted at the last rep. I was getting tired, so I glanced over at Arlo. The dude was looking far off, as if he were some sort of princess gazing into the distance from the top of her tower. He wasn’t always like this, was he?

I really wanted to smack him right now.

“Hey, pay attention,” I said. “You’re supposed to be spotting me!”

Arlo seemed to snap out of whatever trance he was in, probably thinking about his own woes of the heart. What else could make him look so weird? I contemplated asking him what was wrong, but I decided I needed to ask Rishika about him first.

Sheepishly, he apologized to me and helped lift the bar.

“It’s okay,” I told him, clearing my throat. “Your turn.”

Arlo took his position. Rishika walked in a moment later and looked between us with a smile.

“Didn’t know you guys were working out. Can I join in?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. At the same time, I gave her this look that hopefully said, *What even is this guy doing?*

Rishika pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. Arlo was her friend, not mine. Maybe she’d be able to snap him out of this weird funk he was in. I wasn’t quite the fuzzy feelings guy.

“Put more plates on,” Arlo told me then, surprisingly. Did this guy seriously think he could lift more than me? Then again, you never knew…

“Take it easy, okay?” I said after placing the plates.

Arlo wasn’t paying any attention to me. He started bench pressing the extra weight, and both Rishika and I watched, impressed. The guy had to know his limit, then. I wanted to ask Rishika if she’d noticed anything off about Arlo lately, but I refrained. *Your friend constantly bench more than the Alpha of his pack or what?*

Rishika cleared her throat and casually asked, “Sooo… How are you doing?”

The question was loaded. Same as my answer. “Fine.”

What a groundbreaking reply. As expected, Rishika gave me an unimpressed look. “Okay, but how are you *really*, Greyson?”

I continued to pretend that everything was okay. I’d do it until I didn’t have to anymore. Until I knew the truth. Until I had Cali back. I shrugged to underline how fine I was. “What do you mean?”

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Cali isn’t here, and she broke up with anyone and everyone there was to break up with. That doesn’t sound like it’s the best situation ever, and I can see that”—she pointed at me—“all over your face.”

Was it that obvious? Fuck, I needed to practice acting aloof. I used to be really good at it—what the hell was happening to me?

Rishika was about to say something else when Arlo let out a sound. We both turned to him. “Hey,” I said. “Careful!”

Arlo was struggling with the weights, so I hurried over to spot him. When I tried to help him, though, he glared up at me and barked, “Stay away, I can do it!”

I shot a look at Rishika, arching an eyebrow. What was he trying to prove exactly? He had to know that Rishika was interested in Artemis. Unless it was to impress me, the Alpha? Rishika looked equally baffled, which didn’t make me feel better. It was only a bare second before the weight came crashing down on Arlo, crushing his windpipe.

“*Shit*!” I exclaimed while Rishika dashed toward him. Both of us helped remove the weight. What the *hell* just happened? Why wouldn’t he let us help him? Why did he keep going?

“That’s not how you work out,” I told Arlo severely. “Know when to fucking stop, man. You could have gotten seriously hurt!”

Alro was still gasping, rubbing at his neck.

“What’s going on with you?” Rishika asked Arlo. “You know better than that! I’ve never seen you lift that much before.”

Arlo didn’t respond to either of us. He kept dry-heaving, and I started to worry. “Do you need me to get the healer for you? Let me help you stand,” I said, reaching out to take his hand and pull him to his feet.

But Arlo pushed me away, his force hard and shocking.

When our eyes met again, his were a fiery orange.

**Episode 1232**

LOLA

I wasn’t sure I’d heard Irma correctly.

“Why can’t the others stay here with me?” I asked, scowling at her.

Irma raised her eyebrows, looking like she was trying to be patient. “It’s just not safe to have a werewolf and a Fae staying at the Tottenville School of Etiquette.”

The woman seriously got a kick out of saying the entire title of her school, didn’t she?

“You must all realize that some of the vampires here are still learning to control their natural instincts,” Irma continued, shooting a glance at Jay. “Unfortunately, you have already seen how out of control of things can get.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cali said impatiently. “But there’s no way I’m leaving my friend here alone. Mikah may have recommended this place to us, but we don’t know you.”

Irma stared at Cali, her expression calm. “I understand your concerns. But in the hundred and twenty-seven years that Tottenville has been serving the vampire world, there have only been two incidents where things didn’t go according to plan.”

Jay did not look happy. “Incidents? What kinds of incidents?”

Irma blinked slowly. Much like the fluffy cat in the library. “It was a long time ago, and I’d rather not discuss it.”

Jay peered at her. “What if we want to discuss it, though?”

Irma stayed silent, glancing between the three of us. “I’m afraid that cannot happen.”

Cali turned to me and chuckled awkwardly. A little hysterically, too. “I think this is a huge mistake. We should go back to Big Mac—maybe she can do something for you.”

It felt like I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. “Big Mac is a witch, though,” I said. “As much as I’m hesitant about this whole thing, at least here I’d be with other vampires.”

As I said the words, I thought about how odd they sounded. When I’d been a werewolf, I would never have chosen to stay with vampires. They’d always given me the creeps. They gave everyone I knew the creeps. But what choice did I have right now? This was freaking horrible. I couldn’t trust myself around my best friend… Her Fae blood was too tempting. And Jay—my sweet beautiful mate—had offered me his blood, but what kind of relationship would that be? Jay was the man of my dreams, not a tasty little blood bag for me to feast on whenever I felt like it.

Even though he was delicious in more ways than one.

“Lola…” Cali’s voice was a warning, but I interrupted her.

“I’m not crazy about this either, but it’s what I have to do,” I told Cali, squeezing her arm as comfortingly as I could.

Irma smiled at me. “Of course it is. And we can help.” Her tone was so serene that it ended up sounding disturbing. What was it with vampires and being weird? Would I become weird too?

Jay sighed, taking my hand. “You don’t have to do this. You know that, right? We can find some other way.”

Jay’s energy was soothing and sweet as ever. I loved him even more for this suggestion. “We both know that I’ve become a danger to you all. And I don’t want to do anything that will make me hate myself. I don’t ever want to hurt you guys again.”

“But—”

“I can’t go back to the pack house, Cali,” I told her.

She pressed her lips together in resignation.

“We should all go somewhere else then,” Jay said.

“Somewhere else other than the pack house?” I asked. “That would mean you going Rogue, and we all know how important the pack is to you. The pack is important to me too, even after all this. Besides, where else could we go?”

Jay frowned. “Anywhere.”

“But what happens if I attack you?” I asked, my voice cracking at the possibility. “Or someone else? An innocent bystander?”

This last argument made Jay pause. He seemed troubled, but at the same time he seemed to realize that this was the only solution. I could tell by the way his body went rigid, by the disappointment in his stance. When he spoke again, his tone was low and soft. “You sure about this?”

I laughed, and Cali squeezed my shoulder. “No. I hate to leave you,” I said, looking at Jay. “And I hate to leave Cali. But I love you both too much to risk hurting either one of you.”

Cali huffed. “You don’t have to worry about me! I can use my magic, Lola.”

“But I can’t keep looking at you like you’re candy and I’m a sugar addict,” I told my friend, wincing. This was so fucking ridiculous. And a little creepy. I wanted to suck on my BFF’s neck.

Even Cali was at a loss for words now.

Jay exhaled sharply and turned to Irma. “I want your word that you will look after Lola. Keep her safe.”

Irma nodded seriously. “Of course. That’s the mission here at Tottenville—to help vampires live safely and freely in the world.”

It was like the woman was quoting a brochure. Cali seemed to think the same thing, because she looked at Irma suspiciously, clearly unimpressed.

But at the same time, it felt like we had no choice.

“If anything happens to you while you’re here,” Cali told me coldly, “Mikah and I will be having some serious fucking words.”

I chuckled, sniffling at the same time. I was always entertained and moved to see my formerly innocent friend turning into such a badass.

Jay pulled me into a hug, his strong arms tight around me. I nuzzled his neck, taking in his scent for the last time. Every part of him called to me in such a deep, carnal way. This wasn’t just bloodlust; it was lust and love, too.

“I love you, baby,” he whispered in my ear.

I teared up, sniffling. “I’ll text you every minute of every day.”

Jay chuckled. “That might drive me crazy, but I love it.”

Cali was next to hug me, and she squished me against her for what felt like a lifetime. Yeah, I loved being close to my friend, but this was getting uncomfortable. Cali’s Fae blood was singing inside my head like a siren. I needed to control my urges, just so I could come back and be there for her like I used to.

I needed to be there for her, like she was always there for me.

“You’d better go,” I told her, clearing my throat. “I don’t want to make a snack out of you.”

Cali chuckled. But that hadn’t actually been a joke.

“I’m so sorry for biting you,” I said awkwardly.

Cali shrugged. “Already forgotten. As long as you’re back home by Thanksgiving!”

I hoped that I would be. I hoped I’d be able to have a nice holiday season with my friends without thinking about them being my dinner.

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I, of course, started crying when Cali and Jay left. Irma patted my shoulder. “You’ll be fine, dear.”

I wasn’t sure if she was trying to convince me or herself.

Irma then told Jacqueline—a 102-year-old “student” who’d be showing me around. She didn’t look too pleased to be doing so either. She was serving me more hot, mean sorority chapter leader than anything else.

We paused by the door. I was about to thank her when Jacqueline said, “Let me give you some advice—don’t bother me again.” And then she stomped off.

“Relax, Regina George!” I called after her.

She definitely didn’t recognize that reference, because she just shot a glare over her shoulder and kept walking away from me. I rolled my eyes. What a little piece of work. It was obvious that this was not going to be easy.

I hated being away from Jay, and I should have asked Irma how long her training would take. I did not want to spend Thanksgiving here, not with nasty vipers like Jacqueline around. Besides, nobody made mashed potatoes like Mr. Hart…

Though I wasn’t all that interested in mashed potatoes anymore, was I? My stomach and heart were in a battle.

I sighed to myself and opened the door to the bedroom. The space was surprisingly large, with heavily draped windows, and a big four-poster bed. I stared at it, biting my lip. I was already missing Jay. I missed his scent, his hands on me, and the way he always told me that things would be okay. I missed his dorky little smiles when I made him laugh.

I had to give this my best shot for him. And for Cali, too.

I didn’t want to hurt them. If I did, I just wouldn’t be able to keep on living my life.

Inhaling deeply, I closed the door behind me and walked toward the window. It was twilight outside, and the light shining into the greenhouse was beautiful. I could try to get used to this place. At least I had a great view of the garden, and the—

Something interrupted my thoughts.

I sensed an energy in the room, out of the blue.

I was not alone.

My instincts roaring, I spun around.

There was a gorgeous guy sitting on the chair in the corner, his deep-set eyes fixed on me.

He smiled. “You’re not like the other vampires, are you?”

**Episode 1233**

I let Jay drive on our way back to the pack house.

It seemed like he needed the distraction, and I understood that one hundred percent. Leaving Lola was difficult for both of us, but I had to admit that it made sense. Lola couldn’t stay with us at the moment. She was a danger to others, and herself as well. Werewolves were creatures of instinct, and letting an unhinged vampire inside their home could make them go haywire.

As much as it pained both Jay and me, we needed to let Lola do this one herself. She had to get her bloodlust under control. As much as it was vaguely flattering to have my best friend call me *a tasty little snack*, I did not need that kind of vibe in my life. Mostly because it could mean my death. But the whole thing with Lola was so strange…

She was *alive*, but a vampire at the same time. I was kind of glad that she wasn’t a normal vampire. It gave me hope for her when it came to controlling her urges. Then again, Mikah could control himself, and he was a normal vampire. But he had mentioned at some point that it had taken him years to reach that level of self-discipline.

*I can barely control myself when it comes to eating waffles*, I thought. *Wait, are waffles to me what blood is to vampires? Thank god I don’t have to give them up.*

Ignoring my ridiculous thoughts, I turned to Jay, who was constantly heavily sighing like the sensitive little puppy that he was. The man could brood like no one else, rivaling even Greyson.

“How are you doing?” I asked, wincing in regret the moment the words escaped me. “Don’t answer, that’s a dumb question.”

Jay sighed. *Again*. “It’s not. Thank you for asking.”

“I can’t even imagine how stressful this must be for you, having a vampire for a mate and all.”

Jay shook his head. “I’m only worried about Lola. If anything happened to her, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Poor Jay. He was always so sweet. His words hit a chord with me. They reminded me of my own situation—I would feel lost and broken if anything ever happened to Greyson or Xavier. It would feel like pieces of myself had been broken off.

Without them, I could never be whole again.

*And now that I’ve broken up with them, I—*

I didn’t finish the thought. I ignored it.

*No time for that now, Cali.*

“I get what you mean,” I told Jay quietly.

When he spoke again, there was a hint of hope in his voice. “But Lola is strong. If anyone can handle a house full of unpredictable vampires, it’s her.”

I snorted. “She was unpredictable even before she became a vampire. These people won’t know what hit them.”

Jay smirked. “Exactly. Lola can hold her own in every situation. I’ve never met a more stubborn person—except maybe you. Or Xavier.”

I gasped in fake offense.

Jay laughed. “Oh come on, you know what I mean!”

“I actually do,” I said, rolling my eyes. “It’s a miracle that Lola and I have managed to stay such close friends all these years while having such intense personalities. That’s why I trust her to be okay as well.”

“Lola is a superhero,” Jay said with a smirk. “Even if Greyson calls her a drama queen.”

I snorted. “Well, she can be both a drama queen and a superhero.”

Jay chuckled, the fondness in his expression evident. He loved Lola so much.

I smiled at him. “I really appreciate how supportive you are of Lola. How you respect her and her choices, and how she does the same for you. Vampire or not, you two are truly mates.”

“That’s what I tell myself when things get rough,” Jay said. “Surprisingly, they’re rough more often than not.”

“Lola says that she’s really great in bed and that’s why you put up with all her bullshit,” I teased.

Jay choked, his cheeks flushing. We stared at each other for a moment and then burst into awkward laughter. Despite everything, it felt therapeutic.

“I just hope Lola will be able to find some answers,” I mumbled when it died down.

Jay nodded. “I really hope so too.”

I pressed my lips together. “Sometimes I feel like things in our lives could not get more out of control, and then—”

A loud thud on the roof interrupted me. *What the hell?*

Both Jay and I jumped. Suddenly, the sky turned an ominous dark blue. There was a downpour of sleet while large hailstones bounced off the windshield.

I gasped. “What is happening right now? The sky was perfectly clear, like, a second ago!”

Jay seemed equally alarmed and puzzled. “The weather forecast didn’t say anything about a storm,” Jay said. “It’s too dark and the hail is too thick—I can barely see!”

Right on cue, a hailstone the size of a softball landed on the windshield with a loud *CRACK!*

Both Jay and I screamed. Jay swerved, pulling over to the side of the road.

“How dare you!” I yelled at the weather, because it was being ANNOYING. “What the hell did you do that for?”

Jay remained calm, but I noticed that his chest was heaving. I, on the other hand, was full-on panting. My heart was pounding. “What a freak storm. Does Oregon have tornadoes?”

“I can bring you a tornado if you really want one,” someone said from the back seat.

*SOMEONE WAS IN THE BACK SEAT?*

I screamed, and both Jay and I spun around to see an attractive woman with brilliant green eyes sitting in the back. *OH MY GOD!* What fresh hell was *this*?

As if she hadn’t just popped up out of the blue in a strange car, the woman grinned at me. “But I wouldn’t recommend a tornado. They can be a little hard to control.”

*Right*, I thought sarcastically*. Because that’s literally our only problem right now!*

My mind was reeling, but I still managed to notice that the woman was wearing a park ranger uniform, her cloud-like hair jutting out from underneath the hat. Why was she wearing a uniform? What was happening right now?!

“How did you get in here? I distinctly *don’t* remember hearing the car door open while we were driving down the road!” I exclaimed.

The ranger smiled. “I didn’t want to stand out in the rain. And I generally don’t like doors, and I don’t need them, so why bother to use them?”

Looking pale, Jay blinked at the ranger slowly. “You don’t like doors.”

That was one thing to get hung up on.

“Who even are you?” I asked the woman.

The woman smiled, her green eyes twinkling. “I’m Vander.”

I just loved how casual she was about this whole thing. Dropping into a stranger’s moving car without any notice? Apparently, totally normal in her book! I wondered if I was having one of those lucid dreams. I grabbed Jay’s arm. He felt as real as can be, muscly biceps and all.

“You see and hear her too, right?” I asked sheepishly.

“Yup,” Jay said. “Even with one eye.”

This was not a dream. Nope.

Slowly, I turned to the woman again. Jay seemed to snap out of whatever stupor he was in. “What are you doing in our car?” he asked firmly.

Jay was always so nice that I’d almost forgotten he was a werewolf—and a very good fighter, too. Suddenly I felt much better about our chances. I had my powers, and I had Jay. I didn’t *think* Vander was here to hurt us, though. Was she?

Meanwhile, Vander said, “I’m just sitting. And don’t worry about my getting the seat wet. I’m dry.”

Jay stared at her. “That’s not what I meant. Why are you here?”

I was feeling a tremendous presence of magic coming off the ranger. Swallowing roughly, I asked, “Are you a witch? Fae?”

Vander smiled enigmatically. “I’m all of those things—and also none of them.”

Jay glared at her. “You’re also an uninvited guest in our car.”

Even though Jay was being uncharacteristically aggressive, I understood his stance. Werewolves were very territorial, and he was acting on instinct. But my own gut said that there was nothing about this mysterious Vander person that seemed menacing.

“The storm is still raging, and I don’t think we should throw her out into that hail. Give me a second with her,” I told Jay.

Jay paused, then nodded slowly. “Okay.”

Turning to the woman, I asked, “Why are you dressed as a park ranger?”

She shrugged. “Because I *am* a park ranger. I’m the Keeper of All Nature.”

Jay and I looked at each other incredulously.

“*What?*” I squeaked.

Vander pouted. “Didn’t your family mention me?”

“My family?” I asked.

“Your sister? Artemis?” Vander asked. When I shook my head she looked puzzled. “Even after I kissed her?”

I wasn’t sure what she expected me to say*.* “Congratulations for exchanging saliva with my sister”? This was too weird!

Vander’s playful expression faded. “Look, I came here because your sister is in serious trouble.” She leaned forward and handed me a ranger badge. “Artemis needs your help. Can I count on you?”

**Episode 1234**

ARTEMIS

I had no idea how long I’d been moving through the woods. The voice in my head had been quiet for a while. But I didn’t need to hear it to know the truth.

It was the Orb.

Somehow, it was speaking to me.

Was this my punishment for trying to destroy it? Would it slowly take over my brain and swallow my soul? I was still haunted by what had happened with Arlo. It felt like a dream, like a horrible nightmare that I couldn’t wake up from. The look in his eyes as he’d died, staring at me, knowing that I’d killed him…

The Orb had made me do it. The Orb had caused it to happen.

But then, it had brought Arlo back. Arlo was alive again. Why had the Orb done that? To show off its power? To show me that life and death had no meaning, and the Orb itself was the ruler of all that existed?

Why did it think I would want that kind of power? Why would *anyone* want that kind of power? This was dark, dreadful magic—the kind of magic that I didn’t want to touch. The kind of magic that caused only pain and death and horror. I knew that the Orb was trying to trick me, to use me somehow. Even now, when it wasn’t screaming inside my head, I could feel it lurking there, its energy consuming me with every step. The feeling wasn’t natural.

Everything the Orb did went against the natural order of things.

I was starting to suspect that the balance of the world was at stake, and I did not—under any circumstances—want this kind of magic anywhere near me. I’d only wanted to get my normal Fae powers back. That was what I’d been missing, a part of myself. A part of my real self, crucial to who I was as a person.

But regardless, I did *not* want the Orb’s help to get my powers back.

There was no way that would do me any good.

And then, as if it could hear my thoughts—I was sure it could—the voice returned.

*Artemis…*

My name vibrated around the woods, bouncing off the trees and the leaves and the sky above before it ended up inside my head, as always.

Always inside my head, burning my mind.

*Why are you still resisting me?* it asked. *You are trying to fight your destiny—you deny this, you deny yourself.*

“This isn’t who I am!” I shouted. “I’m not someone who kills people just for you to bring them back to life!”

The voice chuckled deeply.

I felt like crying. “You have to stop this! Why won’t you leave me alone?”

The sobbing yell was cut from my throat.

In the blink of an eye, I was back in the Fae world. I was at my grandmother’s estate, watching from above, as a declaration of peace was signed between the Dark and the Light Fae. Panting, confused, I stared. What the fuck was going on?

And, like always, the voice replied.

It was heavy with knowledge, with an intimidating kind of certainty that I was sure would intimidate even the fiercest characters.

*You did this*, it said. *You ended a war that started before you were born and brought peace to the Fae world.*

Holding my breath, I watched as my grandmother wiped tears from her eyes.

“I didn’t do this,” I said. “I never did.”

The voice hissed, *But you will—if you stop rejecting me. Greatness is yours. You’ve already agreed to my offer. Now you must accept it—feel it.*

The only thing I felt right now was the pulsating realization that I was slowly losing myself.

*Make me your guide*, the voice went on. *You were meant for this. You know it. Your father knew it, too.*

I choked. *Kadmos*? “Don’t you mention my father!”

The moment I said the words, I was no longer at my grandmother’s estate.

I was standing in the middle of a drive-in movie theater lot. Cali had explained the concept to me over and over, because I just couldn’t understand why it was so entertaining to humans. The movie playing against the wall was a cartoon, something colorful and happy.

It was all wrong.

“Get out of the way!” someone yelled at me, honking their horn.

I stumbled away from the car, panting and confused. How had I gotten here? Was this real, or was it dark magic? The magic could only be dark, always, because this was my life now.

I’d made a deal with something far larger than myself, something bigger than life and death, something that could kill me, kill those I loved, in a moment. Something that could make it as if none of us had ever existed.

Would I continue to exist, now that this thing was inside me?

Now that this thing was doing things to my mind?

Would I keep moving through time and space until bits and pieces of me had been scratched up and dragged through every universe possible, human and magical?

*I’m only doing what you want*, the Orb said. There was a smile in its voice—it was so human-like in its expression of feeling. There was glee there, and greed, and desire that bordered on lust. Lust for someone’s soul.

Lust for *my* soul, despite the fact that I had once considered myself soulless after all the things that I’d done to survive—to be strong in the Fae world, to make the right alliances with the worst kind of people. I’d been the Kollector’s puppet for how long? I’d become complacent in that life until Cali arrived.

Maybe I deserved this for everything I’d done. Maybe this would be the thing that finally did me in. Maybe it would be a fitting end, for the voice my head to destroy me. After all, I’d led so many other beings to their own destruction when I’d brought them to the Kollector.

*I’m only doing what you want*, the voice said again.

And again I screamed, “I don’t want this! I didn’t want to kill Arlo! I tried to destroy you!”

The voice laughed. *You tried to destroy me, did you? And you think that makes you good? You think that makes you deserving of love? You think that makes you deserving of Tom’s food and his fondness? Of Cali’s smiles and hugs? Of Orla’s motherly care? Of Rishika’s kisses and emotions? Because it doesn’t. You deserve what I say you deserve. Do you understand?*

I didn’t. I didn’t understand any of this.

“I left you in the Fae world,” I said, tears dripping down my cheeks, feeling sharp like blades. “Why did you return?”

*I never left you*, the voice said. *I never will. Unlike your mother, unlike Cali, I will never abandon you. I will always be here for you, within you, and I will never, ever let you go.*

Dread was lodged in my throat like a cry.

And then another voice spoke. A different one.

“Excuse me. Are you okay?”

I spun around to face a young man. He was wearing a jacket with a drive-in name on it. I ignored him. How could I possibly answer that question without sounding insane? “The voice in my head keeps telling me to kill people”—how could I tell anyone that without being locked up?

“Hey!” the boy said as I moved past him, and he blocked my way again. “You can’t be walking around like this—where’s your car?”

I looked at the boy’s hand on my sleeve, and the voice in my head returned.

*Don’t let him touch you. He’s not worthy—you need to make him fear you. Kill him.*

Kill him?

Kill him.

This had happened before, at the service station, when the voice had told me to kill the clerk. I had resisted it then, and I was going to resist it now. I was going to be strong once more. Because I had no choice, because I couldn’t be what the Orb wanted me to be.

I needed to get out of here before I lost control of myself.

I needed to get out of here before my last thread of sanity snapped.

I needed to get out of here before this kid got in my way.

“You want him dead, you do it. I won’t,” I told the voice.

The young man gaped at me. He was cute. He looked to be around Cali’s age or even Violet’s. He was innocent. Innocent enough not to die like this.

“What is going on with you?” he asked, alarmed. “Do you need me to call—”

I reached to brush his hand off my sleeve. I didn’t want him anywhere near me. It was better if he wasn’t. It was—

In the blink of an eye, he was blasted back by a powerful surge of energy, collapsing in a motionless heap.

**Episode 1235**

Jay and I stared at the shiny badge in Vander’s hand. I was completely confused. What was this person doing? What was happening right now? This was getting weirder and weirder with every passing second!

“You want me to… become a park ranger?” I asked Vander, eyebrows raised in what I hoped was not only disbelief but also mild judgment. I couldn’t freaking believe we were having this conversation right now, after she had broken into our car!

Her reaction to my question was to smile, wide and happy. “Yes! I was hoping you’d want to. I can swear you in right now!” she said enthusiastically. As if we were all friends here. And she hadn’t just admitted to creating a storm just for fun. As if she hadn’t somehow poofed into this car out of thin air and, oh, apparently kissed my sister?!

Of course, in the midst of all the nonsense that Vander had brought into this car, she had mentioned one very important thing: my sister. What was going on with Artemis? I needed to find out pronto.

“How does becoming a park ranger help Artemis in any way?” I asked Vander, impatient. It seemed like she liked speaking in riddles.

She gave me an indulgent smile. “You would be aligning yourself with the forces of good, becoming a servant in the ageless quest to restore harmony in the world. To all worlds.”

Like I was saying.

Why did it feel like Vander was reading the script of a commercial? This whole thing sounded a little cult-y. It also didn’t make any sense. “Excuse me? Not to be rude, but what the hell are you talking about?”

Vander started again. “I’m talking about being a servant in the ageless quest to restore—”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, I got that part. What I don’t get is what it has to do with Artemis?”

I was getting a little freaked out and anxious here. Artemis was just a Fae—she wasn’t out to upset the harmony of anything! *Everyone leave my sister alone!* I was pretty upset over the fact that she’d only been in the human world for a few weeks and couldn’t seem to stay out of trouble.

“How do we know what you’re saying is even true?” Jay stared at Vander with narrowed eyes—*eye*. I realized that since Lola wasn’t here with us, Jay had effortlessly fallen into the role of the bad cop. I was obviously always the good cop, because my Dad had raised me to be super nice, but I hadn’t expected Jay to be such a good partner in this kind of thing.

“I always tell the truth,” Vander told Jay, unbothered.

“Then prove it,” Jay told her, determined. I was so impressed by him being a hardass.

*Look at our sweet Jay go!* I thought to myself.

“That’s the easiest part,” Vander said casually and looked between us. “Are you tired of this storm? I know I am.” She snapped her fingers, and the storm was instantly replaced by a sunny day, complete with the biggest rainbow I had ever seen.

My jaw practically fell to the floor.

Vander then added, “Or perhaps you’d prefer something more intimate.” With another snap of her fingers, the sky turned a deep blue, twinkling with stars and a harvest moon. It was breathtaking—both the scenery, and the fact that this woman had made it happen.

*Okay, this Vander person has some serious magic skills*, I internally admitted to myself. *Maybe she’s telling the truth.*

I locked eyes with Jay, who seemed to have forgotten he was the bad cop, too busy being stunned.

I stared at Vander. “Okay, what do you want me to do? What’s going on with my sister?”

Vander seemed pleased for a moment before starting to ramble. “I encountered Artemis during a time of great upheaval in the natural world. I suspected Artemis was somehow involved, and my suspicions gained traction after I kissed her.”

I blinked. Then I raised my index finger to interrupt. “Excuse me, about that kiss—”

Vander ignored me. “That kiss should’ve restored her Fae power, but it failed the first time. So naturally, I tried again.”

I could not believe what I was hearing right now. Jay was looking so bewildered that it would have been funny if it hadn’t been so odd. “So you and my sister made out so she could take back her Fae powers, but then she didn’t. Was making out even necessary?”

Vander shrugged. “Maybe not the second time,” she admitted, “but Artemis didn’t seem to mind. I didn’t.”

Jay seemed to be thinking the same thing. “What’s your point here, exactly?”

“The point is that something is not right with Artemis,” Vander said. “Something that I fear is tied to the Fae world portals closing.”

Great, that was exactly the thing I wanted to hear. Not. My stomach clenched with worry. I had so many things on my plate right now, but worrying about Artemis seemed to always be a priority. “Does this have to do with her breaking the Fae promise? Or could it have something to do with Kadmos, her father?”

Vander scratched her chin thoughtfully. “I don’t know, actually. That’s why I want you to accept the badge and keep an eye on Artemis.”

Jay shot me a sideways look. He was back to being bad cop. “I don’t understand why this so-called Keeper of All Nature needs to have you spy on your sister.” He then stared at Vander. “It seems to me that it’s something that you should be able to handle on your own since you’re a powerful… *being* and all.”

Vander sighed. “Oh dear, I wish I could. But I have a lot of responsibilities, and while I’d love to be everywhere at all times, even I have my limits.”

Jay looked alarmed. “What do you mean by that? What kinds of responsibilities?”

Vander gave us another one of her enigmatic smiles. “Let’s just say that there’s a lot going on right now. Ever heard of something called Global Warming? Good luck!”

Vander vanished from the back seat with a pop. Jay and I shared a dubious look.

“What the hell just happened?” he asked me.

I shook my head. I didn’t have a clue, but it wasn’t anything good.

\*\*\*\*

Ten minutes later, Jay and I were almost at the pack house. I kept staring at the badge that Vander had given me. It was so shiny. It was like it was beckoning me to put it on, just by being its shiny, beautiful self.

*Oh my god, Cali!* I told myself, scolding. *How are you so attached to this thing already?*

Jay arched an eyebrow. “Are you really going to wear that?”

I nodded. “I guess so. Vander warned me to keep it with me at all times. But she never explained why it was so important.” I shrugged and pinned it to my shirt.

Jay smirked. “What now? Should I call you Ranger Hart? Ranger Cali?”

I rolled my eyes. “Just call me Cali.”

He shook his head. “You’re no fun.”

I ignored his teasing. “Do you think Artemis is really in some kind of trouble?”

Jay seemed hesitant. “I can never really tell with your sister. She’s definitely got a lot going on.”

“She has been acting strange, lately. She’s been very irritable… But she’s not one to open up—she’s been a loner most of her life.”

“I get what you mean. Are you okay with that?” Jay asked me.

“I guess. But sometimes, I just wish my sister would be… more like a sister.”

“Like you and Lola?” Jay asked.

I nodded. “A little. Lola’s like a sister, but this is different. It was supposed to be the real thing, you know?”

Jay sighed. “I wish I could be more helpful with this. I hope Artemis is okay, and I’ll be there to help you with whatever you need. But right now, all I can think about is Lola in that vampire house.”

“I get it. And thank you, Jay,” I said, smiling, just as we took the final turn toward the house. “I think Lola should be fine, if anything—”

“HOLY FUCK!”

Jay’s scream startled me so badly I felt my soul leave my body. He jammed on the brakes, the car screeching in protest. This was the second time I’d been utterly terrified in the last fifteen minutes! *Jesus!*

“WHAT THE HELL, JAY?” I demanded, slapping his arm after the car had come to a stop.

Panting, he pointed in front of him, his chest heaving with shock.

*WHAT? What on earth is it this time?* I screamed inside my head.

Then I saw what he was pointing at, and my blood ran cold.

Arlo was standing in the harsh glare of the headlights, holding a can of gasoline.

“Oh my god,” I choked out. “What is he *doing*?”

Arlo had doused himself with gasoline and was now holding a lit match.

**Episode 1236**

LOLA

So this was a great start to my stay here! NOT.

I stared at the man, making sure to appear as confident and ready to fight as possible. “What the hell are you doing in my room?” I demanded.

I wished I could shift into my old wolf form and rip his head off. But this had me wondering: what happened when a vampire fought another vampire? Could I beat this guy? I knew how to kick ass without shifting, but at the same time, this was brand new territory for me.

I had to actively try not to flinch when the man stood from the chair, his movements smooth and effortless. His eyes never left me. He had to have been less than thirty when he’d been turned. He was a stunner, and I wondered if that was a vampire thing and *Twilight* had been right all along.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I told the man as he started circling me like a very sexy shark.

I wondered if Jacqueline had brought me to the wrong room on purpose to scare me, as some sort of mean girl hazing ritual. She would be sorry. That girl had no idea who she was messing with—I would literally make it my life’s mission to see her pay. I had all the time in the world to cause trouble, especially without Jay to distract me with affection and sex.

“I just saw you arrive,” the man said, “and I wanted to meet you in person.”

*Shit*. That sounded ominous. Was I going to die here?

“Why would you want to meet me?” I asked the man. Because this made no sense.

“I’m Emmett Laurence,” he said, ignoring my question. “One of the professors here at Tottenville.”

At least he wasn’t here to kill me. And I didn’t have to start a war with Jacqueline. At least not yet. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say to him, though. The guy kept staring at me in a way that felt devouring; he started from the top of my head and dropped his gaze down to my toes, analyzing every inch of me.

I was ashamed to admit that I felt flustered. But it would’ve been impossible *not* to be.

The guy may have been a vampire, but he was the hottest vampire I’d ever seen. Not that I’d really interacted with many beyond Gregor and his coven, who were on the Gross List. It was weird to notice a professor being so hot, but it was still almost overwhelming.

“I already know your name,” he said. “But I think I’d like to hear it from you as well.”

“My name is Aaliyah Spillane,” I squeaked. “But you can call me Lola. Everyone does.”

Emmett smiled. Who smiled like that? It was such just a simple gesture, but he made it so suggestive and seductive that it felt… too much.

“Lola, huh? Hmm.”

*Hmm*? What was *that* supposed to mean?

I hadn’t felt so self-conscious in forever. I wasn’t sure if he was checking me out or thinking about draining me dry.

He leaned in closer. “A living vampire. How interesting.”

His voice was smooth, like velvet. Incredible. It made it hard for me to concentrate on anything other than him.

“Is that unusual?” I asked, even more flustered now.

Emmett looked into my eyes. “It’s not common, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He moved even closer, until there was just a foot between us, between our bodies. I could feel my heart race. Could he sense that? Of course he could. I didn’t like it.

I didn’t like the way he made me feel.

The words were out of my mouth before I could control them.

“I have a mate,” I blurted out.

He arched a brow, not speaking for a moment. And when he did, it was with a condescending smile. “Good for you.”

I wasn’t a dead vampire, but I sure wanted to die right now from the embarrassment. Why had I even said that? What had I been *thinking*?

Still smirking like the devil, Emmett strolled toward the door like some sort of runway model. But then, he paused. He faced me again. “I look forward to working with you,” he said curtly. “Have a good night.”

He closed the door behind him. I stood there, still flustered, so *embarrassed*.

What had just happened?

Had he been flirting with me? Or worse—had I been flirting with him?!

The thought was absurd, but I was still hit by a twinge of guilt. I reached for my phone, ready to call Jay and hear his voice. Ready for him to remind me that we loved each other. Always had, always would.

But I stopped myself.

I didn’t want to worry Jay.

He was already stressed out about me being in this place. If I called him so soon, he would assume that something was very wrong and come back to pick me up. Because he was that kind of person, that kind of mate. I reminded myself that nothing was wrong. Nothing had really happened just now.

Maybe I’d imagined the whole thing…

I dropped down onto the bed and opened up a picture of Jay on my phone. I zoomed in, taking in his chiseled jaw, his soft curls, and the glint in his green eyes. *Eye*. He’d lost an eye for me. That was him—my handsome, sweet, caring mate, who could make my toes curl with a kiss and a touch.

I sighed dreamily and kissed my phone screen.

I got ready to text him, but I stopped myself. What if he was driving?

Deciding to text him in ten minutes, I lay on the bed, but I got pretty bored quickly. I knew I should probably unpack, but I hated unpacking as much as I hated packing. I ended up pacing the room, still wondering if Jacqueline had known that Emmett had been in here.

I needed to get out of this room, actually.

I could still feel Emmett’s energy in here, as if he were still in my space, watching me.

Swallowing roughly, my heart still pounding, I opened the door and slipped into the hallway. I checked in both directions and saw that the coast was clear. I decided to go downstairs, maybe ask Irma what was going to happen next, when I ran into Winifred. She was the one who’d wanted a taste of Cali’s candy Fae blood.

What a fucking asshole.

“So you’re staying?” she asked me, crossing her arms.

“Apparently,” I said dryly.

“Who was the guy with the eye patch?” Winifred asked with a little smirk. “He looked like a hot pirate prince, and he tasted *very* good.”

I was about to tell her that I knew he tasted good, but that he was mine and to stay away. But I stopped myself, because this whole thing was seriously messed up. Still, though, I needed to answer her question.

“That was Jay, my mate,” I said proudly.

Winifred seemed surprised. “Your *mate*?”

A stream of laughter came from a few feet away. I looked up to see a bunch of other vampires listening in to us.

I scowled. “Yup. Jay’s my one and only. Always has been.”

Another vampire ambled over, this one looking like she was over eighteen in human years. “Let me get this straight,” she said. “You’ve only been with this Jay? Nobody else?”

I was kind of offended by this almost-accusation. What was her problem?

“I did kiss someone else once, when I was a kid,” I said.

Which just made them all laugh even more.

“Lola,” Winifred told me patronizingly, “you need to expand your horizons.”

I glared at her. “I don’t want to. I don’t need to. I have Jay.”

She blinked in surprise. “Wow. That’s weird.”

“I’ve never even considered doing anything with other guys. Jay’s it for me,” I told her seriously.

Winifred snorted. “Good luck with that. Let us know how it works out.”

I seriously did not like her fucking tone.

“We’re having dinner in a few minutes—listen for the bell.” Winifred told me, then walked off with her friends in the most casual way possible. Like she was bored with me.

Why had she been so surprised to hear that I had a mate?

I’d never even questioned it before.

But then I was hit by the memory of Emmett circling me like a wild animal. If I was being honest with myself, I had been attracted to him in that moment… But I’d never do anything about it. I would never! Like I’d told Cali—

No! This was NOT what I’d told Cali.

My stomach clenched, making me feel nauseous. I remembered that when Cali had first told me about wanting to kiss Greyson, I had been upset. I’d told my friend that she should never want to kiss anyone other than her mate.

Had I been wrong?

Or had turning into a vampire broken my mate bond with Jay?

**Episode 1237**

XAVIER

I was feeling weak and broken.

But then Cali came to me.

I tried to lift my head, to look at her, but she whispered, “Rest. Let me take care of you.”

She had always been good to me, so caring and sweet. She kissed my neck, and I felt the euphoria of her touch. She had finally come back to me; I’d always known she would. I’d always known that in the end she would see that I was her one true mate. I was her first, I was the real one, and Greyson had been a mistake all along.

I wanted her to tell me those things.

I wanted to believe those things.

And yet, the kiss turned painful.

The fantasy was over, and I regained consciousness in an unfamiliar room, still strapped

to a gurney. Cali wasn’t the one kissing my neck, and the kiss was not a true one. The vampire had his fangs deep in my neck, and the pain of it was torture, despite any leftover twisted pleasure. He pulled away from me, and I could barely make out his face, just the fact that the vampire wiped his smiling mouth before he walked away.

This had nothing to do with Cali.

I finally remembered. I’d been presented at an outdoor party, and vampires had been gorging on me as if I were a live feast. I’d blacked out. And then I’d slipped in and out of consciousness as I’d been taken away from the forest…

But to where?

Where the fuck was I?

What was this place?

I had never felt so weak in my entire life. I knew that it would only take one vampire too many, or an overzealous one, to literally drain the life out of me. I had never been afraid to die, but I couldn’t die like this, as the main course at a vampire buffet. I wouldn’t die helpless, or without a fight.

My entire life, I had been a fighter. A warrior. A mercenary. An *Alpha*. With my brothers, I had killed the fiercest monster that this realm had ever seen, our own father. This couldn’t be the way I died.

Humiliated.

Broken.

Treated like an object.

I needed to survive this. And when I did, I would do whatever it took to get back to Cali. To see her, to kiss her, to touch her. Even if she didn’t want to see me yet, I needed to tell her that I’d almost died, and that she’d been only thing I’d thought about. Missing her. Missing the life we could have shared.

And I would murder every single person who put me in this position.

I heard someone enter the room, then footsteps and some muted conversation. A warning.

“Don’t be a glutton, he won’t last…”

And then, a sinister chuckle. “That’s not my problem. That’s your job.”

A door closed, and then a woman I didn’t recognize sat by my side. She was very imposing, clearly important in some way. At least she looked that way to my hazy mind. She put a white hand on my forehead—it was cool and soothing. Was she here to help me? Could I even be helped?

Could I be saved?

Grunting, I tried to sit up, but I couldn’t. I was too weak. I was nothing like my normal self. I tried to lift my hand to touch her, to see if she was real and not a mirage in this fucked up place, but the chains restrained me.

Of all the tortures I’d endured, this took the fucking cake.

Nothing in this world was worse than vampires.

“Stop fighting,” the woman said, her voice smooth and low. Calming. “Just let me help you heal.”

The hope I felt was dizzying. “You’re going to help me?”

The woman shushed me softly. “Just close your eyes—you need to save your strength.”

I wanted to start sobbing, even though I hadn’t cried in years. “I have to get out of here. Can you release the chains?”

It sounded like I was begging. I hated myself for being so fucking pathetic, but the idea that I wouldn’t see Cali again after today—the idea that we’d ended things with her breaking up with me—was one that I couldn’t bear.

“I can’t do that,” the woman said, her voice still soft.

“Are you trapped here, too?” I asked, desperate. “If you help me, I can—”

She cut me off with a sharp laugh, so different from her previous tone. “I’m not going to help you escape because I don’t *want* you to escape. You’re my bread and butter.”

Bread and butter? What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

“But… But you’re healing me,” I rasped, shaking.

The woman raised her eyebrows. “Because that’s what they want me to do. Personally, I don’t care whether you live or die. And trust me, after this last round, you’re not far from crossing that line.”

Her words filled me with dread. I was too weak to even feel hatred. To even feel anger. The whole thing was so disturbing and sinister that it nauseated me.

The woman started mumbling some spell, and I felt my body react. Some of my strength came back, and I could finally think more clearly.

When I spoke this time, it was an accusation. “You’re a witch,” I spat.

Unfazed, the woman nodded as she pushed black wisps of hair behind her ears. “I’m Kira, Iñigo’s witch. Medic to the vampires. Jack of all trades.”

“Are you proud of that?” I asked her. “Are you proud of yourself for helping these monsters torture people?”

She didn’t even flinch. “You’d better get some sleep. You’re going to need it.”

And with that, she left.

I resented her for being the kind of parasite who would do this job, but at the same time, I was glad to feel revived.

I was struggling against my chains, the silver digging into my wrists, when the door opened again.

Ava walked in. She looked spotless.

What a fucking joke.

She gasped when she saw me and approached me quickly. I was beyond angry at her. I was beyond bitter. At this point, whatever fucked up thing she did would not surprise me. I was pretty sure that she’d done this to me, that she’d turned me in to the vampires to get revenge after I’d broken the mate bond. She was that kind of person.

She was a nightmare who wouldn’t leave me the fuck alone.

“Get. *Out*,” I hissed at her.

She flinched, like my tone hurt her. This woman was outrageous. How could she seem so remorseful after everything she’d done to me? How could she seem so upset to see me like this? What the hell was wrong with her?

I growled, swaying away as she leaned closer to me.

Her voice was a whisper. “I’m going to get you out of here. I just need more time.”

“Get away from me,” I spat. “You’re the last person I’d accept help from!”

Ava looked wounded, flinching back like I’d struck her. “Xavier—”

“I’d rather be a blood bag for these bloodsuckers than owe you a favor,” I said. “That’s how much I fucking want you out of my life.”

Wiping her eyes, as if real tears had escaped them, Ava whispered once more. “I can help you, but you have to listen to me. I don’t have a lot of time—Iñigo is on his way to check on you.”

Another growl rose from the depths of my chest at the sound of the vampire’s name. He would pay for this. Every one of them would pay for this, slowly and torturously. I would leave them out in the sun and make them into a fucking barbeque.

“No, listen to me!” Ava hissed. “I won’t let him keep you!”

My rage was back. I thought I’d been all maxed out, but apparently this woman could bring out the worst in me. Seething, I stared at her, seeing red. If I were unchained, I would have killed her all over again, torn her fucking head off.

“*I don’t want your help*,” I growled, low and furious. “Get out!”

Ava’s gaze was pleading. To think that I would have fallen for this in the past. What a dumbass I had been. I couldn’t believe that I’d loved her once. I hated myself more than ever in that moment.

“I’m your only hope,” Ava said, her voice barely audible. “Even though you broke our bond, I want to help you. I still care about you.”

I was about to snarl at her—to tell her that I didn’t fucking *want* her to care—when the door bounced open again. A tall figure came into the room, and I struggled to scent who it was. I couldn’t smell anything, just blood fucking everywhere.

The person stepped forward, and then a familiar, menacing voice said, “Ava, would you like to tell him, or should I?”

**Episode 1238**

I looked over at Jay and found him staring back at me, his expression mirroring the fear and confusion I was feeling.

“What the fuck is he doing?” he muttered. He put the car into park, and we both climbed out.

My heart was pounding as my mind quickly tried to put all the odds and ends together. The gas, the match… The only thing I could think was that he was planning to light himself on fire… I shuddered. That couldn’t be it. It just couldn’t. There wasn’t anything more horrifying than seeing someone set themselves alight and watching them burn to death, and I, quite frankly, did not need to add that traumatic life experience to my ever-growing list, thank you very much.

“Arlo!” Jay called, his voice sounding loud in the cold night air. “What the hell are you doing, man? Is this some kind of a joke?”

But as a breeze picked up, it carried with it the fumes of the gas, and I knew that this was no joke. My eyes went to the match, which flickered in the wind but didn’t go out, as much as I willed it to.

Arlo’s dark eyes reflected the warm light of the fire, but they were still and lifeless. He wasn’t looking at us. Did he even know we were there? I barely knew Arlo—what could I say to him? I better come up with something fast if I wanted to prevent a werewolf barbeque… and not the good kind. Except my tongue seemed to be frozen, and I couldn’t get any words out.

“Seriously, Arlo,” Jay said, continuing to move toward the man, “blow out the match. Arlo! Are you listening? Don’t be crazy, man.”

“Jay,” I pleaded. “Stop. You have to stop. Don’t get any closer.”

If Arlo did it—if he set himself on fire—who knew what could happen? The car was close enough that the fire could travel to it and make it explode, and if Jay kept getting closer, he could be burned. If Jay got hurt on my watch, I knew Lola would never forgive me.

But Jay wasn’t listening. He just kept moving toward Arlo. That was the thing about Jay—he was brave, and he never gave up on a packmate.

“Jay,” I called again, but I was so scared that my voice barely made it above a whisper. That was when I saw it: the ground at our feet was wet. The gasoline Arlo had poured on himself had pooled around him and run down the drive, and it was pooled around our feet—mine and Jay’s. If Arlo started the fire, then Jay and I were going up in flames, too. “Jay,” I whisper-shouted. This whole thing felt like a dream. I was trying to scream, but I couldn’t make a sound. “*Jay!*”

He looked back, finally, and I pointed to the ground. He looked down, and his eye grew large with fear, understanding in a moment the danger we were in.

Arlo flinched, his previously dead-eyed gaze snapping toward us like he was seeing us for the first time. “Jay?” he asked, brow furrowed. He looked down at the gas can in his hand, then at the lit match. “What’s going on?” There was fear in his voice, and, as I watched, his hand began to shake, making the match flicker.

“Hey, it’s all going to be ok,” Jay warned, his voice steady. “Arlo, listen to me. Just blow the match out.”

Arlo looked down at the match, confused, but then he winced as the flame reached his fingers, and he dropped the match.

It was as though everything had begun to move in slow motion: I watched the match fall through the air, then as Jay lunged and crashed into Arlo, knocking him to the ground. I could see what was about to happen in my head—the huge, consuming explosion—and without thinking, I put up my hands. The match was less than an inch from the ground when I released a surge of energy and knocked the match back, extinguishing it.

Jay had Arlo pinned to the ground when he looked up at me, breathing hard. “Go inside, Cali. Get Greyson!”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I raced up the porch steps, my heart pounding, my stomach roiling from the smell of gas. I burst into the living room where Sage and Zainab looked up, startled.

“Cali? What’s going on?” Zainab asked.

“Are you okay?” Sage looked at me, concerned.

“Where’s Greyson?” I demanded.

“I’m here.”

I turned around and saw him standing behind me—tall and solid and everything I’d ever wanted—and I fell into his embrace, knowing I’d never needed his arms around me more than in that moment.

He hugged me tight. “What’s wrong, love?” he murmured.

I swallowed hard, trying to regain my voice. “It’s Arlo. Outside. He tried to set himself…” I drew in a shuddering breath. “He tried to set all of us on fire.”

Greyson’s whole body tensed. “*What?*”

It was harder to let him go than I could have imagined, but I pulled myself away and dragged him outside, where Jay was still pinning Arlo to the ground. I pointed at the glistening pool of gas, and then at the can on the ground. “There.”

Greyson’s eyes were wide as he looked around, taking everything in.

“What the hell?” he said softly. But in an instant, his confusion fell away and the Alpha in him took over. He strode over to Jay and Arlo. “What were you thinking?” he demanded, his voice commanding and powerful.

Arlo looked at him, then over at me. He looked scared, but his eyes were weirdly unfocused. “I… I don’t know what I… don’t feel so good,” he slurred.

“Is he—” I started, then gasped as Arlo’s eyes rolled back in his head and he fell limply to the ground.

“He’s out cold,” Jay said, his fingers on Arlo’s neck, feeling his pulse.

“Bring him into the house,” Greyson told Jay. “Get him cleaned up.”

Jay nodded and got to his feet. “What about all this?” he asked, gesturing to the spilled gas on the ground. “We can’t just leave it here.”

“I’ll get some of the others to take care of it,” Greyson said.

Jay hefted the unconscious Arlo over his shoulder and carried him around to the back of the house.

When they were gone, Greyson put his hand on my arm. “Are you hurt?”

Still shaken, I shook my head. “No, I’m okay. I managed to use my magic. At the last possible second, actually. If I hadn’t…” The image came to me again, the enormous fireball that would have swallowed all of us whole. And what if it had spread to the house? To Greyson—

“Hey, I can sense when you’re panic-spiraling. It’s all right, come on back now,” Greyson said, his hand tightening on my arm, bringing me back to reality. “The worst didn’t happen, Cali, so don’t torture yourself. I’m just glad you were able to stop it.” He looked at the corner of the house, where Jay and Arlo had disappeared. “But I’m worried. Arlo is… There’s something going on. His eyes… they’ve changed.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He looked down at me. “I was with him earlier, and his eyes looked like fire. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Hearing this did *not* help my anxiety, and I felt myself begin to shake with fear despite my efforts to hide it. My brain was shooting off adrenaline like crazy. No matter what Greyson said, that I had averted disaster, someone had failed to get that memo to the rest of my body.

“Let’s get you inside,” Greyson said. “It’s freezing out here.”

It wasn’t the cold that was making me shake, but I let him pull me into the house, happy to get away from the smell of the gasoline, which was still making me feel sick to my stomach. Greyson walked me upstairs and to my room, pausing in front of the door.

“You know, Caliana Hart,” he said, the ghost of a smile playing across his lips, “you have an amazing talent for finding danger.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks a lot.”

His smile widened, and he brushed a lock of hair away from my face with gentle fingers. “You should take a shower. You can probably still smell that gas, even now that you’re away from it. It’ll help you feel better.”

I nodded and took a shuddering breath. “Maybe I will.”

“If you’re still upset afterward,” he said quietly, “I’ll be here if you want to talk.”

I bit my lip, then nodded. “Thanks, Greyson.” I turned and walked into my room. I’d only taken a step before I paused. I knew I shouldn’t be doing this—I knew I’d told Greyson that I couldn’t be with him—but tonight, all I wanted was to be in his arms. To take comfort in him. I turned to look at him, and, seeming to understand, he stepped toward me.

He pulled me close. “It’s going to be all right, Cali. You don’t need to be afraid.”

I looked up at him, and our eyes locked. Everything about him drew me in—I just wanted to be close to him. *Close* wasn’t even enough. Not tonight. My gaze drifted down to his lips. I was scared and rattled and just wanted to feel like everything was going to be okay. And—dear god—I wanted to kiss him.

**Episode 1239**

GREYSON

Cali had been shaking ever since we’d come into the pack house, but when I pulled her close, she seemed to relax—at least a little. She was obviously rattled by what had happened with Arlo, but it was more than that—she wanted to kiss me. I could see it in her eyes. And, damn, did I want her to act on that instinct. The desire I felt for her was almost overwhelming, and it was hard to hold myself back, but I knew I had to. Cali had been talking and I had been listening—she wanted distance. Due to this damn curse, she didn’t want to be with either Xavier or me, and—as much as it hurt—I wanted to respect her decision.

But—in this heated moment—it was hard to remember that. Her eyes were like pools of warm chocolate, and they were so open, so *ready* for me. Her pull had always been like this for me—impossible to resist—so I just stopped trying. I gave in and leaned down, pressing my lips to hers.

And, in a moment, I understood the depths of Cali’s need for me. Her kiss made it clear how ready she was, how deep her want was. I leaned in, pulling her body to mine, and felt her melt against me.

My thoughts went to the dream we’d shared: the night before our wedding, surrounded by our friends and family. In that dream, Cali hadn’t been struggling with a choice; her mind had been set on me. Things were simple and clear. I was going to be her husband, and she was going to be my wife, and nothing—*nothing*—had stood in our way.

But that was just a dream.

*This* was real, and while this moment between us was absolute bliss, was it *right*? I used to think that right and wrong were easily distinguishable, but I’d since learned how blurry that line could be. I deepened the kiss, letting my tongue explore her mouth.

She gave a little moan—it was little more than a breath—but it was heaven to know that I gave her pleasure. I moved my hands, curving one around her back and one around her head, tangling into her hair. I couldn’t tell if this was wrong, but I knew I loved Cali, I knew I wanted her, and that need was all the mattered.

But then, as though she was somehow reading the thorny tangle of my thoughts, Cali tensed and pulled back. Just a little, but enough that I noticed and released her.

“Greyson,” she said breathlessly, looking up at me. Her eyes were bright and her lips deep red. “I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize,” I said quickly, my heart beating hard. “I understand.” And I did. Or a part of me did. Another part was frustrated as hell, and it was getting worse. How much more of this could either of us take?

Cali looked up at me, miserable, and I hated that I knew she was thinking along the same lines. I could practically see the conflict taking place behind her eyes, and it hurt. “I’m sorry, Greyson. This is why I wanted some space. I don’t want to… *mislead* you.” She shook her head. “And I don’t want to hurt Xavier, either.”

It was involuntary, but I flinched at the sound of my brother’s name. There it was. There it *always* was. No matter where Cali and I were, no matter where Xavier was, his shadow was going to be dogging us, like a silent, looming specter.

Cali’s expression was so sad, it made my heart ache, and I reached for her hand. “Please don’t worry, love. I’m not trying to force anything. I just want to make sure you’re okay after what happened downstairs.”

Cali nodded. “Yeah, I know. I promise I really am okay.  
 I didn’t completely believe her. “You’ll let me know if you need anything?”

“I will,” she said. “Thank you.”

I gave her hand another squeeze and turned to the door. “You know… I can always stick around if you want?” She wasn’t going to admit that she needed me in this moment, I knew that, but as her mate I knew she needed me near.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, shaking her head again. “I’m fine. You should check on Arlo and Jay. Go see how they’re doing. I’m good.”

I looked at her for a moment longer, almost hoping she’d call me back—change her mind—but it never happened, so I nodded and pulled the door shut.

In the hall, I took a deep breath, trying to find a way not to obsess about what I was leaving behind in that room, and not to think about barging into the shower with her. Trying to find a way not to think about pressing Cali against the wall and making her forget all her doubts—and Xavier’s name.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to re-center my thoughts. I had other things to think about. I had the pack to think about.

*Arlo.*

He wasn’t the type to just up and do something so crazy as try and set himself on fire and take half the pack house with him. I hurried downstairs and into the kitchen, where Jay and Rishika were just coming in with Arlo stretched between them. “Why’s he wet?” I asked.

“We hosed him down,” Jay said breathlessly, struggling with Arlo’s dead weight. “We had to get the gas off.”

“He’s still out?”

Rishika nodded. “Cold.”

“I think it’s more than that,” Jay said, looking at Arlo’s still form. “It’s like he’s in a coma.”

He certainly did look unnaturally still, even for an unconscious man. I nodded over at Jay. “Go find Big Mac while Rishika and I take him down to the basement, will you?”

“Sure,” Jay said, handing off Arlo’s legs for me to support.

Rishika and I carried our unwieldy load down the stairs to the basement and settled him onto a cot in one of the small rooms. Arlo was dead to the world, but I didn’t know how long that would last.

“We’re going to have to restrain him, for his own safety. And everyone else’s,” I added, thinking of the pool of gasoline on the driveway.

Rishika huffed out a sigh. “This is super fucked up, Greyson.”

I could always count on Rishika not to mince words. “Do you have any idea why he’d do something like that?” I asked.

She shook her head. “What he did out there… He could have burned down the whole pack house.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I know,” I said, feeling a wave of fear at the thought. “But what the hell prompted this? His eyes…”

“I know,” Rishika said. “That was super creepy.”

I shook my head, looking down at our charge. “This has to be connected to what happened to his eyes, right? But how? What the hell would do that?”

Rishika was quiet for a moment. “I have no idea.”

“I wish I knew more about him,” I said, irritated. “Do you know anything? Always struck me as a quiet, reliable guy.”

Rishika shook her head. “Not really. Probably no more than you.”

“All I know is that he joined us with Rishika and the other Rogues, after the Manus Cruentae. You don’t think he had something… in him? While he was a Rogue? But what would take this long to activate or…”

“Oh, don’t go all secret government agency chip conspiracy on me,” Rishika rolled her eyes. “Who the hell knows what he gets up to or messes with outside of pack business? Probably got in the way of some kind of spell.”

“Do you think he’s on drugs?” I asked.

“Nah,” Rishika said. “I mean, I get why you’d ask, but not Arlo. He’s always been a total gym rat. His body is his temple. That kind of guy. No sugar, no carbs. No drugs.”

We heard footsteps on the stairs, and Jay came through the door, followed by Big Mac, who scowled around, looking her usual sunny self.

“I heard one of you tried to barbecue yourselves,” she said waspishly.

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Arlo,” she said, pointing.

“Didn’t manage to do it,” Big Mac said, stepping toward him. “That’s something.” She leaned toward him, looking at him so closely her nose was barely an inch from his face.

She was quiet for a long time, and Jay, Rishika, and I all exchanged curious glances.

“Any idea what’s going on?” I asked.

“Well,” Big Mac said, standing, “he’s wet.”

Jay’s eye narrowed. “He was covered with gasoline. We had to clean him off—”

“And he’s unconscious, like he’s in a coma,” Big Mac continued, speaking over Jay, like she didn’t even hear him.

“I tackled him pretty hard,” Jay admitted. “Could it be a concussion from that?”

Big Mac looked at him like he was an idiot. “I said it was *like* a coma, not that it *was* a coma.”

I was growing very tired of the witch’s non-answers. “What the hell does that mean? What is it, then?”

Big Mac’s mouth pressed into a thin line, and she looked angry. “There’s magic here. I can sense it.”

“What kind of magic?” Rishika asked.

“Dark magic,” Big Mac told her. “And contrary to popular belief, dark magic isn’t actually my thing.”

This information settled like a heavy stone in the pit of my stomach. “Who did this to him?” I asked, gesturing to Arlo. “Who did this to my pack?”

**Episode 1240**

XAVIER

The voice was Iñigo’s—hearing it made me wish I could break out of these chains and rip the guy’s fucking throat out. I gritted my teeth, practically *feeling* the tension of his throat giving way as it parted company with the rest of his body. And, as I looked over and saw Ava standing next to him, I thought maybe I’d like to end her, too, while I was at it. Again.

“I think I’d better I tell him,” Ava said.

Iñigo raised his eyebrows but didn’t look surprised as he settled back against the door, apparently content to watch. “Fine by me.”

Ava looked over her shoulder at him. “You’re staying? Why? Don’t you trust me?”

Iñigo chuckled and shrugged one shoulder. “Don’t take it personally, sweetheart. I don’t trust anyone.”

I glanced back and forth between the two of them, trying to make sense of the energy coursing between them. I sensed there was something going on there—it was hard to miss—but at what level, I couldn’t say. I tucked the information away to use later: maybe it was something I’d be able to exploit.

“What?” I rasped to Ava, my voice dry and hoarse. “What are you here to tell me? That you sold me out to a vampire? Well, I can see that, so you can save your damn breath. Or are you going to tell me that you did it for some kind of twisted revenge? I’m real impressed. Or maybe”—I shifted my head to glare at her as she stepped closer—“you’ve come to tell me that you feel bad about it now. That the betrayal is eating away at you. That’s so sad. If you’ve come to me for absolution, you can cry me a fucking river, Ava—”

“I didn’t sell you out,” Ava said quietly.

I narrowed my eyes. “So what is this then?” I asked. Was this the part where she told me this was an elaborate plan to secretly help me? I wasn’t going to buy it. “What exactly would you call this?”

“It’s a…” Ava cast around for an appropriate word. “It’s like a library. You’re going to be used by a network of different vampires, like a library book. They’re going to feed on you—”

“*You think you’re gonna make some vamps’ blood bag?*” I hissed, my stomach roiling.

“For a price, of course,” Iñigo said, stepping forward. He smiled. “And you, being an Alpha, command a premium price. Most werewolf blood is as disgusting as the rest of your kind, but Alpha blood, now that’s a true delicacy.”

Enraged, I struggled against the chains, practically willing them to break against my rage.

This made Iñigo laugh. “You’re never going to break them, wolf, but it’s fun to watch you try.”

His laughter only infuriated me further, and I struggled harder.

“*Stop*,” Ava said, putting a hand on my arm. “You’re only going to hurt yourself, Xavier.”

I tried to jerk my shoulder away from her touch. “Are you worried for me? Or are you worried because I’m damaging the merchandise?”

Ava looked at me like I’d slapped her. “I wish you’d believe me,” she whispered.

I narrowed my eyes. “*Never*.”

“Listen,” Iñigo said to Ava. “I’ve got some *library* business to attend to. Remember, sweetheart—I got you what you wanted, so I expect the same in return. You understand me?” He waited until she nodded, then leaned in and kissed her cheek. His lips lingered on her cheek, brushing against the smooth surface of her skin. My head was spinning and time seemed to be acting strangely, but the whole moment felt like it was taking place in slow motion, and suddenly—watching them—all the pieces fell into place.

When he finally pulled away, Iñigo smiled down at me. “See you later.”

As soon as he had disappeared, I glared up at her. “God, how fucking desperate are you, Ava?”

She looked down at me, surprised. “What are you talking about? I’m not desperate!” She looked at me for a moment, and I watched as her dark eyes hardened. “From my vantage point, Xavier, *you’re* the one who’s desperate.”

“You made a deal with a *vampire*?” I asked incredulously. “Come on, Ava. That *reeks* of desperation. God, are you sleeping with him, too?”

She looked away quickly, telling me everything I needed to know.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t even bothering answering. It really doesn’t matter.”

“You think you know everything, don’t you?” Ava snapped, arms crossed.

“Yeah, I think I got the gist,” I snarled, “and when I get out of here, I’ll kill both of you, and I’ll enjoy it.”

Her jaw tightened. “You broke our bond, Xavier. You have no right to question who I get involved with. Besides,” she added, “it’s not what you think.”

My laugh sounded hollow and bitter. “Isn’t it?”

She leaned toward me, her eyes bright again. “You have to trust me.”

I gritted my teeth. “I trust that damn bloodsucker more than I’ll ever trust you.”

She leaned away, her face flushing. “I’m not the one who put you in this position, Xavier, and despite what you think, I want to help you escape.”

“So what’s holding you back?” I demanded.

“*You*,” she shot back.

I frowned at her, confused.

She shook her head. “You made it clear that you won’t accept my help—”

“And I still won’t. Nothing’s changed.”

She blew out a long sigh. “I hope you change your mind, Xavier. I really do. Before it’s too late.” And without another word, she turned around and walked out of the room.

*Too late?*

What the hell did that mean?

Was there some kind of looming deadline I wasn’t aware of? Did I only have a limited amount of time in this psycho’s library—or whatever Ava was calling it?

I struggled against the chains again, though I knew it was useless. Ava was right, though I hated to admit it. I was only going to hurt myself. If I was going to escape, it wasn’t going to happen while I was chained up here.

I thought hard, thinking through everything Ava and Iñigo had just said. Iñigo had said that his business was to rent me out—and if that was the case, then they were going to have to transport me somehow. That would be their most vulnerable time. That was when I’d make my move.

The door opened, and Iñigo walked back into the room. He walked over to me and grabbed at the chains, testing them, making sure they were tight.

“You should be thanking me, you know,” he said.

“Is that right?” I snarled. “And why is that?”

“I saved you.”

“From what?” I demanded.

He raised his eyebrows. “From being killed by Gregor’s coven. And who knows what little Ava has in store for you? She asked for you, specially. For whatever reason, she still wants you, wolf.”

I shook my head and looked away, disgusted.

“If I were you, I’d steer clear of her. She’s hot as hell, for a werewolf, but she’s crazier than a box of sphinxes—”

“What are you doing here?” I snapped, getting tired of listening to Iñigo’s inane prattle. “Are you just here to chat, or are you going to drain me, too?”

Iñigo grinned wickedly. “What makes you think I haven’t already?”

I bristled at the thought of this asshole touching me. I couldn’t feel any pinpricks on my skin, or the telltale warmth of blood dripping from my neck.

He laughed as I made the mistake of trying to angle my chained body to look for wounds. Faster than I could even track he was inches from me, grabbing my face, moving my head from side to side like he was inspecting a prize steer. “Anyway, I’m glad Kira fixed you up. I’ve got a special client coming in. He paid extra to skip the line, and I want you looking pretty for him.”

The door opened, and a vampire walked into the room. The old man was small and stooped and walked with a silver-tipped cane, which made a sharp metallic clink against the floor as he walked. His pale eyes were small and close together, and his pale hair and features make him look strange and sinister. It was all I could do not to shudder as he walked toward me.

He looked at me, taking me in from head to toe, and when he made it up to my face again, he smiled, baring long, lethal-looking fangs. “He looks more than acceptable, Iñigo. He’d just better be a true Alpha. I’ve had Alpha blood before, so I’ll know if it’s not real.”

Iñigo laughed. “Have I ever let you down before?”

“Not yet,” the old vampire admitted.

“And this won’t be the first time,” Iñigo said, leading the old vampire back toward the door. “Right this way. We’ll prepare the werewolf for transport immediately.”

*Transport.*

That was the word I’d been waiting for. This could be my chance—my only chance—and I was going to take it.

And afterward, I was going to take them all down, and I was going to start with Iñigo. I took a deep breath, trying to will my body to relax as I prepared for what was coming next, and imagined what Iñigo’s head would look like mounted on a pike.

**Episode 1241**

Greyson pulled me against him, his lips rough and needy. It was impossible to resist him when he was like this. I felt myself turning to liquid—melting against him as I pressed myself as tight as I could to his chest.

But even in the midst of this, there was a warning bell in the back of my mind. I knew it was dangerous to feel this way—to give in to this so easily. It felt so good, so right, but I knew I shouldn’t let myself be tempted.

Maybe a moment longer would be okay, I tried to convince myself. I ran my hand up his chest, but suddenly he was gone—vanished like a puff of smoke. I looked around wildly and found my room gone, too. I was standing on the edge of a cliff, looking over the rocky edge at a sheer drop. And below was the choppy, deadly sea. I’d never seen this cliff before, but I knew—every part of me *knew*—that this was Cassandra’s cliff. This was where Cassandra and her two mates had perished. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting this information settle in, and when I opened them, I was wearing the red dress.

“Oh god,” I whispered, my heart pounding wildly.

I looked around, trying to get my bearings, and saw Greyson approaching in the distance. I was about to call out to him when the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I turned and saw Xavier, approaching from the opposite direction. They were both walking toward me.

“Go back!” I screamed, holding out both hands. “Stay away, both of you! It’s too dangerous!”

Neither of them stopped walking.

“Caliana, your time is running out.”

It was Cassandra’s voice, right in my ear.

I shook my head, trying to block the sound, but it didn’t do any good.

“If you keep turning them away, you’ll still lose them. Your mates first, then whatever will be left of your mind.”

“No,” I couldn’t stand the idea of losing either of them.

“You were *just* with Greyson,” Cassandra pointed out. “Why didn’t you choose him when you had the chance?”

I closed my eyes tight and shook my head. “I can’t—I don’t want to hurt them. Either of them.”

“Then I’llchoose for you,” Cassandra said, her voice full of chaotic glee.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps behind me. I whipped around and saw Cassandra standing there, fully formed, a crazed smile on her beautiful face. Before I could even utter a cry of surprise, she plunged her hand into my chest and ripped out my heart, then shoved me hard, sending me tumbling off the edge of the cliff.

Screaming, I fell down the rocky cliff face, plummeting toward the foaming water.

I woke up, screaming, on the floor, tangled in the sheets. Panic still rioting within me, it took me a solid minute to realize I was in my room and I’d rolled off my bed.

Breathing heavily, I clutched at my chest, which ached like I’d been struck with a blunt axe. It had been a dream, but it had felt *so* real.

It took me a long time to get my breath to return to normal, and even longer for my heartbeat to slow to a regular rhythm. I’d never even made it to the shower. After Greyson had left, I’d just sat on my bed and apparently dozed off. It was only a dream. I just had to keep telling myself that. *It was only a dream*.

Or was it?

Was Cassandra really with me? Was she really threatening me? Forcing me to choose? Was this happening because I’d kissed Greyson?

I shook my head. *This* is why I needed to keep away from both of them. I’d known it, even as it happened—kissing Greyson had been wrong.

I pressed my hand to my chest as my heart gave another painful thump. Was this just the beginning? Was I starting to lose my mind? I felt like I was. Instinctively, I felt for the veins before I remembered I no longer had them. That was how we’d all been connected before. What if this was a new way for the curse to hurt us? What if that kiss with Greyson had somehow hurt Xavier?

My breathing was starting to grow ragged again. I needed to talk to him. I needed to hear his voice, just to know that he was okay. I patted my pockets and found my phone, then I dialed Xavier’s number with shaking fingers.

It rang, but only once, then went to voicemail.

I hung up, frowning. Xavier still wasn’t back. This wasn’t unusual, exactly, but I just couldn’t shake this weird sense that something was… *off*. I couldn’t say what, exactly. It was just a gut feeling.

I sent him a message.

*Where are you?*

I looked down at the text, but no three dots appeared to indicate that he was texting back.

I didn’t like the way we’d left things, and right now the anxiety monster that lived in my chest was telling me something horrible must have happened to him, and that it was all my fault.

Looking at the blank screen of my phone filled me with a sense of dread I couldn’t quite explain. But that was ridiculous. He just didn’t have his phone near him, or maybe he hadn’t had a chance to charge it. There were a million explanations for why he wasn’t texting back. So why did I feel so much fear?

I wished Lola were here. She was a mess so much of the time, and had most recently tried to drink my blood, but she was good at talking me down from cliffs. *Metaphorical* cliffs.

And I needed to talk to *someone*. Lola wasn’t here, and Greyson was out, of course. Maybe my mom was around. She wasn’t always the first person I went to, but she was here, and I needed someone, so I headed downstairs to look for her. I just hoped I wouldn’t run into Greyson on the way. After that kiss, seeing him would just be too awkward.

I didn’t find my mom, but I did find my dad. He was sitting outside on the front porch.

“What are you doing, Dad?” I asked.

“Knitting,” he said, holding up his work.

Not even in the top ten options I would have guessed. It looked like a mess of yarn. “Uh… what exactly is it supposed to be?”

“A hat for Torin.” He looked at his work critically. “Do you think he’ll like it?”

I nodded and smiled. “I think he’ll love it.” Torin lacked any human fashion sense, so this bird’s nest of a hat was a match made in heaven.

My dad looked up from his hat and gave me a hard look. “What’s wrong?”

“What? Nothing!” I said, trying to sound innocent.

It didn’t work, and he narrowed his eyes. “Caliana Hart.”

I dropped down next to him on the bench with a sigh. “Where to start?” I wasn’t about to tell him about kissing Greyson—I mean, I was close with my dad, but not *that* close. “I’m just struggling, Dad.”

He nodded wisely. “*Due destini* troubles?”

I grimaced. I hated hearing him say it out loud. “Pretty much always,” I admitted.

My dad put his knitting down and took my hand. “I wish I had something wise to share with you, Cali, something useful, but I don’t. I thought the *Bachelorette* thing would help—I’m sorry if it only made things worse.”

“I know, Dad,” I said, smiling, though I started to feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. “It’s okay.”

“But I can offer you a Dad Hug, pretty much good for curing most things,” he said and opened his arms.

I leaned in and let myself be enveloped in his warm embrace. I flashed back to being comforted in this very same way after a bad day in third grade—Carrie Sullivan had stolen my brand new penguin eraser set, and when I’d tried to report it, Mrs. Gulliver had told me that no one liked a tattle tale.

I took a deep breath as I leaned against my dad’s shoulder. “How are things going with Mom?”

My dad sighed. “Things are… okay. I hope they’ll get better—but I don’t want you to worry about that right now. You have enough going on in your life. Your mom and I will work it out.”

I nodded, not that his words filled me with much confidence, but he was right; there was too much going on in my life right now for me to add yet another worry to my ever-growing list. Mom and Dad were both capable of solving their problems together. I had to trust that.

I heard the front door open and my mom’s voice calling. “Cali? Tom?”

“We’re here, Orla,” my dad said.

“There you are,” she said, stepping out to us. “Have either of you seen Artemis?”

My dad shook his head. “No, not recently.”

“Me neither,” I said, sitting up. “But it’s a big house. She could be anywhere. Have you asked Rishika?”

“Of course I have,” my mom answered sharply. “I’ve looked everywhere, I’ve asked everyone. No one has seen her.”

“For how long?” I asked, frowning.

“All day,” my mom said.

The conversation with Vander flashed into my mind, and I sat up straighter.

“Hang on.” I pulled out the badge she’d given me and showed my parents. “Vander gave me this and told me—warned me, actually—that Artemis was in grave danger—”

“*What?*” my mom gasped.

“Sorry! There’s a been a lot going on! Arlo nearly setting fire to the pack house really threw me for a loop.” I was going to be chewed out for this later. I could handle that.

“We have to go,” my mom said, cutting me off. “We have to find Artemis. *Now*.”

**Episode 1242**

ARTEMIS

*Holy shit.*

I stared at the drive-in theater guy’s motionless body in shock.

What had I just done? He was still, but maybe he was just stunned. Maybe he was just unconscious. Maybe he was just…

No. As I walked closer and looked at his face—at his blank, lifeless eyes—I knew he was dead, and my stomach contracted painfully. Had anyone seen? I frantically looked around the lot, but I didn’t see any other humans. Then again, I was surrounded by cars, and in those cars were dozens and dozens of people. Any of them could look over at any moment and see what was going on.

I grabbed the guy’s cooling wrist and dragged him through the dust until we were behind the giant movie screen. It wasn’t a perfect solution, but at least we were hidden from the assembled audience. For the moment.

*Now what?* My heart thumped hard as I looked down at his crumpled body. I hadn’t *meant* to do this—all I’d tried to do was push his hand away, but then…

It wasn’t like I’d never committed violence in my life. I’d done my share of fighting—*more* than my share. I’d inflicted pain and harm to protect myself when it was necessary—but this was different. This had come out of the blue, and I just hadn’t meant to do it. I twisted my fingers as I looked down at the lifeless body—the boy had only been doing his job when he’d stopped me. He didn’t deserve this.

“*Shit*,” I said, rubbing my head. I could beat myself up about this later. Right now, I had to do something with the body. But what? I didn’t know. I looked around. There was no one else here behind the screen, just a few empty trash cans and an old wood crate. Just leaving him here was an option, but that felt wrong somehow.

I looked around, into the darkness. Maybe I could bury him somewhere. That seemed like the most logical solution, but that would require moving him again, and that would be too risky. Digging graves took time, and anyone could stumble across me.

I should just run. I could feel myself getting more agitated, and my breath was starting to grow ragged. I needed to get the hell out of here. Maybe I’d still be able to find a way into the Fae world. At least there, I’d be safe from all of *this*. And I’d be able to look for my father.

Yeah, that seemed like the best option. I peeked out from behind the screen, eyeing the exits, wondering how fast I’d be able to get out when I heard it.

“You can’t run from your problems.”

I spun around, my heart pounding.

*No way.*

The dead guy was sitting up. He wasn’t looking directly at me, sort of over my shoulder, and there was a weird, glazed-over look in his eyes.

“Did you just *talk*?” I gasped. My mind was spinning too fast to even consider the absurdity of asking this question of a guy who’d been *dead* thirty seconds ago.

But my questions seemed to jar something inside him, and the guy looked around, his expression suddenly afraid. “What’s going on? What am I doing back here?” He put his hand on the back of his head and when he pulled it away, there was blood smeared across his fingers. He must have started bleeding when he fell. His eyes widened at the sight of it. “Oh god! Am I *bleeding*?”

I rushed toward him and covered his mouth with my hand. “Just keep quiet.” Was it possible I had read the situation wrong and the boy *hadn’t* been dead? He certainly didn’t look like a corpse with his wide eyes now regarding me with real fear as I held him down. “I’m gonna take my hand away now. Don’t scream, or I’ll…” *What, kill him again?*

“You know, I’m a liability.”

That was an odd thing for the not-dead guy to say.

The fear had disappeared from his eyes, and they looked blank in the darkness. “You need to finish me off.”

Startled, I stood up and took a step back from him. “What’s going on?”

He looked up, his cold, dead eyes boring right into me. “Kill me.”

His voice seemed to be shooting directly into my brain, and I backed away, fear coursing through me. In an instant, I made up my mind, turning on my heel and sprinting away.

But I’d only made it a few yards when I tripped on something large and solid and went flying. I landed hard, and the wind was knocked out of me. I dragged in a breath and turned to see what I’d tripped on. A jolt of fear hit me like a bolt of lightning when I saw it was the boy’s body, which was lying in the dirt.

I screamed and scrambled away. How the hell had it gotten over here? I clambered to my feet and turned to run away again, but I ran into something hard enough that it knocked the wind right out of me again.

It was him, now standing, impossibly, before me. He looked down at me and grinned maliciously. “You can run, but you can’t hide.”

“What the hell is happening…?” I backed away. My legs felt liquid under me, but I forced myself to move. I needed to get as far as possible from whatever dark energies were surrounding this place.

But the dead guy followed me, matching me step for step. “You know what you need to do,” he said. “Just do it.”

I was being stalked by a corpse that refused to remain dead. Normally I was the hunter, the predator. I hated the fear now coursing through my veins. No amount of fighter’s instinct seemed to reduce it; it was as if the fear was not something I was in control of.

The guy stepped closer and—faster than I would have thought possible—reached for me, grabbed my hands, and put them around his throat. “*Do it*,” he hissed.

I tried to pull my hands away, but he held them tight.

“Do it,” he repeated, his eyes burning with unholy light. “Kill me.”

“No,” I whispered, but even as I spoke, I could feel my hands start to tighten around the boy’s neck. I wasn’t doing it—I was *trying* to stop them—but it was like my hands were acting independently. As though they had a mind of their own. I closed my eyes and screamed, the sound ricocheting all around my body, filling my head.

And then, suddenly, I was standing over the boy’s body, back behind the movie screen.

I looked down at my hands, which were nowhere near the boy’s neck. It was like the last thirty seconds had been reset.

*What the hell is going on?*

I couldn’t risk waiting around to find out. I had to get out of here. But I still had to figure out what do with the body. I wished I’d never run into him, that he’d never put his hand on me, that I’d never reached out to touch him.

If only I had the power to undo this awful mess.

But… *wait*. I remembered what had happened with Arlo. I’d accidentally skewered him, but then I’d brought him back. And he was fine. Totally back to normal, no side effects.

I looked down at the dead guy. Could I do it again?

The thing was, I wasn’t sure how I’d done it the first time. This was all so new to me. I closed my eyes and thought back, trying to remember what had happened with Arlo. I thought of the drive-in guy, imagining him coming back to life, really concentrating, the way I always did when I used my Fae powers.

Then I opened my eyes and looked at the guy. Nothing had happened. I never was good with healing magics. Maybe I had just gotten lucky with Arlo.

I blew out a frustrated breath and looked around. For the moment, we were still alone. Just me and the dead guy. It sucked that my magic hadn’t worked, but I couldn’t stick around and figure out how to use my new regeneration power. I had enough problems without being charged with murder and held in some two-bit human prison. Not that prison worried me. I’d broken out of prison before, but I just didn’t have time to plan a jail break right now.

Grabbing an armful of soggy autumn leaves, I started to cover the body. It wasn’t a perfect cover-up, but it was going to have to do. Hopefully, it would buy me enough time to get away.

I’d just started to cover the guy’s head when he sat up.

“You have *got* to stop doing that,” I breathed, jumping back in shock.

“Hey,” he said, looking around, confused, like he was waking up from a strange dream. He rubbed his neck, where I’d squeezed it, and looked up at me. “What happened?”

“Um…” I started. I had no idea how to answer. Obviously this guy didn’t know the truth, but I also wasn’t sure which lie I was going to tell him.

But then he spoke again.

“You saved my life. I owe you.” His eyes turned to me, but they reflected no light as he spoke in a flat, expressionless voice. “What would you ask of me?”

**Episode 1243**

LOLA

As I took a seat at the long, narrow dining table, all the other Tottenville residents looked up at me, their gazes ranging from mildly curious to outright hostile. Irma was seated at one end of the table, and she smiled at me as I walked in. Emmett was at the other end of the table. The only open seat was just to his right, and I studiously avoided catching his eye as I sat down, looking closely at the delicate china and silver place setting as though they were the most interesting things in the world.

Was this how they ate *every day*?

The dishes were white and covered with sprays of delicate pink roses. The silver was engraved with an elaborate monogramed ‘T’ at the base of every piece. The glasses shone like diamonds in the light from the crystal chandeliers hanging above the table, casting rainbows onto the white linen tablecloth. Everything on the table was fine and delicate and most likely very old. And very expensive.

Note to self, do not break anything…

“So, Lola, I love to hear people’s stories.”

I looked up to see Winifred sitting across from me, leaning forward, her eyes eager.

“What story?” I asked, replacing the fork next to my plate.

“The story of how you were *turned*, of course,” she said brightly. “I always wonder. Everyone’s story of how they became a vampire is always so different, of course.”

“It was an attack, at my house,” I said quietly.

“Oh. Well, that doesn’t sound very pleasant,” Winifred said, still cheerful. “How long ago was that?”

“Um, I’m not sure. A month? Maybe more?” I wasn’t sure. Time had been such a blur lately.

“And how has it been for you? Is it everything you hoped it would be?”

“Hoped it would be?” I repeated, baffled.

“Yes! You must have dreamed of becoming a vampire—does the reality live up to your expectations? I’ll never forget how disappointed I was when I found out I’d never turn into a bat. I don’t know if I’ll ever really get over that.”

I put my elbows on the table and dropped my head into my hands. It was all too much. Being here, alone, without Jay or Cali, being a vampire, being a threat to my friends… *NO!* I wanted to scream. *Being a vampire was* not *living up to my expectations*.

“Winifred, *enough*,” came a gentle but firm voice from my left.

I looked up to see Emmett shaking his head.

“Let’s not overwhelm our new student,” he said. “We must allow her some time to adjust.”

Winifred smiled and nodded. “Of course,” she said, looking over at me. “Sorry. I just get so excited. It’s not every day I get to converse with a brand new vampire.”

“It’s fine,” I murmured and breathed a sigh of relief, secretly relieved that Emmett was on my side. But that feeling disappeared when he turned to me. He was fairly attractive, I couldn’t help but notice. For a vampire. When he smiled I could see two pearly fangs in his row of perfect teeth.

“So, instead of talking about yourself, Lola, perhaps you’ll tell us a little more about your mate.”

Heat rushed to my face.

Across from me, Winifred giggled. “He’s the cute one with the eye patch, right?”

“The *werewolf*?” someone asked from down the table, a dark-haired girl whose lip curled in disgust.

“Gross,” said the boy next to her. “How’d that happen?”

My hackles rose. “*I’m* a werewolf,” I blurted out, without thinking. There was a collective gasp around the table. “I mean, I *was* a werewolf. I’m not anymore.”

For a moment, the table was silent. Winifred looked at me with eyes as big as dinner plates. Then the dark-haired girl snorted with laughter and the boy next to her groaned. Two girls at the end of the table exchanged scared looks and pushed their chairs back, as though they were going to make a run for it.

Emmett was looking at me, his gaze curious.

I swallowed hard. “I was never a full werewolf—I was a hybrid, and shifting got to be kind of a problem for me. I tried to fix the problem, and I lost my wolf in the process. The witch I talked to said—”

“It’s fine,” Irma said, interrupted my rambling. “I’m sure you have many questions about all of this.” She looked around the table. “I’m sure I don’t need to remind anyone that every single one of you was once new at this table, with many questions of your own. And I want you to all be supportive of Lola as she seeks to find her answers.”

Irma stared around the table until everyone nodded and relaxed. The girls at the end pulled their chairs back in and reached for their forks.

“Lola, to start, you might be wondering why we have meals like this together,” Irma said. “I’ve found it’s easy for vampires to ease into consuming blood by having it through familiar means. And there’s always something comforting and very human about eating real food. Enjoy, everyone!”

When everyone had turned their attention to their own plates and conversations, Emmett leaned closer to me. “I knew you were different,” he said quietly. “From the moment I saw you, I knew.”

“I don’t know what—”

“Oh don’t be so modest,” he said. “Don’t try to hide what you are, Lola. Being different has certain advantages. It can destroy you, or it can make you more powerful than you can imagine.” He was quiet for a moment, waiting for me to meet his gaze. “There’s so much more to you than meets the eye.”

I held his gaze, and there was so much power in our connection that it nearly took my breath away. I felt something there—something I almost dared not feel. My heart beat fast as I looked into the depths of his eyes. “My mate’s name is Jay Young!” I blurted out.

The moment the words left my lips, I wished them back. I felt like an idiot. I wanted to crawl beneath the table and disappear.

Emmett’s lips curled into a mocking smile, and he leaned even closer to me. “Well, Lola, I look forward to meeting this Jay Young.”

All the blood in my body rushed into my face, and I clamped my mouth shut, certain I was about to say something embarrassing again. There was no way I was ever going to let this guy met Jay.

*Ever.*

\*\*\*\*

I didn’t eat much at dinner, which had been a very bloody steak. I’d mostly just pushed food around on my plate while I listened to everyone else talking and—I shuddered—sip at their blood. I tried to avoid Winifred’s questions about werewolves and mates. As I balled up my napkin and pushed my chair back, I spotted Emmett talking to Irma at the other end of the long dining table. They were speaking in low tones and kept glancing over at me.

I felt like I should’ve been wondering what they were talking about, and if they were talking about me, but I just didn’t care. I’d had enough. I just wanted to get to my room and away from everyone. I might have been turning full-on vampire, but that didn’t mean I had to like being around them.

I gave a dramatic yawn and stretched my arms over my head. “Well, that’s it for me. I’m beat. Excuse me,” I said, standing and heading out the door before anyone could stop me—though I had the strange sense that Emmett was watching every move I made. I hurried up to my room, slamming the door behind me and flopping down onto my bed.

I closed my eyes and—unbidden—Emmett’s intense gaze swam into my mind.

I opened my eyes and sat up quickly, then reached for my phone. I needed to talk to Jay. I needed to hear his voice.

“Lola,” he said, answering after the first ring. “Are you okay?”

“Jay,” I breathed, the sound of his voice warming me from the inside out.

“Is everything all right?” he asked. “I’ve only been gone a few hours.”

“Ugh, but I’ve been surrounded by vampires for those few hours.” I could feel tears pricking the corners of my eyes. “Things aren’t exactly bright and sunny over here.”

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Did those annoying children do something to you? Kick you in the shins or try to bite you?”

I laughed. “Not exactly. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too,” he said, his voice gentle.

“We’re still mates, right?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Lola?” Jay’s voice was suddenly edged with something hard. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly. “Nothing’s wrong. I just—”

“I can tell something’s up,” Jay said. “Are you sure you’re okay? Are you sure you’re safe? They didn’t attack you? Do I need to come out there and kick some undead ass?”

I shook my head, but I felt something stirring inside me. It was a new feeling, but it was intense enough and disturbing enough that I recognized it right away. It was blood hunger. It was like regular hunger, but deeper, angrier. It couldn’t be ignored. I swallowed hard. “There *is* something you can do for me.”

“Anything, Lola,” Jay said. “Just name it.”

The hunger was building fast. It started out as a tiny flame, but it grew like wildfire, and then all of a sudden it was consuming me. I knew it was wrong to ask this of Jay, but the blood hunger didn’t listen to reason.

“Jay,” I said, my voice pleading. “Can you come get me?”

**Episode 1244**

VIOLET

“And they just *show up* out of *nowhere*,and what am I supposed to do?” I burst out. “That’s what they’re counting on, right? Of course I didn’t want him to go with them, but what was I supposed to say? It’s not like I can tell them the real reason why I don’t want him going with them, you know? And I realize they’re his parents, but let’s just look at their history—it’s not like they’re totally trustworthy. It’s still totally nerve-wracking.”

Marta nodded somberly. “It’s called love, Violet. It’s natural to worry about the people you love. You don’t have to have a specific reason.”

That was sweet of her to say, but in this case I had a *very* specific reason for feeling so worried. That Charlie’s sweet little crossbow-wielding mother had *threatened* me, and I still hadn’t found a way to tell Charlie about it. It wasn’t the easiest thing to bring up. I leaned against the kitchen’s center island.

“Do you think this could be a ploy of theirs to lure Charlie away?” I asked.

Marta frowned. “Do you think they’d really be that devious?”

“I don’t know! That’s what’s getting to me. Would his mom kidnap him, just to keep him away from me?” I wondered.

Marta didn’t look convinced. “It seems to me Iris isn’t thrilled that Charlie is dating a werewolf—that’s crystal clear—but kidnapping seems a bit… *extreme*. I mean, Charlie’s not exactly helpless. He could just run away from her if she tried anything like that.”

“But she can fight—”

“So can he,” Marta reminded me.

“That’s true,” I said, thinking hard. “But what about vampires? I’m worried about vampires, too. If Iris and Paul were telling the truth about us being followed, then Charlie’s facing a lot of danger. I mean, he’s a great hunter—I’ve seen him in action—but vampires are no laughing matter. They’re dead—they’ve literally got nothing to lose.”

“You don’t have to convince me of that,” Marta said, shuddering. “I’ve seen enough vampires to last a lifetime, and then some. If I never saw another bloodsucker again, I wouldn’t complain.”

I bit my lip, thinking hard. “I know Charlie’s a hunter—it’s part of who he is. And now that he’s a werewolf too… It’s just so complicated. And I know it’s been hard on him. And he’s probably even more conflicted about all of this than he’s letting on.”

“That might be true,” Marta said, and her expression was sad. “It must be very difficult, to be the very thing you’re sworn to destroy.”

I hadn’t thought of that. A little thread of guilt gnawed on me as I contemplated Marta’s words. How hard must this all be on Charlie, being a hunter and a werewolf? I had only ever been a werewolf. It was my whole world, and I couldn’t imagine ever hating that part of myself, but for Charlie it must be harder than that, despite all my best efforts to be understanding.

“By the way,” Marta added casually, breaking into my thoughts, “your brother agrees.”

I looked up quickly. “What? Lilac’s here? Right now?” I looked around, hoping to see him.

Marta looked at me like I’d just grown another head. “Of course he is, Violet. He’s always here. He never left.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. It was very hard to know that Lilac was here but that I couldn’t see him, couldn’t hear him.

Marta started to say something, then she stopped, like she was listening to someone. Then she scowled. “No,” she snapped. “I am *not* going to tell her that.”

“What?” I asked, baffled. “Did Lilac say something? What was it? What did he say?”

“Nothing,” Marta said, waving a dismissive hand. “You don’t want me to tell you. It was about Charlie, but it’s too juvenile to repeat.”

*That* sounded familiar. I rolled my eyes. “Tell Lilac not to say anything bad about Charlie.”

“I think you just told him,” Marta said, reaching for a plate of muffins Tom had left on the island. “He can hear you.”

I didn’t know where to look, so I just looked over Marta’s shoulder. “Lilac, knock it off. You’ve never even properly met Charlie. He’s a really good guy, and he’s just doing his best. There’s a lot of pressure on him, and more importantly, he’s my mate, so just be cool. He’s stood by my side, and he supported me and defended me when his parents were trying to attack us, and—”

“Lilac says he’s sorry,” Marta said through a mouthful of blueberry muffin.

“Oh, does he? I asked, unnerved. Lilac never apologized that fast.

Marta swallowed. “He apologizes. He knows Charlie’s a good guy, and that you care about him. He says he’s just looking out for his sister.”

Okay, that part was definitely Lilac. My eyes filled with tears. I hated that I didn’t have Lilac around in the flesh, but it was comforting to know that he was still here, acting like the brother I remembered.

“Why can’t I see you?” I asked.

Marta listened for a moment. “He doesn’t know.”

“We were going to talk to Big Mac about it,” I said, remembering. “And then Charlie’s parents showed up and I forgot all about it.”

“Let’s go,” I said, grabbing Marta’s hand as she reached for the rest of her muffin. “It’s time to get some answers.”

I was pulling Marta toward the stairs when Big Mac appeared from the basement.

“Oh, there you are,” we both said at the same time.

“I was looking for you,” Big Mac said.

“We were looking for you, too,” I said.

“Not you,” Big Mac said, narrowing her eyes at me. “Her,” she said, pointing to Marta. “I need you in the basement.”

Marta froze. She shook her head. “I don’t do basements.”

“Come again?” Big Mac asked.

Marta gave her head a little shake. “Too dark, too small.”

“Marta was held against her will in a Victorian house with poor lighting. She’s not crazy about being confined,” I explained.

“We’ll keep the lights on, but we need your help,” Big Mac said dryly.

“What’s going on?” I asked. Big Mac could be cryptic when she wanted to be.

“There’s something wrong with Arlo.”

“Can’t you just bring him up here?” Marta asked, her gaze darting around nervously.

Big Mac shook her head. “No. It’s not safe.”

“But it’s safe for *me* to go down to *him*?” Marta asked, her voice going shrill.

I had to admit she had a point. I was starting to get creeped out myself.

Big Mac sighed irritably. “Listen, girl, are you coming or not? I can’t make you—well,” she amended, then thought for a moment. “I *could* make you, but I’d rather you come voluntarily.”

I looked at Marta, who had gone very pale. And for a woman who’d spent decades inside a house with a poltergeist, that was saying something. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” I said.

Marta chewed on her lip, thinking hard. “It does sound… *intriguing*. And I do love a good mystery.” She gave me a small smile. “When I was trapped in the house with Bert, I read all of Agatha Christie’s books, several times over.”

“How many times?” I wondered out loud.

“Four thousand,” she answered brightly like that wasn’t the saddest thing I’d ever heard. She turned to Big Mac. “All right, lead the way.”

Curious as well—and not wanting to leave Lilac—I followed the witch and the medium down the basement stairs. Big Mac led us to a small room, where Arlo was lying on a narrow cot.

As soon as we entered the room, Marta shuddered, like she’d just walked into a freezer.

I reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “It’ll be okay. I’m right here.”

She didn’t look at me, but she nodded to show she’d heard me.

Big Mac led us to the cot where Arlo lay, still, his eyes closed.

“Oh my god,” I said, horrified. “Is he dead?”

“He might as well be, for all we can do for him,” Big Mac said grimly, crossing her arms. “He’s in some kind of a coma.”

Marta looked down at him and shook her head. “I don’t know what you want me to do. I’m not a doctor—”

“I’m not asking you to heal him,” Big Mac snapped. “I want to know if you can sense anything, girl.”

Marta took a deep breath and looked back down at Arlo. She was still tense, but as she looked, her body seemed to relax, and then her eyes narrowed. “There’s *something*,” she said quietly. She shook her head. “There’s something going on here.”

“What is it?” Big Mac demanded.

“A darkness, some kind of powerful force. I can’t really… grasp it,” Marta said.

Big Mac sighed and nodded, like this confirmed something for her. “I sensed that, too.” She looked down at Arlo’s still body. “I wish we could talk to the boy. Find out what the hell happened to him.”

Marta frowned. “Why don’t you just ask him?”

I looked up at Violet, then at Big Mac, who looked back at me, looking as baffled as I felt.

“I just told you, girl, he’s in a coma,” Big Mac said slowly.

Marta pointed past Arlo’s cot to an empty space on the cement floor. “No, he’s not. He’s right there.”

**Episode 1245**

LOLA

It was strange, waiting for Jay’s answer. There was no one in the world I felt more comfortable with than him, but I felt oddly self-conscious, like I’d failed somehow. I hadn’t even been at this weirdo vampire school twenty-four hours and I was asking him to come bail me out. I hated to admit that I couldn’t handle it, but I just… I couldn’t possibly stay here. This wasn’t me! I was supposed to be back at the pack house with the rest of my real kind. And then there was this gnawing hunger—what I’d come to recognize as the blood hunger. I wanted to ignore it, or pretend I had control over it, but I got the feeling that asking Jay to come get me could be putting him in danger.

Maybe I was just being super selfish right now, and maybe I had to accept that.

“Tell me why you want to leave, Lola,” Jay said quietly.

“I just…” I shifted on the fancy four-poster bed. “I don’t fit in here, Jay. This place is full of bloodsuckers, and I was a *werewolf*! It just doesn’t feel right. I’m not like them! I never was! It’s not like I was a regular human before all of this happened. I’m not coming into the vampire world with a clean slate.” And, I had to admit, those vampire tweens just weren’t very nice. But I didn’t mention this to Jay. It just sounded petty, and I didn’t want him to think I was too soft.

“Lola.” Jay’s voice was gentle. “Starting anything new is always going to be hard, baby. But I think you need to give it a little more time before you quit. I think this place is going to be good for you. I think you’re going to learn a lot. And it’s not like you’re going to be stuck there forever. I’m going to be there to pick you up at Thanksgiving. That’s not so far away. Just a few weeks.”

“I know, but…” I started. How could I make him understand what was bothering me when I wasn’t actually sure myself?

“But what?” Jay asked.

“But what if something happens to our mate bond because we’re separated?” I burst out. I thought back to the last time we’d tried the long-distance thing. It hadn’t been easy, and it had made our bond so weak that I’d ended up in the hospital. “I just don’t want a repeat of last time,” I whispered.

Jay must have been remembering the same thing. “It’s not going to be that bad, Lola,” he said gently. “I promise. It’ll be okay. I’m not that far away. I’m only a few hours away, and if we get really desperate, I’m sure Irma allows visitors from time to time.”

He was probably right, and his words made my heart feel a little better, like whatever was squeezing it so tightly released the pressure a little.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Maybe. But I’m going to miss falling asleep in your arms at night.”

“I know,” Jay said.

“So what am I supposed to do?” I asked. “How am I supposed to cope? Where can I get a Jay-shaped love doll?”

Jay laughed. “I’ll start looking around. But until I find one, we can have a call like this every night if you want.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “You’d do that?”

“Of course,” he assured me. “I’d like it, too. I miss you too, little spoon.”

“Ugh!” I rolled my eyes. “Jay! Quit screwing around! I’m the big spoon and you know it!”

Jay laughed, and the sound was like a warm hug.

“I do miss you,” I said, lying down on my bed. “I don’t know how I’m going fall asleep tonight without being able to tuck my feet under your legs to warm them up.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to fall asleep without your frozen toes on me.” Jay chuckled. “But I was thinking how much I was going to miss the way you whisper goodnight into my ear right before you fall asleep.” His voice had gone low and rough.

My breath caught in my throat at his tone. “I’m going to miss the way you pull me close in your sleep.”

“Do I?” Jay asked, his voice gravelly. “I didn’t know I did that.”

“Every night,” I breathed. “You just reach out in the middle of the night and pull me into you.”

“Do I pull you in tight?” Jay asked.

I closed my eyes as I lay back on my bed. “So tight.” I could almost feel the bulge of him pressing into the back of my legs.

Jay was silent. I looked at my phone in confusion. The call had ended. I frowned, but then the screen lit up. He was FaceTiming me.

“There you are,” I said, picking up.

“Hi,” Jay said, smiling. “Sorry. I just had to see you.”

“Damn, babe,” I breathed, looking at him. My face was heating up, and part of me wished I could hide the fact that I was turning bright red, but there was no way around it. He was in bed—in *our* bed—and he was shirtless. I looked at him hungrily, taking in every line of his sculpted chest. When my gaze finally made it up to his face, I saw him looking back at me and could see the hunger in his eyes, too. “Oh, fuck, Jay,” I moaned. “*Why* am I not with you right now?”

“I don’t know,” he murmured. “But maybe we can still have a good time. Over the phone.”

“You think so?”

“Take off your shirt.” It wasn’t a question, it was an order, and the tone of his voice sent a ripple of pleasure through me.

I set the phone on a stack of pillows so he could see me and grabbed the hem of my T-shirt. I started to pull it off, slowly, teasingly.

Jay moaned. “Faster. Now,” he growled.

I yanked my shirt off and threw it to the floor.

“Bra. Off.”

I widened my eyes. “This bra?” I asked innocently. I ran my finger along the black lace edging as I leaned toward the camera. “This one?”

Jay sucked in a breath and nodded. “That’s the one. I want it off.”

“Why?’ I asked, knowing the answer.

“I want to see your tits, Lola. Let me see them. Now.” His voice had gone rough with desire, almost a snarl. It was new to see him like this, so hungry for me and yet unable to touch.

I leaned closer to the camera, pushing my boobs together. “What would you do to them if you were with me?”  
 Jay slipped his hand beneath his covers. “I’d suck them until you screamed.”

Slowly, keeping my eyes on Jay, I unclasped my bra and pulled it off. Jay closed his eyes, then opened them again. “Touch them.”

I took my breasts in my hands.

“Harder,” he ordered. “Make it hurt.”

I pinched my nipples, the line between pleasure and pain so thin it made my head spin. “Fuck, Jay. I want you here. I want you *in* me.”

“Take your pants off. I want to see you touching yourself.”

I wriggled out of my pants and slid my hand into my underwear. I gasped as my fingers slid inside myself. “*Jay*.”

“Say my name, Lola,” he demanded. “*Say it*.”

“Jay,” I chanted, moving my fingers in circles. “Oh, fuck, Jay. *Jay!*”

My whole body was starting to tense, and Jay’s breathing was beginning to grow ragged when there was as knock on my door.

I froze.

Who was knocking on my door? Was I being too loud?

“Lola?” Jay gasped, clearly about to finish.

“Hang on,” I said, scrambling up.

“What?” he asked, looking baffled.

“Just… hold that thought. I heard a knock.” I listened hard. “Probably one of those creepy vampire kids.”

There was another knock—louder this time, and clearly at my door.

“Shit,” I hissed, grabbing for my clothes.

“Lola, is everything—”

“I’ll call you back!” I said, grabbing my phone and ending the call. I scrambled into my clothes and lunged for the door. Who the hell was knocking at my door? When I wrenched it open, I was still flushed and my skin was buzzing from my almost-climax, which probably made a strange picture for Emmett, who was standing in the hallway, a sly grin on his face.

“I’m sorry, Lola.” He looked me over and raised one eyebrow. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

I could feel myself blushing furiously. “I was just doing my nightly yoga practice. Can’t go to bed without it.” I drew in a breath. “What’s up?”

He smiled at me—that smile that made my stomach do cartwheels.

Why the hell was my stomach doing the flip-flops when my hot-as-hell mate had just been on my screen making me crazy?

Emmett nodded, gesturing over his shoulder. “There’s something I think you should see.”

**Episode 1246**

“You want to get that side a little further out,” my mom said, gesturing to Astrid. We were in the yard, near the trees, setting up a fairy ring. Torin was with us, too. The ring would’ve been even stronger with Maren, but in the end, I’d decided not to ask her. What we were going to do involved Artemis, my only sister, and I just didn’t trust Maren enough to ask her to join the ring.

Besides, seeing Maren would only remind me of Fenrir and Greyson and the DNA test and the question of paternity and all the baggage that came with that. My head really couldn’t start concocting more elaborate anxiety daydreams right now. I had to focus.

No, it was better to keep the ring small and slightly less powerful, but powered only by the Fae I trusted completely.

“Okay, everyone,” my mom began. “You all need to come closer; take your places in the circle.” Torin and Astrid stepped closer. “Everyone join hands.”

I took my mom’s hand on one side and Astrid’s on the other. My heart pounded. The ring hadn’t worked last time we’d tried it, but maybe this time…

I’d asked Maren to help me the last—failed—time I’d tried this. Maybe it had failed *because* of Maren. I didn’t know if I believed she would have done anything *intentional* to sabotage the effort, but maybe her Dark Fae power had messed things up somehow.

*C’mon, anxiety brain, what did I just say?*

I tried to stop thinking about her as my mom began to speak.

“We must all think of Artemis—picture her face in our minds—and then chant her name.”

I closed my eyes and tried to picture Artemis. I thought of the first time I’d ever met her, in the Fae world, when she’d captured me in her net. Astrid and Torin had been there as well. And Greyson.

I felt my face heat up as I remembered being pressed close to Greyson in the net. We’d been captured at the spring, and we’d both been naked.

The others started chanting, and I joined in, hoping I wasn’t blushing.

Maybe if the location spell worked this time, I would try it for Xavier, too. He still hadn’t returned any of my texts, and he wasn’t answering my calls. I was starting to get really worried, but…

I took a deep, calming breath. One thing at a time. First, we had to find Artemis.

*A wisp*.

I opened my eyes, *knowing* that a wisp had appeared. I watched as the wisp circled over our heads, little more than a scrap of light. Everyone followed the tiny creature’s fast, unpredictable movements.

“We have to follow it,” I said, looking up at the tiny ball of light. “It’s going to lead us to Artemis. I’m sure of it.”

My mom’s hand was growing clammy in mine. She was nervous, but she nodded. “Okay, everyone follow me. Stay close together, and stay focused on the wisp. Do not take your eyes off it, even for a moment.”

We moved forward as one—or, I thought we did. I was completely focused on the tiny scrap of light that moved quickly through the cold air. I picked up my feet as high as I could as I walked, trying not to trip on any rocks as the tiny creature led us toward the woods.

“It’s working,” I whispered to my mother, my heart lightening for the first time in days. “The connection is stronger, and the wisp *feels* stronger somehow.”

My mom nodded, her eyes on the wisp. “Let’s hope so. I’m just so worried about Artemis.”

I glanced sideways at my mom. Her face looked pinched and drawn. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen her looking so scared. And then I remembered what Vander had said, when she’d appeared to Jay and me in the car, and I felt my own anxiety rise. Was it possible that Artemis wasn’t just missing? Could she be in danger, too? Was she in danger right now?

I looked up at the wisp, willing it to move faster. But even as I thought this, the thing began to slow down, its movements growing sluggish and more erratic. It moved forward and backward, to the right and to the left—almost like it wasn’t sure which way it should be going.

“Is that normal?” I asked my mom.

My mom shook her head. “No, it’s not normal. Something’s not right.”

And, just as she spoke, the wisp reversed its path and started heading back up the lawn, back the way we’d come.

We all stopped and watched it for a moment.

“That is… not good,” Torin said.

The wisp continued to zig-zag through the air, jumping from place to place, seemingly at random. Then, without warning, it disappeared in a tiny puff of light and smoke, like a tiny firecracker in reverse.

“Damnit!” I said, tears in the corners of my eyes. I stared at the spot where the wisp had vanished, crushed. We’d failed. Again.

“I was afraid of this,” my mom said, her voice hollow. She closed her eyes as the blood drained from her face, and for a moment, she swayed on her feet. But when she opened her eyes, her jaw had a determined set to it. “We need to try again.” She turned to the group and grabbed my hand. “I need everyone to concentrate on Artemis. Clear your minds, picture *only* Artemis.”

We all joined hands and started chanting her name again, but I could feel everyone’s doubt this time. Despite the low morale, I joined in. My mouth was saying her name, but in my mind, I was calling out to Artemis. *Help us, Artemis. Tell us where you are. Tell the wisp. Let it guide us to you. Artemis. Tell us!*

But nothing happened. We went on and on, but no wisp appeared.

My mom stopped chanting first, dragging in a sob. Torin and Astrid broke off next, looking worried.

I squeezed my mom’s hand. “We’ll think of something. We’ll find her another way.”

My mom didn’t answer. She pressed her lips together, clearly trying not to cry, and I put my arm around her shoulders and led her back up the lawn toward the pack house.

*Was* there another way? Could Big Mac help? Was there some kind of Artemis location spell we could use? I would have to ask her. I had to find out.

When we got back to the pack house, we found my dad in the kitchen, flipping through a cookbook like everything was completely normal and a bunch of us hadn’t been attempting magical spells in the back yard.

“Do you think you could make Mom some tea?” I asked him.

“Sure,” he said quickly, seeing the drawn look on my mom’s face. He snapped the cookbook shut and turned on the stove.

“I’m just going to find Big Mac,” I said, and after I settled my mom on a stool, I strode out to do just that.

But the first person I found was Greyson. He was standing by the stairs, speaking quietly to Maren. I paused, stopping before they noticed me. I couldn’t see Maren’s face, but Greyson was leaning against the wall, nodding as she spoke to him. I couldn’t hear what was being said, but the scene hit me like a slap in the face. They weren’t doing anything untoward, but I just felt… *awkward*. Like I’d walked in on something I wasn’t meant to see. Just seeing Maren *speaking* to Greyson made me feel jealous and territorial, and I balled my hands into fists.

Greyson glanced up and, seeing me, excused himself from Maren. Maren glanced over her shoulder at me, her expression neutral, then walked away, up the stairs.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” Greyson asked, walking over.

That territorial jealousy was still rocketing around in my brain, making my mind spin. I pushed all the questions I had about his conversation with Maren aside and focused. “I’m worried about Artemis,” I answered. “We weren’t able to call a wisp to help locate her. The spell failed the second time we tried it, just nothing. I wanted to talk to Big Mac. Have you seen her?”

“Yeah, she’s in the basement with Arlo,” Greyson said. “I’ll go down there with you.”

I couldn’t refuse him, nor did I want to. I wanted him near, even if it was just a quick jaunt down the stairs. It was always cooler in the basement, but it was freezing when we descended, and the scene that met my eyes when we made it downstairs made me shiver.

Arlo was lying still as stone on a narrow cot in one of the small basement rooms. Violet, Marta, and Big Mac were standing near him, but none of them were looking at him. They were all facing away from him, looking into an empty corner.

“What’s going on?” I asked. I wasn’t sure why, but it felt like I should whisper my question.

Violet looked over at me, surprised, like she hadn’t heard me come in. “Oh, hey. Marta’s communicating with Arlo’s ghost.”

“His *ghost*?” I asked, aghast. If Arlo’s *ghost* was here—*separate* from his body—then that meant Arlo must have died? I looked down at Arlo, lying on the cot. He *seemed* to be breathing. But before I had a chance to ask, Big Mac started shooting questions at Marta.

“What does he know about the presence of dark magic?” she demanded.

I shot a questioning look at Greyson. *Dark magic*? I mouthed. That sounded bad.

Suddenly, a cold hand grabbed my arm.

I screamed and looked around wildly. It felt like my heart stopped when I saw that the hand belonged to Arlo. He had reached for me and was pulling himself up from the cot. His eyes were on me, and they were flashing a fiery orange.

**Episode 1247**

ARTEMIS

I stumbled back through the dirt as the guy stepped toward me.

“Get the hell away from me,” I said, trying to sound angry and intimidating, and not like I was scared as hell. He reached out for me and, panicking, I shot a blast of my power at him, knocking him back so he fell on his ass and skidded through the dust. “I *said* get away from me!” I screamed.

“Why’d you do that?” the guy asked, looking around, stunned. “I said I wanted to help you! What’d you attack me for?”

I stared at him, baffled. “Wait, *what*?” I looked him over warily. “Hang on, man. Are you alive or dead?”

The guy looked at me like I’d just grown another head. “That’s a fucking weird question,” he said, getting to his feet and brushing the dust off his pants. “Why the hell would you ask someone that?”

I rubbed my head, which was starting to ache. “Okay, hang on, let’s go back a couple of steps. Who are you?”

“My name’s York,” he said, almost cheerfully. He reminded me of Arlo and the weird, cheerful vibe he’d had after he’d been brought back to life.

I looked him over carefully, checking for anything suspicious. I was still shaken, thinking I might have just killed him—and then brought him back to life.

“And—you’re normal?” I asked. “I mean… you’re feeling okay?”  
 York looked around, apparently confused. “I’m okay, but what are we doing back here? What am *I* doing back here? I’m supposed to be working.”

With a sigh of relief, I nodded. “Yes. Right! Working! That’s a *great* idea. You should go back to work. It was really nice meeting you, York, but actually, I have to go, too.”

I turned and started to walk away, glad as hell to be getting out of there and away from that dude.

But my stomach sank when I heard the steady beat of footsteps. I turned around and saw York just behind me.

“Oh god, York. Stop following me. Go back, you’re supposed to be working.” He didn’t appear to be listening. “*Shoo*. Leave me alone.”

I turned back around and sped up, trying to lose him as I hurried away behind the screen, but I could hear his footsteps matching mine, step for step.

“I’m only trying to *help*,” he said from just behind me. “I’m here to serve you.”

“What are you talking about? Didn’t you say you had a job you had to get back to? *Go away!* I don’t need any help,” I said, breaking into a run. I made it past the screen and hit the edge of the drive-in. I ran as fast as I could, trying to get as far away from the people in the cars as possible.

“But it’s what the voice told me to do!” York called after me.

I stopped in my tracks. York stopped behind me, and I spun to face him. “What voice?” I asked, though I dreaded to hear the answer.

York pointed to his head. “The voice in here.”

I felt myself start to shake with fear. The screen behind York’s head was awash with color and light, but I didn’t see a thing. My mind was spinning as I sifted through the possibilities. Was it possible that the voice in his head was the same as the voice in my head?

*You see?* said the voice as if on cue. *I can help you. You’re the vessel I’ve been searching for.*

I closed my eyes, willing the voice to disappear, or to shut the hell up.

*You’re special—and I’m the only one who sees that.*

“Stop!” I gasped, clutching my head. “Leave me alone! I’m not special, I’m not anything. Stop talking to me.”

*Ah, but you are wrong, dear child. You’re different. You’ve always felt different, haven’t you?*

I gritted my teeth as a jolt of understanding shot through me, shaking me to my core. The voice was right. I *had* always felt different. It was what had made me tough and capable, able to get the job done, no matter what. It was the idea of being special that had made the loneliness a little easier to bear, back in the days before I’d met Cali and Orla and Rishika and the rest of them.

When I felt a hand on my arm, I jumped like I’d been shocked. I glanced up to see York looking at me, his pale blue eyes intent.

“I know what you’re going through,” he said, his voice curiously flat.

“Do you?” I breathed. “I seriously doubt that.”

He nodded, like he hadn’t heard me speak. “That’s why I’m here. To help you. Maybe you want some popcorn? I can get you some. As much as you want. Soda? A hotdog?”

He sounded like he was being pulled in two different directions: the totally normal, mortal job he had here, and then whatever weird quest he seemed hellbent to be on with me. “I don’t want any popcorn,” I finally managed. “I don’t want a hotdog or a soda. I want this damn voice out of my head, and I want you to get the hell away from me.”

York looked pained. “You shouldn’t fight this, you know. It’s your destiny.”

I swallowed hard. I did *not* like the sound of that.

“What the hell do you know about my destiny, York? *I* determine my destiny—I always have—not some popcorn guy I don’t even know.”

I jerked my arm out of his grip and strode away, heading toward the exit.

“You should *let* me help you,” he said, following me. “How many chances like this do you get in life? Someone just offering you their service?”

I walked faster, trying to ignore his voice, which was boring into my head like a drill bit. But York kept following me. I broke into a run, my feet pounding against the hard-packed dirt as I sprinted along the edge of the drive-in and out the gates. I ran as fast as I could, hoping to wear York down. Maybe I could lose him that way. Beyond the drive-in was a road, little used and pitted with potholes. I leapt over them as I kept running, hoping York wasn’t as agile as I was. The sky was dark, and away from the light of the movie screen, the road was nearly black.

But as my eyes began to adjust to the moonlight, I saw an opening in the trees up ahead. For a moment I thought it might be a park or even a house. But as I drew closer, I saw that it was a cemetery, the uneven rows of old gravestones illuminated by the moonlight.

“God dammit,” I hissed, turning when I heard the sound of fast footsteps behind me. I hadn’t gone fast enough to lose York. I spun around, pissed. “I swear, if you come one step closer, I’ll blast you so hard you’ll never leave this cemetery.”

This brought him up short and he stopped, looking at me warily.

*That’s right*, the voice said silkily. *You’ve got the right instincts, Artemis. Your powers can be used for many things. Control, yes. But if you want to see the full extent of what you’re capable of, you’ll only be wasting your energy on York here. He’s already living and breathing. There are far better uses for your gifts.*

York pointed behind me. “They’ve been waiting for someone like you. Powerful. Capable.”

I frowned at him, confused, then turned to look in the direction he was pointing. My eyes widened at the cemetery sprawling before me. Rows upon rows of gravestones filled my vision, and I could feel whatever strange energy was inside of me grow stronger. The mark of the dead was… soothing? No, that was too weird. I didn’t want to go near the cemetery, but at the same time I didn’t want to go anywhere else. My heart beat hard—so hard I felt like I could feel it in the base of my throat.

*You know what to do*, the voice told me.

I *did* know what to do.

I raised my hands.

There was a part of me—a big part—that *knew* this wasn’t right. There were certain rules in magic, unspoken laws, and tampering with life and death was the most taboo of them all. But the magic was so intoxicating—the power that coursed through me burned like whiskey, and it felt just as good. It was there, *right there*, right at my lips, and I wanted to take a drink. It was just too hard to turn away from. I could feel something swelling in the earth at my feet—an expectation, like it was waiting for me to act. I could smell the damp ground as though it were opening itself up to breathe. There was a feeling of hope, of *life*. I could feel the ground pulsing beneath me like a heartbeat.

I put my hands up, then turned my palms so they faced toward the ground. I concentrated my energy, sending a surge of power straight into the ground, causing the earth at my feet to tremble. I felt my whole body sway with the movement of the earth. I was being swept away on the overwhelming power and strength I felt emanating from within me.

*See?* the voice said, softly chiding. *Once you see what is possible, Artemis, you’ll never question me again.*

The voice was right. I never would. I felt ten feet tall as the power coursed through me.

Another surge of energy blasted through my hands and into the ground, causing little explosions of deep, dark earth to puff up at my feet.

The voice didn’t laugh, but it sounded satisfied as it spoke.

*It has begun.*