**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 26**

**Episodes 3153–3327**

# 

# Episode 3153

“Cali. It’s time to get up!”

My mom shook my shoulder again, and I rolled over.

“Leave me alone. I don’t want to go to school,” I mumbled groggily. I wasn’t going to go. I was too tired. Besides, I was too old. I hadn’t been to grade school in years. Why did she want me to go now?

“Cali. You need to wake up. Cali!”

“Stop! I already told you, I’m not going,” I snapped, starting to get mad. But when I turned and opened my eyes, it wasn’t my mom standing over me, it was Xavier. I stared at him, baffled. “What are you doing?” I slurred.

He made a face. “I’m trying to wake you up. Obviously not successfully. You can’t sleep in anymore, Cali. We have to get to the airport.”

I sat up, more confused than ever. “The airport? Why?”

Then, a second later, I remembered why, and I felt instantly awake.

“*Oh no!* Are we late?” I asked, looking around desperately for my phone.

“No, but we will be if you don’t get your ass out of bed,” Xavier said.

“Got it,” I said quickly, getting to my feet. I hurried to the bathroom and splashed some cold water on my face, brushed my teeth, then threw on the clothes I’d already picked out. I tossed my pajamas into the hamper and slung my bag across my back. I felt like I was a little tornado whipping around the room while Xavier—already dressed—stood patiently by the door, waiting for me with his duffle slung over his shoulder.

“Ready,” I said hurriedly, grabbing my suitcase.

We headed downstairs to find Rishika and Artemis waiting for us, though Artemis looked like she was about to nod off, and Rishika was nursing a very large cup of coffee. She had two more on the table behind her, and she handed them to us as we walked over.

“You’ll need these,” she said, her voice still scratchy with sleep.

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, and took a sip of the strong brew. But really, now that I was up, I wasn’t feeling tired anymore. I wasn’t even sure I was going to be able to sleep once we got on the plane. Excitement was coursing through me at the thought of our upcoming adventure.

It was like I’d told Xavier the night before—I felt like we were heading in the right direction to get what we needed. This trip could change everything.

We all looked up as Greyson came down the stairs.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice husky with sleep. He glanced around, his eyes taking in the luggage, though he didn’t say anything.

It *was* kind of a lot for what was supposed to be a short trip.

Artemis woke up long enough to hand Greyson a cup of coffee. “You look you’re going to need this.”

He accepted the cup. “Let’s go.”

We climbed into the car and drove to the airport in silence. There were a few steps involved—long-term parking, the shuttle to the terminal, checking luggage, security—but it all went smoothly. Mostly because there weren’t a lot of people at the airport, but also because Artemis had thankfully chosen not to bring her knives along. I didn’t even want to think about what TSA would do if she strode into the airport with those.

By the time we got to the gate, it was nearly time to board, and though it felt like I’d woken up hours ago, it also felt like time was rushing by.

“That’s us,” Greyson said when the gate agents called for group A.

We stood and gathered our things. Rishika hadn’t wanted to check her suitcase, so she pulled it along behind her as we headed down the jetway.

Once we were on the plane, I realized my ticket had me sitting in a middle seat.

My heart pounded.

“Can I see your ticket for a second?” I asked Greyson.

“Sure, would you hold it for me while I put this up?” he asked, handing me his ticket as he hefted Rishika’s bag into the overhead bin.

I grabbed Xavier’s ticket as he dealt with his own luggage and, with a sinking stomach, realized I was sitting in the middle seat between Greyson and Xavier.

That was not going to be good.

“Artemis,” I hissed, grabbing my sister’s arm and yanking her a little ways away.

“What?”

“Trade seats with me.”

She stared at me, baffled. “What are you talking about?”

“Just switch seats with me,” I said, trying to pull her ticket from her hand.

“No!” she said, yanking the ticket away from me. “What’s going on with you?”

“I’m sitting between Greyson and Xavier for the entire flight,” I said.

“So?” Artemis asked. “How is asking me to do that any less awkward?”

“I’d owe you,” I tried to wheedle.

“Forget it,” she said dryly. “I want to sit by the window, and Rishika. They’re your mates, Cali. You’re on your own.”

And with that she turned and headed toward her own—window—seat.

I sighed and took my middle seat, though I had to get up again right away when Greyson stepped into the aisle. When he squeezed past me, he put his hands on my hips, and I felt his body press against mine. When I sat back down, my face felt like it had been set on fire. I was flustered and turned on and—as Xavier sat down on my other side—embarrassed. I tried to hide my blush from him, but this didn’t seem like an auspicious beginning.

Xavier was looking at me curiously, but luckily enough, at that moment, the flight attendants started to explain the safety features of the plane, so I pretended to be very interested in their oxygen mask demonstration.

And by the time the plane took off, I was feeling hopeful again. I was nervous, of course, but also feeling positive that this trip might work out. Honestly, it felt strange that it was even happening.

I was certain I wasn’t going to be able to sleep at all, but I managed to nod off, and I slept through the short flight, the layover, and the long flight to Louisiana.

I didn’t feel fully awake again until we were picking up the rental car. I was standing outside while Xavier was inside, filling out the paperwork, and I looked up at the wide blue sky stretching over me. It was so cloudy in the Pacific Northwest, but the sky in Louisiana was clear and bright. The air was comfortably cool and smelled sweet. There was something about it that seemed *special*, like I was smelling magic. I wasn’t sure I’d ever smelled magic before—I wasn’t a werewolf with an extra-sensory nose—but there was something about the air that made me feel energized.

“Got it!” Xavier called as he walked out of the small building. He jangled a set of keys, and we all piled into the extra-large SUV he’d reserved. We’d rented a house in the Garden District, and the drive there felt like something out of a storybook. It was the middle of winter, but the oaks blooming green and lush, and the genteel homes with their well-groomed lawns, made it feel like we were in the heart of spring.

My face was glued to the glass as we drove past one of the famous New Orleans cemeteries with its above-ground crypts. Greyson pointed out the cemetery ferns growing all along the outside walls—beautiful and creepy.

The place we’d rented was a large white house with black shutters. It had a wide porch that wrapped around the front and side of the house, and a balcony on the back of the house that overlooked a private garden filled with palms and birds of paradise.

Once we’d dropped off our bags and done a quick tour of the house, everyone seemed much more awake when we gathered in the kitchen.

“I think we’re going to go downtown. Maren wrote down a few addresses for us to take a look at,” Artemis said. She pulled out the aforementioned list. “I want to get started on the hunt for Adair.”

A walk downtown would’ve sounded like a lot of fun under any other circumstances, but I wasn’t sure what the plan was for recovering the ashes. Though, I did want to see New Orleans. I’d never been, and I didn’t want to leave such a beautiful place without having explored a bit.

I turned to Greyson and Xavier. “So now what? Where do we start with the ashes?” I asked, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter.

Greyson glanced up from his phone. “Big Mac gave me her friend’s address, but apparently visits are by appointment only.”

“But luckily,” Xavier said, stepping into the kitchen from outside and slipping his phone into his pocket, “I’ve already made us an appointment.”

I paused mid-bite, surprised. “Really? When?”

“I just spoke to her now.”

“When’s the appointment?” Greyson asked.

My heart sped up. I felt nervous, but also kind of giddy. “Yeah, when do we have to go? If it’s not until tomorrow or something, maybe we could go explore a little today—”

But Xavier was already shaking his head. “No, we’re filling in for a cancellation. We have to go now.”

# Episode 3154

**Xavier**

I’d reserved the extra-large SUV because we had so many people and pieces of luggage, but as I eased it through the narrow, alley-like New Orleans streets, I realized why the rental company had it available. And as hard as it was to drive through the throngs of holiday crowds, it was even worse to park. But I’d parked bigger trucks in tighter places, so I managed it. We were in the French Quarter, which I’d never been to before, but it looked exactly like I’d expected. It was beautiful, with colorful buildings and groups of laughing tourists walking through the mild winter air. There were wide balconies on the old, gracious buildings, and they all had planter boxes with long, trailing vines dripping downward toward the street. There was the gentle sound of people dining outdoors, and a small band was playing jazz on the corner. People walking on the street had stopped to listen, and a crowd was starting to form.

I liked the place right away. It had an old soul vibe that resonated with me—but I definitely could have done without the narrow-ass streets.

We all piled out of the car, and I slipped the keys into my pocket.

“I’m not doing that again,” I muttered, speaking mostly to myself as I checked how close I’d gotten the wheels to the high curb.

“I told you to let me drive,” Greyson said, slamming his door.

I rolled my eyes. “The address Big Mac gave me is just down here,” I said, nodding down the street.

Cali peered down the crowded street, then turned to Artemis and Rishika, who’d come along for the ride downtown. “Do you two think you’ll be okay on your own?”  
 Artemis nodded. “Yeah, we’ll be fine. We’re going to grab something to eat, then check out a couple of the places that Maren mentioned.”

“And you’re going to be careful, right?” Cali asked nervously.

“Sure,” Artemis said vaguely. Even I could tell that safety wasn’t the first thing on her mind.

“I’ve got my phone on me, so if we need to send you an SOS for some reason, I’ll be in touch,” Rishika added reassuringly, patting her pocket. “But, hey, at the very least, trust me. We’ll be fine.”

Artemis grinned. “Come on, Cali. Relax. I don’t think it’s going to be possible to get into too much trouble. Look at all the people around here,” she said, gesturing around.

Cali nodded and gave her sister a quick hug. “Well, be careful anyway, okay? We’ll catch up with you as soon as we can.”

“Hopefully with good news… on both our parts,” Rishika said. She waved as she and Artemis disappeared into the milling crowds.

“We’re headed this way,” I said, pointing down the street.

As we walked down the crowded, cobbled street, a steepled white church came into view.

“That must be it,” I said, looking up at it, then glancing at the addresses on the other buildings as we passed.

“A church?” Greyson frowned. “Really?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Why?”

“That doesn’t seem like the most likely place for a witch to be,” Cali pointed out. “Seems strange. I wonder how she ended up here.”

I shrugged. “Well, you two can ask all your questions when we get inside.”

When we reached the wide double doors, there was a buzzer off to the side of the building.

“Oh. It’s been converted into apartments,” Greyson said, craning his neck to look up at the building. “Man, what *hasn’t* been changed into condos or apartments lately?”

I looked past him, scanning the directory next to the buzzer for the apartment number for C. Lambert. It was 3B. I buzzed the unit and stood back to wait.

For a long time, nothing happened. So long, in fact, that I buzzed 3B again, starting to wonder if this was going to be a bust. When I glanced over at Cali, I saw that she was rocking on her feet a little. She did that when she got nervous. It was hard for her to stay still. She was clearly anxious to get this going—whatever it was that *this* turned out to be.

Greyson shot me a look. “Are you sure she’s here?” he asked. “And she said to come now?”

“Yeah, she is, and yeah, she did,” I said shortly. “I was literally on the phone with her only a few minutes ago.”

I thought back to my phone call with Clementine. It had been pretty weird, but she was a witch—of course it had been weird. Big Mac was weird, too. Most witches were weird. I just accepted that as part of their whole deal.

The call had been brief but ultimately pretty clear. She’d wanted us to come by at six p.m.

I glanced down at the smartwatch Cali had given me for my Secret Santa gift. It was after six now.

I was starting to get annoyed. I didn’t like anyone jerking me around—especially a witch. And if it was Big Mac who’d given me bad information and sent me to some crackpot, she was never going to hear the end of it.

I pulled out my phone and was about to call Clementine again when suddenly a voice came through the scratchy intercom.

“Hello? Who’s out there?”

“Hello,” Greyson and I spoke at the same time.

“Is this Clementine?” I asked.

There was no response, but after a moment the door buzzed, signaling it was open.

We all exchanged glances, then Greyson pushed the door open, and we stepped inside.

It looked nothing like a church, but a lot like a new condo, which I supposed was what it was. At the end of the foyer was a set of curved stairs which looked new, and we headed toward them. On the third floor, we stopped in front of 3B, and I knocked.

The door opened, and a woman stood framed in the doorway. She had dark skin and tightly curled hair that framed her face. She was probably in her early forties, but possibly younger. She looked somehow timeless, and her white tunic looked fresh and crisp against the ebony of her skin.

“Are you Clementine?” I asked again.

She smiled, revealing a set of bright white, perfectly straight teeth. “Of course. You must be the little wolves. Won’t you come in?”

I wasn’t sure I liked being called a *little wolf*, but I kept my mouth shut and let Greyson walk into the apartment. Cali followed him, and I put my hand on the small of her back to guide her inside.

Inside, Clementine stood back and looked at the three of us, still smiling.

“Now, MacKenzie never told me how adorable y’all are.”

Cali raised her eyebrows. “How do you know Big Mac?”

Clementine chuckled. “Big Mac? Good lord, is she still calling herself that? Well, MacKenzie and I go way, way back.”

“Did you two date?” Cali wondered out loud.

Clementine smiled mysteriously. “We used to have a good time.”

“Listen,” I said shortly, “I didn’t fly two thousand miles to hear about Big Mac’s love life, okay?”

Clementine ignored my outburst and looked between Greyson and me. “Now, which one of you two Evers men is going to be MacKenzie’s new stepson?” She chuckled, the sound deep and rich. “MacKenzie having a child in any capacity—who would have thought?”

“It’s me, but I’d hardly think of myself as Big Mac’s *child*,” Greyson said. “She is engaged to my mother, though.”

“Well, I’m glad she’s found someone,” Clementine said. “I’m too much of a rolling stone. MacKenzie was, too. That’s probably why the two of us could never make it work. As it is, I’m only here in New Orleans for a few days, so consider yourselves lucky that our paths were able to cross.”

“Wow,” Cali breathed.

“Now, what is it that y’all came here to see me about?” Clementine asked, walking further into the apartment and taking a seat on a futon—one of the few pieces of furniture in the place.

“Big Mac didn’t tell you?” Greyson asked.

“She was a little vague on the details,” Clementine admitted.

I pulled the medals from my pocket. “Do these mean anything to you?” I asked, holding them out.

I watched Clementine’s face carefully as she looked down at them. I wanted to see if her reaction was at odds with what she was going to say. Big Mac might have recommended this woman, but I knew I could never fully trust a witch. It just wasn’t in my nature.

“They used to be two,” Cali pointed out. “But they melted together.”

Clementine took the medals from me and looked at them for a moment, then quickly up at me, her eyes flashing with what looked like concern. “Where did you get these?”

“I think someone left them for me,” I told her.

This didn’t seem to make her feel any better. She looked at the medals again, then handed them back to me. “I’m sorry you flew all this way, little wolves.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, starting to feel agitated.

She shook her head. “Well, I’m sorry to drag you all down here for nothing, but you see… I can’t help you.”

# Episode 3155

**Artemis**

Rishika and I had grabbed a bite to eat—fried shrimp po’boys from a tiny shop that was nothing more than a walk-up window with a long line—and were now heading toward the first address Maren had given us. As anxious as I was to start getting some answers, I wasn’t finding myself in too much of a hurry. The southern city was beautiful, and we were enjoying the walk.

Everyone in New Orleans seemed to be content to stroll in the mild weather, and it made for a pleasant evening walk. Striding along too briskly would’ve felt strange amid the slow-moving crowds. Somewhere in the distance a band struck up a song, and the smell of jasmine wafted through the air, making it feel more like summer than winter. We had just eaten, but as we passed a shop selling beignets, the smell of sugared dough was so tantalizing, I nearly walked inside, like I was hypnotized.

“I have to admit,” Rishika said, breaking into my dessert thoughts, “I’m pretty surprised that Maren agreed to help when we asked her.”

“Are you?” I asked, looking over. “Why did that surprise you so much? She’s been fairly nice to everyone in the pack. Well, not *nice* nice, but at least not openly hostile.”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “I’ve heard that she and Cali aren’t exactly best friends.”

I thought about that for a moment. “I guess that’s because Maren and Greyson used to be a thing, and that probably makes them all a little edgy. And Maren has some issues with the Wrenthorns. That would probably do it. But, even so, I’m Dark Fae, and so is Maren, and I think she felt a kinship with me. Besides, it wasn’t like she needed to give up some deep, dark, personal secret—just some places to hit up in the city.”

Rishika gave me a sidelong glance. “Yeah, I’ve been wondering how that conversation went.”

“It was… fine,” I said, thinking back. “I mean, I guess Maren was a little cool at first, which is understandable, given that I am a Wrenthorn. But once I explained what was really going on, she warmed up a little. She said that Cali had told her someone was looking for Adair, but she hadn’t realized it was Cali’s sister.”

“And she still agreed to help you?” Rishika asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “She’s heard of Kadmos and Adair, but she said she hadn’t come across anyone who’d actually *seen* Adair.”

“Really?”

“Believe me, I pressed her on it. I wanted to know if she had any idea where exactly in New Orleans he could be,” I said, turning a corner down a smaller street.  
 “And did she?” Rishika asked, wide-eyed.

“Maren’s a hard read,” I admitted. “She thought about it for a while. For a minute, I didn’t think she was going to tell me. But then she gave me these addresses. And we’re starting with the first one on the list now.”

Rishika looked around. We were on a quiet block lined with shops. “Where is it?”

“It should be right up here,” I said. “At the very end of this block.”

We walked until we stopped in front of a tiny shop selling “wares of the occult.” The front windows were jammed full of dusty shelves filled with books with cracked bindings, fake skulls, shrunken heads that had never been real, and cloudy crystals piled up in depressing-looking mounds.

Rishika took in the windows with a raised eyebrow, but she kept her mouth shut, which I appreciated. There was a neon sign over the door that buzzed as it flashed. It was supposed to read “WITCHES,” but the “W” had burned out, so it actually read “ITCHES BREW.”

That seemed like a bad omen.

Rishika seemed to think so, too. She took a deep breath. “Are you sure about this?”

I swallowed hard. “I guess.” What choice did we have?

Inside, the shop was small, dark, and cramped. Every nook and cranny was jammed with teetering shelves filled with glass jars, stacks of tarot cards, and dusty candles. The air was so heavy with the scent of patchouli and burned sage that it made me feel like I was perpetually on the verge of a sneeze.

In the corner, there was a dirty glass tank holding a snake with poisonous green diamond skin and staring black eyes. It watched us as we moved deeper into the store, toward the counter where a middle-aged woman stood. She had long, grey hair, and she gave us a wary smile as we walked over.

“Hello there, girls,” she said, eyeing us just like her snake.

I tried to smile back. I wasn’t getting a very Fae-ish vibe from the store, but we’d already come this far, so I had to see it through.

“What can I do for you? Can I help you find something? Are you interested in a book of spells, maybe?” she asked.

“We’re actually looking for someone. Maybe you can help us find him,” I said.

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “Ah! A lost lover, perhaps?” She reached for a stack of worn tarot cards next to the cash register. “I could do a reading for you, let you know if it’s likely that you’ll find him again. Only two dollars. Best deal in town—”

“No, no, thank you,” Rishika said quickly. She looked over at me. “Artemis, I think we forgot to add time to the meter. Maybe we should go before we get a ticket.”

The woman’s face fell in disappointment.

I knew what Rishika was doing—and I didn’t blame her—but we’d already come this far…

I turned to the woman. “Do you know anything about Fae?”

“Of course,” the woman said. “I have all kinds of books about the Fae,” she said, and turned to reach for some behind the counter.

“I’m trying to find someone who might be in contact with Fae,” I said, reaching out a hand to stop her. “Do you know anyone like that?”

The woman turned slowly and gave me a curious look. “I might,” she said. “What’s in it for me?”

Rishika rolled her eyes and pulled a ten dollar bill out of her pocket. “How’s this?”

The woman eyed the bill, then reached across the counter and took the money. “I know a man who knows someone who is Fae. But I make no guarantees,” she added hastily.

“That’s fine,” I said. “We’ll take it.”

The woman shoved the money into her cash register and scribbled something down on a scrap of paper.

“This is the name and address,” she said, pushing the paper toward me. “Tell him Maria sent you.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the paper and following Rishika as she headed for the door.

“Are you sure that’s all I can provide? I can do a crystal ball reading for you girls. Ten dollars. Best price in town. It’s a special today!”  
 Rishika gripped my wrist. “Let’s go,” she said quietly.

“Another time,” I called, and trailed after Rishika.

On the street, I turned to her. “Why were you so eager to get out of there?” I asked. “She seemed harmless enough.”

Rishika looked disdainful. “God, Artemis. It was obvious that woman was no more a witch than I am.”

“She never said she was a witch,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, she just offered to tell our fortunes and to do a tarot card reading,” Rishika countered. “She’s a witch wannabe. I only paid her the ten dollars so we could get the hell out of there.”

I sighed as I looked back at the tiny shop. “I guess you’re right. I just want answers so damn bad, and I’m not going to give up hope because our first contact didn’t give up anything useful.”

Rishika took the paper Maria had written the name and address on from my hand and reached out to throw it into the trash can on the corner.

“Hang on,” I said, putting my hand on her arm to stop her.

“Artemis, come on—”

“What?” I said defensively. “We might as well check it out. Get our ten dollars’ worth.”

Rishika rolled her eyes but looked down at the paper. “RJ, at 350 Frenchman Promenade.” She looked up at me. “What do you want to bet that it’s not even a real address?”

But I took the paper from her hand, frowning.

“Artemis?” Rishika asked. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly. “There’s something about that address that kind of rings a bell.”

“Wait, how? Not like… premonition or Fae magic familiar?”

“No, not like that, but still…” I looked down at the address. Where could I have seen it before? Wait! The list of names Maren had given me!

I pulled the hastily scrawled list from my pocket and—sure enough—there it was. RJ, 350 Frenchman Promenade. Right there, second on the list.

I pointed it out to Rishika, who looked floored.

“*Whoa*.”

“That can’t be a coincidence, can it?” I asked, staring down at the two identical addresses.

“Well,” Rishika said, “I suppose there’s only one way to know for sure.” I looked at up her, and she raised an eyebrow. “Let’s go find out.”

# Episode 3156

This wasn’t going well, but I gritted my teeth. I wasn’t about to give up. Not now. Not when we’d come so far.

“What do you mean, you can’t help us?” I asked.

“What do you mean, what do I mean?” Clementine asked. “I can’t help you. How much clearer can I be?”

“You don’t understand,” I huffed. “If you know anything about those medals, you *have* to help us. My life may depend on it, okay?”

Even as I spoke, I could feel the handprint on my back, and my skin beginning to heat. My whole body felt strange and flushed, so I couldn’t tell if the heat was real or imaginary, but it made my stomach turn. We’d come down to Louisiana because we were in desperate need of help, and the idea of Clementine just not wanting to help was simply too much.

But Clementine just rolled her eyes. “You can just cut out all the pity party stuff, drama queen. If anyone doesn’t understand, it’s you.”

“What don’t we understand?” Xavier asked.

“*Me!* My situation! I don’t move around all the time just because I love to travel. I do it because I have a shit-ton of enemies and it’s not safe to stay in the same place for too long!” she said. “I can’t trust anyone.”

My throat had gone tight. We couldn’t lose this lead. Something told me Clementine could help us… if she chose to.

“Big Mac told us you could help,” I reminded the witch. “That’s why she sent us to you. And you can trust us. I swear you can. If you and Big Mac ever meant anything to each other, then you have to trust us.”

Clementine gave me a hard look, then she turned to Xavier. “Do you have any idea what’s going on with this medal? It’s oozing revenge magic. Why do you even have it? You should have left it where you found it.”

I felt my pulse rate kick up. There was something menacing about the witch’s words, and they filled me with anxiety.

“Well, it’s too late for that now,” Xavier said sourly. “Besides, leaving it behind wasn’t really an option.”

“Why not?” Clementine asked.

“One of those found me,” he said, nodding toward the fused medals.

The witch shook her head. “That isn’t good. Somebody must really have it in for you.” She narrowed her eyes. “You must have done something pretty fucked up. What was it?”

Xavier’s jaw clenched, and his hands flexed at his sides. I thought about what he’d told me. About how when he’d been a mercenary, he might have been involved in a job that had led to the murder of a child. I thought about the broken look in his eyes when he’d told me. I’d never forget his expression, and it had been obvious that he was devastated by any part he might have played in it. Was that what Clementine was referring to?

“Well?” she asked again when he didn’t answer.

“Let’s just say that—like you—I have my fair share of enemies,” Xavier said to Clementine, his voice tight.

She raised her eyebrows. “Yeah, but this is some serious shit,” she said, holding up the medals.

A muscle in his jaw flexed. “Does the name Duquette mean anything to you?” Xavier asked.

Clementine shrugged her slender shoulders. “No. Never heard of them. Why? They the ones you pissed off?”

“Listen, can you help us or not?” I snapped. I didn’t like this witch’s attitude, and—worse—I could see it was starting to get to Xavier. He wasn’t typically sensitive, but I could tell he was feeling a little touchy about this thing with the kid, and I didn’t want to watch Clementine push his buttons any longer.

Clementine looked at me, then glanced over at Greyson. “He doesn’t say much, does he? Strong silent type?”

“I talk plenty, when I have something to say,” Greyson said, cocking his head. “But you haven’t done anything worth talking about.”

Clementine’s eyebrows furrowed. She took up the medal in her hands again. “You want me to tell you who’s using this revenge magic against you?”

“Yeah,” Xavier said, nodding.

I took his hand discreetly, hoping that my touch would calm him, a least a little. He just seemed so on edge. I knew how stressful this was for him. We just needed answers.

*Come* on*, universe.*

“There’s more to it than that,” Greyson said. “We need to find the ashes of a demon.”

Clementine rounded on him, her eyes wide. “Wait, what? A demon? *Ashes?*”

He nodded calmly. “They were stolen from us. “

“We think it’s connected. That whoever performed the revenge magic may have also stolen the ashes. And we think it might be a vampire-witch,” I said, getting all the worst news out at once.

Clementine rolled her eyes. “Honestly, that’s the least of your problems.”

She thought for a moment, the apartment silent around us. The only sound was the distant drip of the bathroom faucet.

She wrapped her arms around her knees and peered at the three of us in turn. “You know that what you’re asking for is highly unusual, right?”

“Yeah, we’re well aware of that,” I said tartly. “It’s the reason we sought you out in the first place. We were under the impression you could help with requests that were highly unusual. So, can you help us?”

Clementine fixed me with a piercing look. “Well, that depends.”

“On what?” I asked.

“Can you pay me for my services?” she asked. “You should know that witches don’t run charities. We have to be paid for the services we provide.”

I had a flash of Big Mac, back in the early days before we’d gotten to know her properly. Back when she’d demanded steep prices for her services, like vials of my blood. And Jay’s eye.

“And what exactly do you do?” Xavier snapped. “Because all you’ve done since we’ve been in here is talk. And I don’t pay for conversation. If you want to be paid, we need to know what exactly we’re paying for.”

I squeezed his hand. I could feel myself growing more anxious by the moment. I just didn’t want this to blow up before we had a chance to learn about the ashes, and witches were notoriously touchy.

“How much do you want?” I asked hoarsely.

Clementine shook her head. “No, no, it’s not that simple.”

“What does that mean? What do you charge?” I asked, nearly begging now.

“You need to really understand what you’re asking me for.” She started to enumerate the services provided on her fingers. “First, to uncover who is using revenge magic against you. Then I’d have to track the magic. Then I’d have to somehow find the ashes of a literal demon—”

“I know it sounds like a lot, but we don’t know who else to turn to,” I said, switching to flattery. I wasn’t sure how else to handle this, since I was sure Xavier’s outbursts had only made things worse for us. “Big Mac spoke so highly of you. She knew what we were up against, and she said you were the only one she could think of who might be able to help. And if you can’t help us, I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

After my outburst, Clementine stared at me for a long moment, her dark eyes liquid and unreadable.

Then, without warning, she burst out laughing.

I stared at her, shocked, as she dropped her head back, cackling.

“Wow. You really are good,” she said through bursts of laughter.

“Excuse me?”

“No, it’s a compliment. You’re great at that. You tried to play the pity card, and you did a pretty good job of it,” she said, wiping her eyes. Still chuckling, she turned to Greyson and Xavier. “I mean, you have to give her credit for trying.”

Greyson frowned. “Does that mean you’ll help us?”

“I never intended not to,” she said breezily. “How could I refuse, when MacKenzie’s soon-to-be stepson has come all this way to ask me? But I just had to be careful about what I was agreeing to. And who I was agreeing to work with.”

I was shaky with relief, but—as I looked sideways at Xavier—I still worried that he was angry enough to do something rash.

“What should we do next?” I asked. “Should we sign a contract or something? How do we do this? You’re the expert.”

“No, I don’t sign anything,” Clementine said dismissively. “I don’t do anything that leaves a paper trail. Your confirmation and our verbal agreement will be plenty. I tend to leave no evidence—that’s your free advice for the day. And once I’m done with this job, I’m leaving New Orleans.”

“So how long is this going to take?” Greyson asked warily.

Clementine glanced out the window and shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said with a sigh. “How much time you got?”

# Episode 3157

**Artemis**

If Rishika had been iffy about “itches Brew,” it was clear she thought even less of the bar we were standing in front of.

She read the sign with clear disdain. “‘The Dusty Petal’.”

And I supposed I understood why she was feeling disdainful. The place wasn’t exactly overflowing with charm. It was a small, squat building, bracketed on either side by larger taverns with flower boxes and generous outdoor seating. The Dusty Petal had a rickety bench outside the door, and two small windows in front, but we couldn’t see through them because they were nearly black with grime. The sign over the door was askew, as it hung from only one rusty chain, and the paint was faded and peeling.

All in all, it didn’t look like the coziest spot in Louisiana.

Rishika looked at me. “Just be prepared for anything.”

I nodded. “That’s no problem. I always am.”

Rishika set her jaw, and we pushed through the creaking door. Inside, the light was so dim that it took my eyes a moment to adjust to the gloom. The Dusty Petal wasn’t quite true to its name: it was more than a little dusty—the place was completely filthy. The floor was sticky, and it smelled like stale beer and feet. Despite this, there were a few customers scattered around the small, low-ceilinged room, and they all looked at us suspiciously as we walked in.

I made some quick calculations: our best escape was out the way we’d come, but I suspected there would be another door in the kitchen if that way was blocked. I liked to have these kinds of things planned out in advance—especially in such clearly unfriendly territory. It didn’t do to be unprepared if things went sideways.

Rishika leaned into me. “Just follow my lead on this one, okay?”

“I mean… fine,” I agreed hesitantly. I got that the place was sketchy, but it really wasn’t all that different from a lot of the pubs I’d frequented in the Fae world. It was just that—back then—*I* had been one of the people at the bar, looking suspiciously at the newcomers. But I let Rishika take the lead anyway, and she stepped toward the bar.

“What’s the contact’s name again?” she murmured at me.

I glanced down at the paper in my hand. “RJ.”

She nodded and gestured toward the bartender. He was a short dude with black hair and what looked like a permanent scowl on his face. Rishika waved again, but the bartender was speaking to another customer, and he ignored us.

“This place is crawling with supernaturals,” Rishika whispered to me. “Werewolves, vampires, witches—everything. You name it, it’s here.”

Rishika seemed a little tense about this information, but I didn’t consider that particularly alarming. If this was a supernatural hub, all that meant was that there could be a Fae here, and that was a good thing.

“I guess the money you spent at ‘itches Brew’ was worth it after all, huh?” I said with a sly smile.

Rishika rolled her eyes. “It’s a start,” she admitted, “but don’t let your guard down.”

I snorted. “Like I ever do.”

Finally, the bartender finished with his customer and sauntered over to us. “What do you want?” he asked coldly.

We eyed the guy, who looked about as friendly as a pissed-off goblin.

Rishika raised an eyebrow. “We’re looking for someone. We were hoping maybe you could help us.”

The bartender didn’t look pleased by this information. “Looking for someone?” he grunted. “What are you? Cops?”

“We’re not cops,” Rishika said. “We’re just looking for a friend of my girlfriend’s.” She nodded toward me.

Friend was generous, but Rishika was smart keeping our reason a secret. I didn’t know what any of these people knew, and they didn’t need to know why we were really there. Some secrets I had to hold close until we knew we could trust someone.

The bartender’s tiny eyes narrowed until they nearly disappeared. “You with MIB?”

“What?” I asked.

“I already told you guys, I’m just a bartender. Leave me the hell alone!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, man,” I said. “I’m just in here looking for some help to find my friend. That’s it. His name’s Adair. Ever heard of him?”

The bartender shook his head dismissively. “Does this look like a missing person’s bureau to you?”

“No, but I—”

“Listen, girlie, you want a drink, I can help you with that,” he snapped. “You need help finding your missing friend, call the FBI.”

And with that, he spun on his heel and headed to the other end of the bar.

“Oh my god, who pissed in his cereal this morning?” I muttered, watching him turn to another customer. “What’s his problem?”

Rishika looked at me, surprised. “He’s a vampire, for one.”

“He is?” I asked, shocked. “How do you know that?”

“You can’t smell it?” she asked.

“No,” I said truthfully. “I’m kind of surprised you can smell anything in here, actually.”

Rishika was looking a little green. “Even with the stench of beer and liquor, I can still smell the death oozing off him. It’s making me nauseous.”

I looked at the guy. “I wonder if he’s going to be any help to us at all.”

The bartender was leaning toward a customer, whispering something. It was impossible to tell what he was saying, but the customer glanced quickly at Rishika and me before sliding off the stool and disappearing through a door near the back of the bar, next to an old dart board.

“What was that about?” I wondered. Rishika shook her head, clearly just as confused as I was.

The bartender stepped back toward us. “You just going to take up space in my bar?”

I glanced at the nearly empty bar. “Um…”

“I pay thirty-five dollars per square foot in rent, which means you’re costing me at least seventy dollars right now, just sitting there.”

Rishika made an irritated noise. “Relax, dude. Just give us a couple of beers.”

I hadn’t thought it was possible, but the guy’s scowl deepened, and he turned to get the drinks.

Looking around, I noticed that the other customers seemed to have lost interest in us and weren’t paying us any more attention. I looked at each of them in turn, wondering if any of them were Fae. Did any of them know Adair? Or Kadmos?

On the other hand, Rishika had said that she smelled werewolves and vampires in here. There might’ve been witches, too. None of those were typically best friends with Fae.

The bartender reappeared and slammed down two bottles of beer, then walked away without a word.

Rishika raised her bottle. “To finding Adair.”

I smiled and tapped my bottle against hers. “I’ll drink to that,” I said, taking a sip.

“You know,” Rishika said, taking a drink and putting her bottle back down, “even if we don’t find what we came here for, at least I get to spend some time in New Orleans with you. That’s definitely a win.”

She put her hand on my knee, and I felt warmth travel up my leg. I knew it was possible that we’d come out of this empty-handed, but Rishika was right. It was nice to spend time away from the pack house, sharing a new adventure with the woman I loved.

“I like it too,” I said.

Rishika leaned into me. “I’d follow you anywhere.”

I closed the gap between us and pressed my lips to hers. Gods, she always tasted so good.

“Hey!”

We pulled apart—just as things were getting good—and looked at the bartender, who had appeared right in front of us again.

“What?” Rishika demanded.

The bartender glared, then nodded behind us at the back door. “Someone in there might know something about your friend.”

My heart jumped into my throat. I slammed my beer down, grabbed Rishika’s hand, and hauled her toward the door.

“Hang on, hang on,” she said, pulling at my hand to slow me down.

“What?” I demanded.

“We need to be careful,” she reminded me.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m always careful, Rishika, but if there’s someone in there who knows anything about my uncle, then I’m going to go talk to them. I know it’s a risk, but it’s one I’m going to take.”

Rishika gave me a long look, then nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

I pulled open the door next to the dart board. It opened onto a narrow hallway, and we started down it. At the end of the hallway was another door, which stood slightly ajar. The hallway was so narrow, we had to walk single file. As we neared the door, it opened fully, and we stepped into a smaller, dim room.

The man who’d been speaking to the bartender was leaning back against a pool table. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and he gave us a cool look as we walked in.

“Tell me,” he said, “why are you asking questions about Adair?”

# Episode 3158

“We don’t have an abundance of time here,” Xavier said, sounding exasperated. “The whole reason we’re here is to put an end to this curse and make sure Cali stops being affected by the damn ashes. We need this done in *days*. Preferably no more than a couple. Can you do that?”

Clementine snorted. “Sure, I could get it done in two days…”

*Why do I feel like there’s a snarky remark coming?*

“… *if* I were five different witches.”

My shoulders slumped. *Seriously? There’s no need for her to be so sarcastic all the time. It’s not like I* asked *to have to come here and beg her for a favor.*

I was here because of a situation I hadn’t signed up for—one I sure as heck hadn’t wanted to come visit Clementine to fix!

But I held my tongue. I’d learned from Big Mac that it was better not to piss off a witch, if you could avoid it. And Clementine *was* technically doing us a favor, even if it was much slower one than we’d been hoping for.

“Fine.” Xavier huffed out a groan. “How long do you need, then?”

He sounded just as frustrated as I felt. We’d come all this way, and my time was running out. If Clementine couldn’t fix this for us, it was all over. I wouldn’t survive this.

“Maybe a week?” The witch grimaced and held up a hand, clearly expecting the shock and fury on Xavier’s face. He looked like he was ready to rip her apart. “I know that’s not the answer you were hoping for, but it’s the best I can do.”

I put a hand on Xavier’s arm, a quiet reminder to cool down before he did or said something we’d all regret. As it was, I could practically feel the handprint burning on my back at the thought of waiting a whole week, but what else could I do? It wasn’t like I had any other options apart from Clementine and her magic.

*Still, do I even have that much time?*

I swallowed roughly. I couldn’t decide if it was a good thing that I didn’t know the deadline for Seluna’s curse. On the one hand, it was nice not to have a ticking clock in the back of my head. But on the other hand, there were just so many unknown variables. I didn’t know if I had a week, or a month, or longer, or less. Big Mac had said the handprint was practically living off of me and my magic… while I was simultaneously being potentially ripped apart by dimensions or whatever the fuck.

Maybe I only had days.

*How much time do I really have before I’m overwhelmed? Before I’m broken, just like the voice in the fairy ring told me I’d be?*

I cleared my throat. “I know you’re doing what you can, so I hate to make another request, but is there anything you can do about the… effects? The ashes being missing has had a… physical impact. It just hurts. So much.”

I’d thought Clementine would have more sass, but she just looked sad now, like she was genuinely sorry. Like she knew just how dire my situation was, and how little she could actually do to help. She shook her head. “I’m afraid not. Your best bet is to get the ashes back. That will likely solve the issue.”

I nodded. This wasn’t anything new, so I didn’t know why it was so devastating to hear it. I guess I’d really been hoping that a witch with Clementine’s specific skill set would be able to help me with the side effects of the handprint.

“What do you need from us to make this happen?” Greyson asked.

“I just need my payment.”

I stiffened.If past experience was any indication, this payment wasn’t going to be a simple exchange of money. The cost could be so much greater than that, and it could take a huge toll on whoever paid it.

“I don’t suppose you accept Venmo?” I asked, laughing weakly.

Clementine’s lips twitched, but she shook her head. “I’m a collector of rare things. The rarer the item, the more powerful it can be as an ingredient. What you’re asking of me is not simple magic, so the payment will not be simple either.”

*Well, I’m a cursed* due destini *mate. Seluna was certainly obsessed with my magic, and the possibilities surrounding the* due destini *magic. But I also kind of doubt that I can offer up my curse as payment.* I sighed. *If only it were that easy.*

“You want something rare?” Greyson asked. “How about the blood of an Alpha werewolf?”

“Hmm.” She cocked her head to the side. “Of course, Alpha werewolf blood is nice to have, but I prefer mixed breeds.”

“Excuse me?” Xavier snapped.

“Anyone who is more than one thing—more than one species, or controlling more than one kind of magic. Those individuals are of high interest to me, and their blood would be rare enough to pay this price.”

I frowned. *I’m half-Fae, half-human, and I’m a* due destini *mate, but I’m also cursed by a demon.*

That sounded pretty rare to me. Could my blood be rare enough to serve as payment?

“I sense that you came to the city with others who aren’t present at the moment,” she continued casually. Too casually for my taste, and I realized what she was getting at a moment before she said, “You came here with one who is both Light and Dark Fae. Her blood should suffice as payment.”

“No way.” I shook my head. I couldn’t promise Artemis’s blood as payment, especially when she wasn’t even here to agree to it.

“How about this?” I infused some excitement into my voice, trying to be just a little bit more salesman-y. “A half-Fae, half-human *due destini* mate who’s been cursed by a demon? I bet that’s the rarest blood you’ve ever heard of. That *anyone’s* ever heard of.”

Clementine scoffed. “You lost me at the ‘human’ part.”

“But I got you back at the ‘*due destini* mate, cursed by a demon’ part?” I asked hopefully.

She shook her head. “Human blood, even part human blood, is easy to acquire. No offense, but that’s pretty much the opposite of what I’m looking for.”

“Fine,” I snapped, a bit offended. “I’ll ask Artemis.”

“I’ll even take it on credit,” Clementine said. “Your word will be enough.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t promise anything without asking Artemis first.”

“Okay.” The witch shrugged. “Then I’ll give you a day to confirm, or the deal’s off.”

I swallowed, suddenly reminded of just how little time I could have left. A single day could make all the difference.

Greyson must have been thinking the exact same thing, because he asked, “Will you still start your work on trying to find the ashes while we ask about the blood payment? In good faith?”

She laughed. “I’m sorry, I want to help, but I’m not running a magical charity here.”

My heart sank. So we’d be losing another day after all.

Xavier stepped up to the counter. “Can’t you trust us? As friends of Big Mac?”

She scowled. “Fine, but tell MacKenzie that this is her wedding gift from me.”

Greyson nodded and held out a hand. They shook on it, and Clementine turned her gaze to me.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “You’d better be back with my payment, or the deal is off. And I don’t think I have to tell you that you don’t have a ton of other options here.”

No, she definitely did not need to tell me that. “Tomorrow.” I nodded. “Thank you, Clementine.”

I called my sister the moment we stepped out the door of the shop. The call went to voicemail, of course. I’d never needed to talk to her more, and she wasn’t picking up her phone.

“Artemis, it’s me. I need to talk to you right away, so let’s meet up soon. Text us your location, and we’ll find you. Please hurry.” I ended the message and sighed. “I hope they’re okay.”

Greyson slipped an arm around my shoulders and gave me a gentle squeeze. “Don’t worry. She’ll agree. She’d do anything to save you from this curse.”

I nodded, but my heart was still in my throat. I was pretty sure Artemis would do this for me, but I couldn’t make any assumptions. There were plenty of rules and laws in the Fae world that I knew nothing about.

I remembered being told once by my mom to never let anyone have my blood. What if Artemis felt the same way?

I pulled in a deep breath and looked up at my mates. They watched me carefully, tenderly, like they were waiting for me to lose my mind any second. It was as sweet as it was chilling.

“Do you want to go find Artemis?” Xavier asked.

I straightened my shoulders. “No, she’ll call me back.”

“Do you want to go to the Airbnb, then?” Greyson asked.

I shook my head. “There’s actually something really important that we *have* to do, right now.”

# Episode 3159

**Artemis**

I eyed the guy who’d asked me about Adair. He was standing next to a pool table in the dim room, along with half a dozen other guys.

“Yes,” I said evenly. “Do you know where he is?”

The guy seemed to be feeling me out, just like I was doing to him. “Depends. Why are you looking for him?”

“Family reunion.”

I quickly realized this was the wrong thing to say.

The guy’s eyes narrowed. “That must mean you’re Dark Fae.”

*Half right.*

A wave of tension rippled through the room, and the guys clustered around the pool table all fixed their gazes on me. While they tensed up, clearly ready to strike at the slightest provocation, I forced my muscles to loosen. I could practically taste the beginning of a fight, and locking up would do me no favors.

*Amateurs.*

I took a step forward, all confident nonchalance. “Why do you care?”

The man mirrored my movements, and soon we were only a few inches apart. He leaned in so close our noses nearly touched, and his hot breath washed over my face, smelling of beer and tobacco. “Because we’re Light Fae, and this is our territory.

Rishika grabbed my arm and pulled me back. “Okay, fine. We didn’t know. We’re leaving.”

He laughed. “Sorry, it’s too late for that. The only way you’re leaving now is in a body bag.”

In a blur of motion, he snapped his pool cue in half and lunged. If I were a vampire, I might have been a little concerned. But, as my reflexes took over and I caught the broken cue before wrenching it out of his hands, I wasn’t afraid at all.

I was fighting. Winning. Right now, I was in my element.

I used the cue to knock the guy on his ass before skewering it into his shoulder, pinning him to the floor.

*Maybe it’s a good thing he’s not a vampire, either.*

As he screamed and thrashed, pinned to the increasingly bloodied floor, I launched myself at one of his buddies. Nearby, Rishika was taking on three of them at once, more than holding her own. *That’s my girl.*

“Need some help?” I called as I slammed one of the guys to the ground.

“I’ll let you know when I break a sweat!”

In an embarrassingly short amount of time (for them) all seven guys were on the ground, moaning and whimpering and in various stages of injury.

Rishika flashed me a feral grin. “Not half-bad for a warmup.”

I pulled the pool cue out of the guy’s shoulder, tossed it aside, and then wrenched him up by his shirt collar. “Where. Is. *Adair?* Tell me what you know!”

The guy just groaned. His face had gone ashen. He’d lost a lot of blood, now that I thought about it.

“Come on!” Rishika grabbed my arm again. “Let’s get out of here before they recover.”

I dropped the guy and kicked him one last time for good measure before allowing Rishika to pull me away. We rushed through the bar and out onto the street, then melted into the crowd, just in case anyone tried to follow us.

If they did, they’d end up in the same shape as those guys back in the bar, but it was best not to draw attention to it. Still, I wouldn’t have minded the punching-bag-style release.

“That was a huge waste of time!” I said. “We’re no closer to finding Adair than we were when we landed here.”

“I know it’s frustrating, but we had to try.” Rishika took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “We’ll find him. We just have to keep following the leads we have.”

“Maybe.” I sighed. “But for now, there are people in this city who have their reasons to hold a grudge against us. We’ll have to keep our eyes peeled for any more potential attacks.”

Rishika laughed and cracked her knuckles. “Let them try. Now that I’m warmed up, I could take twice as many guys in half the time.”

Despite my bad mood, I cracked a smile. In that moment, I couldn’t have loved my badass girlfriend more.

“Let’s go check out the next place on our list,” she suggested. “I mean, it can’t be worse than that bar, right?”

I snorted. “Famous last words.”

Our next stop was a diner, and the contact was the line cook. The diner was pretty casual. Maybe a little too casual, because they allowed two random women to go into the kitchen to talk to the line cook while he worked.

*Maybe we won’t stay for dinner…*

The cook was a large Black man who cooked unlike anyone I’d ever seen before. He was cooking a dozen different things at once, without pausing. I watched him flip a burger, grill some salmon, sauté mushrooms, simmer a soup, and chop vegetables like it was some kind of fast-paced yet perfectly smooth choreography.

*What’s the guy’s deal? There’s no way he can be human.*

Rishika took the lead on questioning this time around, and I couldn’t help noticing that she approached the situation with a whole lot more diplomacy than I had. Though I had a feeling that all the diplomacy in the world couldn’t have kept those guys in the bar from trying to beat the shit out of us.

“Excuse me. We’re wondering if you’ve heard of someone named Adair?”

The cook hesitated only slightly before flipping the burger over again. If I hadn’t been watching him so intently, I would have missed it completely.

He didn’t reply.

“We just need to talk to him,” Rishika continued. “It’s very important that we find him.”

“Why should I tell you anything?” he asked.

I frowned. There was something about this guy that was different, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Obviously, he wasn’t human, but he didn’t seem overtly Fae.

“We don’t mean you any harm,” Rishika said. “We truly just want to ask you some questions, and then we’ll be on our way. We’re not here to make any trouble for you.”

“Whatever it is you came for, I can’t help you. Now, you’re in my way.”

“I’ve got it.” I snapped my fingers.

Both Rishika and the cook looked at me strangely, but I didn’t care. I’d finally figured the guy out!

“You’re a redcap, aren’t you?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

His eyes jerked up to look at me, and his fingers tightened on his spatula. I wondered if he’d be able to use it as a weapon, if he chose. He glared at me like he wanted nothing more than to never see me again.

Fortunately for him, I’d happily grant his wish—once he told us what he knew about my uncle.

“That’s why I couldn’t place you at first,” I continued. “Redcaps are mercenaries who can cloak themselves.”

The cook stepped forward so that he towered over me. “I don’t do that kind of work anymore. I’m just a cook now.”

“I get it.” I nodded. “I left my line of work in the Fae world, too. Like my friend said, we don’t want to cause you any trouble. We’ll leave as soon as you tell us what you know. And we promise not to reveal your identity or whereabouts. I give you my word as a Fae.”

It was the best I could offer without making a Fae promise, and even giving my word wasn’t something that was taken lightly in the Fae world. Hopefully this proved that we meant business, but weren’t a threat.

Finally, he nodded. “I’ve heard of this Adair guy. I make it my business to know which Fae are in my city. Just in case.”

I nodded, my heart leaping. It was as good as confirmed, then. Adair was here, in this city. My family. A piece of my identity I’d been missing for my entire life.

“He was here for a while,” the cook continued. “He moved quickly through the city for some reason, and then—poof. He vanished.”

I frowned. “What kind of places has he been seen at?”

“Mostly seedy places. The underbelly of New Orleans. But they’ve all only been sightings. No direct contact.”

“Wait, no one has spoken to him?”

He shook his head. “Not to my knowledge. He’s been pretty elusive lately.”

I blew out a breath. I’d been hoping to find someone who’d talked to him so I could talk to *them.*

“Anyway,” the cook continued, “I haven’t heard talk of him in over a week.”

My heart plummeted. *Are we too late?*

I forced a smile and nodded. “Thank you.”

I led Rishika out of the restaurant and into a quieter part of the street before I turned to her. “So we know he was here, at least. But now he might be gone? I feel like we’re hitting one dead end after another.”

“It could be that he’s in hiding.”

“Maybe.” I wasn’t so sure. Had I delayed this trip for so long that I’d lost my chance to find my uncle? What the hell was I going to do? How could I connect with the other side of my family if I couldn’t find Adair?

I was so lost in thought that I didn’t notice the shadow until it stepped out of a side alley. Immediately, I spun to face it, raising my hands.

“What do you want?” Rishika snapped, stepping forward.

The shadow raised its hands in a show of peace. “I can help you find Adair.”

# Episode 3160

**Greyson**

Cali’s face split into a grin. “We’re in New Orleans! We have to get beignets!”

My lips pulled down into a frown. I could tell Cali was just putting on a brave face, probably more for Xavier’s and my benefit than her own. I wanted to call her on it, to tell her she didn’t have to do this, but what would that even accomplish?

I didn’t need to keep rubbing in her face just how dire everything was, or that her life was in danger and our one chance of saving her required her sister’s blood and about eight days of work—she already knew all that. She was probably already terrified of what all of that meant. And I didn’t need to be the asshole who wouldn’t allow her to forget for even one minute just how shitty her situation was.

I already felt like a broken record. We’d been talking circles around Cali’s Seluna curse for what felt like weeks now, and it was beyond maddening. I just wanted to fix things. I just wanted her to be happy, healthy, and whole again.

But I didn’t have any control over any of that, as had been made painfully clear to me. So instead of saying any of the things that were swirling around in my head, I cleared my throat, took control of my expression, and asked, “Is that really what you want to do?”

She nodded. “It is. It might be nice to think about something else for a while.”

I squeezed her hand. “Then let’s go.”

Xavier nodded too, and soon we were walking back toward the French Quarter. We went into Café du Monde, and the moment the air hit my nose, my mouth began to water. The air was rich with the scent of sugar and fried dough.

Cali breathed in deeply and let out a squeal of delight. “This is going to be delicious!”

Xavier and Cali found a table outside the café while I stayed inside and ordered the largest quantity I could get. A few minutes later, a large paper bag of steaming beignets was handed over to me, and I carried them out to Cali and Xavier. When I opened the bag, a cloud of steam puffed out, along with that mouthwatering scent.

Each of us dug a beignet out of the bag and took a bite. Powdered sugar fell everywhere, but I couldn’t have cared less. It might have been the most delicious thing I’d ever tasted.

Cali closed her eyes with a happy little hum. “This is *so* good.”

“What do you want to do next?” Xavier asked.

She grabbed the sack out of my hand and cradled it in her arms. “Why don’t we take a stroll with our beignets?”

“Brilliant idea,” I agreed, and we set off to explore the French Quarter.

By the time we arrived at the famous Bourbon Street, we’d eaten half the bag—and good thing too, because the moment the scent of the street hit me, I completely lost my appetite.

I scrunched up my nose and glanced over at my brother, who looked just as disgusted as I felt. Beside us, Cali lurched to a stop, the bag of beignets in one hand and her other hand pressed against her stomach. “Is it just me, or does this street smell like vomit?”

I nodded emphatically, not trusting myself to open my mouth.

She dry heaved a little, then croaked, “I think we should go. My stomach is too full of beignets to handle this right now.”

“Let’s go back to the park,” I managed, taking the bag of beignets. I probably shouldn’t have ordered so many, since I was fairly sure we wouldn’t be eating any more of them.

We hurried back to the park, and by the time we made it there, a bunch of street artists had set up their stalls. Cali seemed to be in a good mood again as she perused their wares. I loved seeing her like this—happy, unburdened, just enjoying the moment. I wished she could always be like that, that tourism was the only reason why we’d come on this trip. That it was a fun vacation where Cali could just go shopping and see the sights and eat delicious food and be at peace.

But it never slipped my mind that that was *not* the reason why we were here. I checked my phone. *Should I try to call Artemis?*

I couldn’t imagine why she’d answer my call when she hadn’t answered Cali’s, but I didn’t know what else to do. I could always try Rishika, too. The gnawing need to get control of this situation, to save my mate, was eating me alive.

*No. Cali wants to be the one to ask her sister about the blood. She’s already called and left a message. It’s not my place to interfere in that relationship.*

But I did know one thing: if Artemis wasn’t willing to give Cali her blood—something I couldn’t imagine she would do—I would step in. And I’d do whatever it took to make sure Clementine got what she needed to help us.

But for now, my only job was to make sure Cali had a good evening. As we continued past the park, I noticed her gaze moving upward to all the elaborate balconies on the second and third stories of the buildings.

She stopped. “Oh, look! Some of the balconies have tables from restaurants and cafés! Can we go up there?”

I laughed at the joy and excitement in her voice. This time, it sounded genuine, and it had been far too long since I’d heard her voice like that. “We can do whatever you want, love.”

We entered one of the cafés and ordered drinks. While Xavier waited for our order to come up, I escorted Cali up to the balcony. She made a beeline for a table by the railing that would look down into the courtyard below. She leaned over, her hands reaching out to wrap around the balcony railing, but I caught her hands and pulled her back.

“What is it?” she asked.

I pointed to the railing. “It’s iron. A lot of things here are, I think. You probably shouldn’t touch it.”

“Oh.” Cali blinked, staring down at the railing. “Thanks. That could have been painful.” She laughed, but this one didn’t sound as genuine, and I wondered if the threat of the railing had made her think of the other sources of pain she was dealing with.

I gently squeezed the hand I was still holding, and I reached out with my free hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. As I looked out over the courtyard, I realized this was a very romantic city.

*I’m lucky to be here with Cali, even if the circumstances aren’t great.*

There was no telling when or if we’d be able to make it out here again, so I made a promise to myself to enjoy every moment we could here. To find the joy beyond the crucial purpose in this trip.

I leaned down and brushed my lips over Cali’s. She tasted like powdered sugar. “Have I ever told you you’re delicious?” I asked.

She laughed as I leaned back. “Maybe once or twice.”

Xavier’s steps sounded on the stairs, a little louder than was strictly necessary. *Probably to give me a warning that he’s on his way. Too bad, little brother.*

It was a surprisingly considerate gesture from my brother, even though I couldn’t help but wonder if he was doing it to prevent himself from seeing Cali and me together. But it didn’t really matter, either way. I gave her another quick kiss and then took her hand. Ultimately, there was no reason to start a fight with Xavier, especially when Cali was in such a good mood.

Xavier set our drinks on the table, and we all took a seat, quietly enjoying the late afternoon.

Cali was the one to break the amiable silence that had settled between us. “Okay, I think it’s time for us to start talking about what our next steps are.”

“I heard the seafood is good here,” I suggested.

She laughed. “Not for food. With Clementine.”

“Ah.” It seemed our moratorium was over, but at least it was at Cali’s behest. “I think we should come up with backup plans in case Artemis is reluctant to part with her blood.”

“I agree,” Xavier said. “Maybe if we offer the blood of two Alphas, then Clementine will agree?”

I nodded. “It’s not a bad idea. Plus, we’re brothers. I doubt she has that in her collection already. Maybe it’ll sweeten the pot.”

Cali frowned. I knew she hated the idea of anyone else having to put their blood on the line for her. I reached over and squeezed her hand. “I can tell where your mind is going, and it’s fine. Seriously.”

She nodded with a sigh. “I wish she’d just accepted my blood.”

I squeezed her hand again. “We’ll do what we have to in order to find those ashes, Cali. We promised you, remember?”

She nodded again.

Suddenly, Xavier’s phone started buzzing loudly against the table. He picked it up and frowned.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s *Gabriel*.”

“Gabriel?” It took me a minute to place the name, but there was no forgetting Xavier’s werewolf ex-mercenary friend. “Why is he calling you?”

# Episode 3161

**Artemis**

I immediately fell into a fighting stance as I stared down the hooded figure. I’d learned the hard way that just about everyone in this city wanted to kill us.

*This place might as well be the Fae world.*

“Oh, there’s no need for that,” the figure said. “I’m here to help you.”

Help us into an early grave, maybe. “What do you mean, you want to help us? Who the hell are you?”

The figure stepped further into the light and pushed back his hood. He was male, and beautiful—the kind of beautiful that I knew from experience wasn’t human. He was obviously Fae. “My name is Nikkos, and I am looking for Adair too.”

That didn’t offer me any comfort. If anything, my defenses climbed even higher. Clearly, people in this city had it out for my uncle and, by extension, me. *Is this guy with those Light Fae from the bar?*

“I mean no harm. I owe Adair a debt, and I would like to see it repaid. I swear, I don’t want to hurt you, or Adair.”

I scowled at his words. It was almost too convenient for this guy to show up now, wanting to help us, right? And owing Adair a debt? That could’ve easily been code for wanting to slit his throat or something else awful and perfectly fitting for a Fae.

But then again, Fae couldn’t swear so easily if they were lying. And this Nikkos guy wasn’t using the same veiled language so many other Fae were careful to use. He sounded genuine. Honest.

*What the hell kind of Fae is this guy, anyway?*

The fact that he did seem to be telling the truth (so far), and wasn’t playing games, actually put me slightly at ease. I relaxed, and Rishika, seemingly picking up on my change of body language, stepped forward.

“Okay, Nik,” she said. “Can I call you Nik?”

He sighed. “My name is Nikkos.”

“Let’s say we believe you, *Nikkos*,” she continued. “Why would you want to team up with us? You don’t know the first thing about us. We could be out to kill Adair, or one of his allies. It seems a little suspect that you’d throw your lot in with us.”

Nikkos frowned. “Hardly suspect, but purely opportunistic, if that will put you at ease. I heard what you said back at the bar.” His eyes locked with mine. “You’re Adair’s family, and that means you have a vested interest in finding him. Just like I do. It also means you’re slightly less likely to want him dead. You don’t actually want him dead, do you?”

I shrugged. “Not currently.”

“Fair enough. I don’t want him dead either. That’s a few things now that we have in common, and that’s enough for me to want to throw my lot in with you. Aren’t three heads better than two?”

I looked over at Rishika with a frown. She just shrugged, and I read her body language loud and clear.

*It’s your call.*

I looked back at Nikkos. I didn’t have the first idea what to make of the guy. He was polite, I’d give him that. But that didn’t necessarily mean anything. I’d met some very lovely Fae who would politely slit your throat.

But Nikkos… He didn’t seem like a threat. And my instincts, honed over years of assessing potential threats—especially Fae threats—weren’t telling me to worry about him. Admittedly, this only made me *more* suspicious of him, but we couldn’t very well stand in this alley forever.

Finally, I let my arms drop. “I think any potential partnership on our end will depend on what kind of information you have. For all we know you may not have anything new to offer us.”

He nodded. “I’ll gladly share my information. Perhaps, as a member of Adair’s family, you will see a pattern that I do not.” He reached into his hoodie, and I held a hand up.

“Slower.”

Nikkos complied and very slowly pulled out what looked like a map with lines drawn all over it.

I frowned. “What am I looking at here?”

“This is a map of the city, and all the places I’ve marked are places I’ve confirmed Adair has visited in the last two weeks. The one that is circled is the last confirmed sighting, which happened last week.”

I nodded. That, at least, lined up with what the cook had told me—that Adair’s activity had been quiet for the last week or so. I narrowed my eyes, scanning the map for a pattern, a shape, a message—anything.

But it just looked like a map with lines crisscrossing it. Nothing special.

Nikkos leaned forward. “What does this look like to you?”

I pretended to mull it over. I didn’t see the value in letting Nikkos know that even though Adair was my uncle, I actually didn’t know anything about him. My only advantage was the fact that Nikkos thought I had some kind of insight into his thought process. I needed to get as much information out of this guy as possible, but he’d probably only be in a sharing mood as long as he thought I also offered valuable insight.

“Have you been to all of these places?” I asked.

“I’m in the process of checking some of them out. Do you want to come with me?”

Rishika tapped on one location on the map. “We were already planning to hit this one up.”

I narrowed my gaze on the spot and realized Rishika was pointing to one of New Orleans’s massive graveyards.

*Great. That’s not creepy at all.*

I’d have preferred to hit up a hundred more violent Fae bars than spend the day with a bunch of dead bodies.

Nikkos nodded and rolled up the map. “It sounds like our paths have crossed at just the right time, then. Shall we go?”

I watched his face for any sign of malintent. Anything, really, that would’ve given me the slightest hint of whether or not he was going to go full Fae and betray us.

His expression was as blank as it was guileless.

“Just to be clear,” I said, “if you make one wrong move, or give me any reason to think that you’re going to double-cross us, I will slit your throat and dump you in the first open grave we find.”

Nikkos nodded solemnly. “I would expect nothing less from a member of Adair’s family.”

Well, if that wasn’t a ringing endorsement of the kind of people I came from, then nothing was.

With that, we headed toward the cemetery with Nikkos leading the way. He still had the map, after all, and I was content to stay a few paces behind him. It made it easier to keep an eye on him.

But like before, I was getting absolutely nothing on the guy. No sense of his allegiances, his preferences, the depth of his power… All my years of bounty hunting and tracking and reading the slightest gesture in someone’s face that meant the difference between life and death, and I was coming up empty with some guy named Nikkos.

*What. The. Hell?*

It was like there was some kind of static in the air, and it was messing with my senses.

Rishika leaned in and whispered, “What do you think of him?”

I frowned and blew out a breath. “I have no clue. He’s Fae, but somehow not a game-playing, overtly violent sociopath. And he’s shared information with us, but maybe too readily?”

She nodded. “My thoughts exactly. Until we can figure out exactly what his real angle is, we need to keep an eye on him. We can’t let our defenses down.”

“Agreed.”

We passed a large shop, and through the storefront windows, I could make out the dim and cluttered interior. I stopped as I sensed something from inside the shop. Some kind of magic I’d never felt before. I walked up close to the windows and peered inside. The windows were bordered by shutters, and I could barely see past all the clutter in the window display.

“Careful. These shops and people are to be respected.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin and spun on my heel, hissing at Nikkos, “Don’t do that!”

He blinked. “Oh, sorry.”

“Sneaking up on people is a good way to end up with a dagger in your gut.” I pulled in a breath, trying to calm my racing heart.

“I understand. I just wanted to let you know—the witches who run these shops are unlike others you might have met. Their power is tied to the very roots of this city, and it is not to be messed with. Don’t think you can manipulate it for your own means. Stick with the magic you know.”

I nodded, thinking of all the different types of magic I’d dabbled with in the past. That, at least, Nikkos and I could agree on.

We finally arrived at the cemetery, which was flooded with tourists. I frowned. *Why are we lingering here in the crowd instead of investigating?*

Nikkos seemed to sense my question. He leaned in and whispered, “It’s a ghost tour.”

*Great. Just how I want to spend my limited time here in the city.* I took a step toward the gates surrounding the cemetery, but as I neared the threshold, I felt something pushing me back. Like it was warning me to take heed before I entered. I gasped as a chill rippled down my spine.

“Are you okay?” Rishika asked. She took my hand and then gasped herself. “You’re ice-cold. Wait—are you afraid of ghosts?”

# Episode 3162

**Xavier**

I looked at my brother with a raised brow. “I don’t know why Gabe’s calling, but generally speaking, that’s the idea behind answering the phone.”

Greyson grumbled something under his breath, but I ignored him and took the call.

“Hey, Gabe. What’s up?”

“Hey.” Gabe’s voice slipped through the phone, tenser than I’d ever heard it. “So, I hate to ask you for a favor, but… I need a favor.”

I frowned. In all the time I’d known Gabe, I’d never heard him sound like this. He was the type of guy to face down a crew of trained killers with a lazy grin and a barrel full of sarcasm. He didn’t take anything seriously, not really.

So, whatever was going on with him now, it had to be a big fucking deal.

“What is it?” I asked.

“How fast can you get to New Orleans?”

There had to have been a bad connection. There was no way he had said what I thought he said. “Wait, are you messing with me?”

“Um… Is that particularly funny?”

“Because I’m in New Orleans right now.”

“Wait. What? How?” Gabe said. “When the fuck did you get here?”

“Well, fortunately, airplanes have been invented, so it wasn’t all that hard. We got in today.”

“We?”

I glanced over at Cali and Greyson, who were watching my face, probably trying to put together what was happening from my half of the conversation. Honestly, I wasn’t all that far ahead of them. I still had no idea what the fuck was going on. “I’ll fill you in later. What are *you* doing here?”

“I’ll explain the whole story when we meet up, but I wasn’t kidding about needing that favor. I have a friend who’s in trouble, and to help her, I might need some more muscle. Since you’re already here, can you help?”

“Of course I can.” I’d have helped him even if I’d been back in Oregon. Gabe had always helped me when I was in a pinch, and I still owed him big time for helping me get into the Fae world to save Cali.

*Oh. Cali…*

I looked over at my mate. I wanted to help Gabe, of course. And it was the simplest thing in the world to say yes to him, because I *was* already here. But I didn’t want to leave her when so much was still up in the air. We didn’t know if Artemis was going to give up her blood. We didn’t know if Clementine could actually help find the ashes in time to save Cali. Basically, we didn’t know jack shit. We’d been flying blind for far too long, while Cali’s life hung in the balance, and I wasn’t sure if leaving her to go be Gabe’s backup muscle was the right call.

I looked at Greyson, who was staring down at his drink with intense focus. He was probably trying to listen in on the call.

I knew Greyson would take care of Cali. That he’d put her first and do whatever it took to make sure she got out of this in one piece. It was pretty much the only thing Greyson and I agreed on, but it did help to know that Cali wouldn’t be alone.

*Fuck. I’m gonna have to leave her.*

Gabe had always been there for me when I needed him, and it was long overdue for me to return the favor.

“Where are you?” I finally replied. “I’ll come meet you now.”

Gabe gave me his location. “Hurry.”

He hung up the phone before I could reply. That was another bad sign. It wasn’t like Gabe not to take a few extra seconds for a snarky sign-off.

I set my phone down and looked at Cali and Greyson. “I have to go.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “What do you mean, you have to go? Where?”

I had no fucking idea what I was getting into, but I wasn’t about to tell her that. She already had enough on her plate without worrying about me. “Believe it or not, Gabe is here, and he needs my help with something. He didn’t say much on the phone.”

“Should we come with you? Does he need our help too?” she asked.

Greyson’s brows rose. “Does he?”

I shook my head. “No. Well, I’m not sure yet. I’m going to see what he wants and let you know. I’ll meet you back at the Airbnb. Cali, try to enjoy the night the way you wanted to. Just focus on having fun, and I’ll see you soon.”

She relaxed, just slightly. “Okay.”

I was bummed about it too. In the back of my mind, I’d been hoping to get an opportunity to get some one-on-one time with Cali so we could go explore the city together. I sighed. I really needed to get going, and I didn’t want to give Cali any time to start worrying again, so I stood and turned to leave.

“Xavier.”

I turned to face my brother. “What?”

“Call me if anything happens.”

“Sure thing.”

Hopefully, I wouldn’t need the backup.

As I rushed to meet up with Gabe, I couldn’t help but wonder just what kind of trouble my friend had gotten into, and why that trouble just happened to be in New Orleans. I wasn’t the superstitious type, but it seemed like one hell of a coincidence for him to be here too.

I found Gabe sitting at the bar he’d told me to meet him at, nursing a beer. To my surprise, Mikah was there as well. Gabe hadn’t mentioned the vampire PI, and I’d kind of assumed they’d gone their separate ways a while back.

“Hey.” I gave Gabe a hard half-hug before taking a seat on his other side. “Your urgent thing had better not be a bar crawl.”

Gabe laughed. “It’s good to see you too, friend.”

I ordered a beer from the bartender, then turned back to Mikah and Gabe. Gabe looked kind of run-down. Deep circles were etched beneath his eyes, and he looked more haggard than usual.

Mikah, of course, looked immaculate as any vampire would. My eyes moved between the vampire and the werewolf, picking up on something I couldn’t quite parse.

*Is it just me, or is there tension between the two of them?*

Gabe cleared his throat. “So, let’s get straight to the point. We have a friend who was taken. We’re trying to find her, to rescue her.”

I nodded. “What’s her name? Does she have any enemies?”

He shook his head. “Tabitha isn’t like you or me, buddy. She’s a human mixed up in things way over her head. That’s how we met her. But I wouldn’t say she has enemies. She’s a good kid. If anything, she was probably taken because of someone from Mikah’s or my past.” Gabe grimaced, and it didn’t take an empath to read the guilt etched into his face.

I knew all about that special brand of guilt that came with people you cared about getting caught up in your bullshit. Whatever was happening to Cali was a result of my own checkered past. Maybe this was what was weighing on Gabe so heavily—that sense of guilt and responsibility.

“Okay, what’s the plan?” I asked. “What are we gonna do to get her back?”

“There’s a person in the city,” Gabe said. “A kind of snitch who knows everything going on around here. But when we tried to go question him, he was surrounded by guards. We need an extra fighter so we can get through.”

I nodded. *Sounds simple enough.* “Are we heading there now?”

“We should probably update you on the ‘rules’ of this city first.”

I lifted a brow at Gabe. “The rules?”

Mikah nodded. “Things here aren’t the same as other places, partly because of how powerful the witches are. You have to respect their rules and magic, or else horrible things can happen to you. Even an Alpha werewolf isn’t immune.”

Well, I sure didn’t like the sound of that. The only witch I’d spoken to so far was Clementine, but she’d seemed like more of a nomad. It sounded like the New Orleans witches were a whole different breed.

“The witches of New Orleans are kind of like a dynasty. They possess generations of magic that has seeped into the very roots of this city. They gain extra power from their ancestors. All those giant cemeteries are more than a human tradition—the witches draw on their nearby dead to pull magic from the spirit world.” Gabe shuddered, and Mikah put a hand on his arm. Gabe offered me a lopsided smile. “Trust me, that place is scary as fuck and holds a lot of powerful magic that we couldn’t even understand.”

“Oh, I believe you. Saw enough of it recently to not want to repeat the experience.”

Mikah frowned. “Wait… You’ve been to the spirit world?”

I lifted a brow. “Have *you*?”

For a moment, we all stared at each other in disbelief before Gabe snorted and we all dissolved into laughter.

“Of *course* you’ve been there,” Gabe mused. “You always were able to get yourself into trouble.”

“Look who’s talking,” I said.

“Eh, fair point.”

“So, the biggest thing is not to piss off a witch?” I asked.

He nodded. “And don’t desecrate their ancestral resting places.”

“Got it. No digging up graves.”

Mikah stood and dropped a few bills on the bar. “Ready to go?”

I nodded, and we left the bar. We moved across the city, taking the opportunity to get back in sync with each other and to put together an attack formation for reaching the snitch. We soon arrived at what looked like a warehouse, away from the central hustle and bustle of the city.

I turned to Gabe and Mikah. “Okay. What’s the plan?”

# Episode 3163

I sipped my coffee drink as the sun set over New Orleans, grateful that I’d opted for caffeine instead of alcohol.

As much as I tried to stay present, I couldn’t stop thinking and worrying about Xavier. As far as I knew, Gabriel didn’t call him very often. And it was even rarer for Xavier to run off and help him. What could be going on? It must have been urgent, for Xavier to leave me here with Greyson. He’d been extra protective since Seluna’s curse had started taking its toll, and I knew how he felt about leaving me alone with Greyson anywhere.

I sensed Greyson’s eyes on me as I mulled over Xavier’s absence. My concern must have been crystal clear, because he took my hand. “You shouldn’t worry about Xavier. I’m sure he and Gabriel can handle themselves, whatever it is they’re doing.”

My brows drew together. “How can you be so sure? Do you know Gabriel very well?”

He shook his head. “Not really. But I know Xavier, and I know he’d never truly put himself in so much danger that it would put him at risk of not making it back to you. Gabriel… He always struck me as a little impulsive—not unlike Colton. But that just means Xavier has plenty of experience working with that kind of person.”

“Wow, you really know how to comfort me,” I teased.

“If worse comes to worst, Gabriel’s a good fighter. They can both handle themselves; I almost feel bad for whoever would try to start something with them.”

I knew Greyson was probably right. From what I knew about Gabriel, I knew he was more than a capable fighter. Certainly on par with Xavier and Greyson. Still, I couldn’t help but be worried about Xavier. Couldn’t help wanting to know for myself that he was okay. After all, we were in a strange city, trying to find someone dangerous. It wasn’t exactly the most benign of situations, even without whatever problem Gabriel was having. Plus, Xavier was all but convinced that whoever the person was who’d stolen the ashes, they had a vendetta against him, personally.

*Shouldn’t we all be on higher alert? Whatever this person is trying to do to me, they probably want to do even worse to Xavier.*

Greyson squeezed my hand. “Love, take a breath. He’s going to be fine, but if it will make you feel better, I can always give him a call.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to distract him.”

I heaved in a breath. Greyson was right. Xavier would be fine, and even if he wasn’t, there was nothing I could do about it right now. I didn’t know where he was or what he was doing, and calling to check in didn’t seem like the right move.

I had to deal with the worry and trust that I’d see him soon. I took one last gulp from my mug and set it down on the table, looking out onto the dusky city.

“What do you want to do?” Greyson asked. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

I forced a smile, trying to show him that I was relaxing. Or, at least, that I was trying to.

“Maybe we should find somewhere to go for dinner?” I suggested.

“Great idea.” He pulled out his phone to search up nearby places. Then he looked up at me with a smile. “I think I have just the place.” He glanced down at our outfits and added, “But maybe we should change.”

“Oh, should we go back to the Airbnb?”

“No, I have a better idea.”

He took my hand and led me out of the café and down an alley.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“You’ll see.”

He pulled me toward a street with boutique clothing stores on either side of the road. The realization dawned, and I laughed. “We don’t have to buy new clothes. We packed for the trip.”

He shook his head. “We packed to go on a mission. Not to go on a date.”

A grin tugged at my lips. “Oh, is this a date now?”

“Hey, you know me. I gotta jump on any chance I get.”

He pulled me into the nearest boutique, and one of the clerks rushed over to greet us.

“Welcome! Can I help you find anything?”

I was about to wave the clerk away when Greyson nodded. “We need to get her something for a nice dinner date. Whatever she wants,” he said. “And I’ll check out what you have too.”

The clerk’s face lit up, and I could practically see the dollar signs flashing in her eyes. She’d definitely picked up on Greyson footing the bill and could clearly already see a big commission in her immediate future.

She pasted on a gigantic smile and led me toward a section filled with cocktail dresses.

“Oh, it’s not a problem,” I began. “I can just pick out whatever. You don’t need to waste your time on me.”

But the clerk wasn’t taking no for an answer. “I’m here to help.”

Realizing that I was essentially trapped by the clerk’s hospitality-slash-desire for a huge commission, I finally gave in and let the girl lead me to a fitting room. Moments later, she hung about a dozen beautiful dresses over the dressing room door.

“Give these a try,” she said. “I think they’ll fit your frame and coloring beautifully.”

I stared at the pile of dresses with wide eyes before letting out a little laugh. I’d never been on a shopping trip like this in my whole life—just for myself, with no apparent limit to how much I could spend.

*I might as well get into it.*

I tried on the first dress and immediately rejected it. It was way too tight, and I had every intention of enjoying our dinner. Plus, breathing was also nice.

A dress halfway down the pile caught my eye.

It was champagne-colored and covered in subtle sparkles. The off-the-shoulder straps seemed to scream elegance and sensuality all at once. It seemed way too fancy for a normal dinner, but I couldn’t stop myself from trying it on.

The dress fit like a glove, and it was even more gorgeous on me than on the hanger. I slowly ran my hands over the material, watching it shimmer in the mirror.

*This is way too fancy.* And yet, I couldn’t bring myself to take it off. I spun around to see how it looked from the back, and my eyes immediately caught on the ugly bright-red handprint peeking out over the edge of the dress.

I sucked in a sharp breath. It was a cruel reminder of why we were really here—and it wasn’t to go on a date and spend the night out on the town.

*Should I even be trying on dresses right now? Shouldn’t I be trying to get Artemis on the phone? Or searching up other ways to track down the guy who stole Seluna’s ashes? Or, you know, literally anything but wasting my evening on something so frivolous?*

“Don’t you want to show them to me?” Greyson called out.

He was so invested in us having this nice date. Maybe it was best for me to just suck it up, try on one of the other dresses, and call it a day.

I picked a dress with a high neckline and long sleeves. The skirt was cocktail length, and the entire dress was made of black velvet that caressed my skin. It was classy and comfortable, and there was no way anyone would see the handprint.

*Talk about a winner.*

I stepped out of the dressing room, and Greyson let out a whistle. I blushed and took him in. He looked handsome in some fitted black pants and a quarter-sleeved shirt.

“You look gorgeous,” he said.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself.”

“Do you want to try on anything else, just in case?”

I shook my head. All the other dresses were either short-sleeved or strapless, so my decision was easy.

“This one’s perfect,” I said. Then I peeked down at the tag and gasped.

*Holy shit, this dress is $500!*

“Actually,” I began, “I don’t need—”

But Greyson was already holding out his credit card to the gleeful clerk. “We’ll both wear our new clothes out.”

I sighed, but a small smile tugged at my lips. Greyson was trying to give me what I wanted—a break from everything bad that was going on. One fun, romantic night. So I let him buy the dress and, as he pulled me out of the shop, I tried to focus on the moment instead of all the what-ifs living in my brain.

Instead of hailing a cab, Greyson led me down the street.

“Where are we—” A streetcar pulled up in front of us, and I let out a laugh. “Oh, got it.”

I’d always wanted to ride a streetcar. Greyson gestured for me to hop on, then he climbed in after me.

We found a seat to share and watched the city roll by from the open-air car. The sun was setting, golden on the horizon. I cuddled closer to Greyson, so grateful and content to be with him in this beautiful, romantic moment.

I kissed him on the cheek.

He smiled. “What’s that for?”

“You know perfectly well. For helping me de-stress.”

“Anytime.” He leaned in and caught my lips in another kiss. In almost no time, it deepened beyond what I normally would’ve allowed in public, but I couldn’t get enough of him. I was reaching around his neck when he suddenly broke away from my mouth and stood up.

“We have to go!”

And before I could ask about the sudden attitude switch, he grabbed my hands and pulled me behind him as he raced out of the streetcar.

# Episode 3164

**Artemis**

I scowled at Rishika. “Of course I’m not afraid of ghosts. Have you forgotten just how many freaking ghosts and revenants and everything else spirit-related we’ve fought together?”

Rishika’s expression was soft, understanding. The kind of look that got under my skin and made me feel like she was seeing way more than I wanted her to. “I do, and nobody would fault you for being wary of all that after everything you’ve seen.”

I straightened my spine. “Well, there’s no need for that, because I’m *perfectly* fine.”

“Okay, then why are you so cold?”

“Oh, that. I can sense particularly strong magic around,” I explained. “Different than anything I’ve felt before. It almost feels… alive?”

Nikkos sidled up to us, a knowing expression on his face. “That’s because the witches use the magic of their ancestors in these cemeteries. You’re probably sensing it overflowing out of the cemetery.”

A chill crawled down my spine, and I forgot to be angry at him for eavesdropping on us. The magic pushed against me again, never once letting me forget that I was a trespasser here. That I didn’t belong. The sensation was so strong, so *sentient*, that it actually did scare me a little bit. This wasn’t some single strong entity I could fight if needed—this was a deep well of power and magic and knowledge that I didn’t have the first idea what to do with.

“Great,” I deadpanned. “And you want to go *toward* the big bad ancestral power?”

A crease appeared between Nikkos’s eyebrows. “Surely you sensed big stores of magic when you lived in the Fae world? They’re not so uncommon there.”

I wracked my brain for a moment before realizing he was right. I’d come across places like this before, usually when I went to pick up magical items for the Kollector. Due to the nature of that work, I’d often ended up in places that gave off huge amounts of magical energy. In that sense, this did feel somewhat familiar. But there were no witches in the Fae world—at least, none like the ones here in New Orleans.

Besides, I’d been taught to avoid places like this whenever possible. But now we were heading straight into this cemetery unprepared? It seemed beyond reckless. It was practically inviting bad witchy energy into our lives.

But how else was I going to find my uncle? This was the next stop on our list of leads, and skipping it might mean the difference between finding him or spending the rest of my life wondering whether I should have been brave enough to just go into the cemetery. Wondering whether things would have been different.

“Hello, hello!” A young man appeared, dressed in a suit that looked like it was from the turn of the twentieth century. “Welcome! The ghost tour is about to begin. If you’re here for the tour, gather closer. I’ll come through to take your tickets, we’ll be heading out shortly.”

The man moved through the cluster of people, taking tickets, and when he reached Nikkos, Rishika, and me, he held out his hand.

“Tickets, please.”

Nikkos leaned in and whispered, “We’re here to ask after a man named Adair.”

The tour guide’s brows lifted, and he scanned our faces before nodding tightly.

“Ask me again after the tour,” he said. Then he moved back to the group. “Okay, everyone. Stay together, and off we go!”

I looked at Rishika, and she just shrugged. With that amazing show of confidence, we joined the group and followed the tour guide into the cemetery. As we stepped through the wrought-iron gates, dark, ancient magic wrapped around me like a second skin.

Another shudder rocked through my body, and Rishika took my hand. I clutched onto it like the lifeline it was. I was only dimly aware of the tour guide explaining the history of the many cemeteries in New Orleans as we began our journey through the winding stone paths of the cemetery—something about the cemeteries here being called “Cities of the Dead.”

*Well, that’s not disconcerting at all…*

The tombs on either side of the path were sun-bleached, and most of the epitaphs had been worn away by time. The tombstones and occasional mausoleums were scattered around with no apparent organizing principle. Small, modest tombstones were clustered next to ornate mausoleums, and crosses and statues jutted out from the tomb surfaces seemingly at random. Burned-out votive candles clung to some of the tombstones, and the guide pointed out one just off the side of the path.

“It’s customary to light candles for the deceased during the holidays,” he explained. “If you were to come here on All Saints night, the cemetery would be entirely aglow with candlelight.”

“It’s gotta be a real bitch to keep that lawn mown,” Rishika mused under her breath as we followed the guide.

It was a little shocking to me that *anything* grew here, that the plants weren’t tainted by the same suffocating magic that was hugging my every breath.

The tour guide droned on. “New Orleans’s first public cemetery was erected around 1725 in the area known today as the French Quarter. At the time, burials were performed in the ground, as is the custom for most cemeteries. As the public cemeteries were mainly utilized by those families without enough wealth to bury their loved ones on their own estates, affordability was a concern, and burying the dead in the ground was much cheaper than erecting an above-ground tomb.

“The only problem with burying the dead in the ground is that New Orleans sits at or below sea level. Saint Louis Cemetery erected the first above-ground tombs by 1804, and by 1818, above-ground tombs were the standard for cemeteries across the city. In addition to being a more physically secure place to bury the dead, the advent of above-ground tombs also created the visual of small cities made just for the dead.”

I swallowed the unease crawling up my throat. I’d never really *liked* cemeteries, but after everything that had happened with Letifer, I absolutely abhorred them. My brain kept helpfully reminding me of what this “City of the Dead” would look like if it were teeming with revenants.

*Why did our next lead have to be a cemetery? I have no good history with them.*

Rishika hadn’t actually been too far off the mark. But it wasn’t the ghosts that were bothering me—it was the cemetery and all of its dark, anxiety-causing magic.

Nikkos, who’d mostly been following behind Rishika and me, leaned forward and whispered, “A lot of witches settled in the area early on. That’s why the witches here are so powerful, and to be respected.”

This was as surprising as it was unsettling. I didn’t know many Fae who would ever consider another being to be superior to them—and even if they did privately believe it, they’d never have admitted it outright. But Nikkos seemed to be pretty humble and respectful when it came to these witches. *Does that mean we can trust him?* I still didn’t know for sure. And until I could get a proper read on him, I was going to reserve my judgment.

I looked up at him. “What is the debt you owe Adair?”

He fell back as he considered my question, then finally met my gaze again. “Adair and I grew up together in the Fae world. I owe him a debt—a number of debts, really. And I aim to make sure I can fulfill my promises to him.”

My eyes widened. “You grew up with him? Really? Did you know him very well?”

He nodded. “Perhaps better than anyone. For a time, at least.”

His voice was sad, almost wistful. *What happened between my uncle and this Fae? And, more importantly, why is he deferring to me when he obviously knows Adair better than I do?*

Nikkos’s expression darkened. “Since you’re looking for Adair, you should know that people from the Fae Court are also looking for him. It’s important that I get to him first.”

“Do they want to hurt him?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know if hurting him is necessarily what they’re after, but there’s no guarantee that they won’t hurt him in order to get what they do want.”

I nodded.

“The tour seems to be wrapping up,” Rishika said, cutting in.

Wrapped up in my conversation with Nikkos, I hadn’t realized how far we’d walked, but we’d successfully looped all the way back around to the entrance. While the tourists thanked and tipped the tour guide, we hung back to wait for him.

Finally, he came over. “So, you’re the ones looking for Adair?’

“Yes,” I said. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea. If you find him, you might end up in one of these tombs yourself. Are you sure that’s a path you want to take?”

# Episode 3165

**Greyson**

I pulled Cali after me as I jumped off the streetcar, laughing. We didn’t stop until we were off the street and tucked out of the way of vehicles and passersby, standing in front of a storefront.

Cali was panting, and I realized belatedly that a light jog in a velvet dress had probably made her a little warm. Still, she looked amazing. As modest as the dress was, it hugged her like a second skin. It might’ve been the sexiest thing I’d ever seen her wear.

“What is it?” she asked. “What’s happening? Are we running from someone?”

I frowned down at her, confused, then shook my head and let out a laugh. “Oh, no! God, sorry. We were about to miss our stop, and I don’t know this place well enough to be able to backtrack quickly.”

Cali scoffed and lightly punched my arm. “You scared me!”

“I’m sorry!” I grinned, not the least bit repentant. “I just wanted us to be on time.”

Any true anger she might have had evaporated in a heartbeat, and she smiled back. “Okay, then. Where are you taking me?”

I pointed just down the street at what looked like a gigantic, light blue and white mansion. “There. Come on—we don’t want to be late.”

Her eyes widened as we approached the building. “What is this place?”

“It’s called Commander’s Palace, and we’re here for dinner.”

And with that, we headed up the stairs and into the “palace.” A member of the staff held the door for us on our way in, and once I gave my name, the maître d’ led us to our table. The building did look very much like a historic mansion on the inside, with gold wallpaper and pristine white paneling that went halfway up the walls, but the space had been outfitted as a restaurant.

The white-clothed tables were set in an elegant display with actual china, and I noticed several other customers were wearing suits and dresses.

All in all, it was a gorgeous, romantic venue, and the perfect place for me to spoil my mate. She deserved some spoiling. She always did, and I was happy to do it, but I knew she needed a little love now more than ever.

I held Cali’s seat out for her, and she sat down. I carefully pushed her closer to the table before taking my own seat.

It was, perhaps, the simplest thing in the world to be out on a date with my mate, but I was looking forward to every single moment.

I picked up the menu and looked it over. “What would you like? Tenderloin? They’ve got pecan-crusted fish—oh, or we can go with a selection of artisanal cheeses?”

Her eyes were huge as she scanned the menu. “I have no idea. I can’t decide. It all looks good.”

I grinned. “Do you want me to order for both of us?”

She seemed to perk up and slapped her menu shut. “Sure! I trust you.”

When the waiter came over, I ordered both of our dinners and a bottle of wine to share. Cali absolutely devoured her plate and had a second glass of the wine as well. There was something immensely rewarding about knowing my mate well enough to be able to choose a meal that she loved. Dinner passed in a pleasant blur. We people watched, talked about the sights we’d seen that day, and even talked about nothing at all.

But we didn’t talk about Seluna’s curse, or Artemis, or Clementine, or even Xavier. And for all of that, I was grateful. I wanted Cali here with me, focused on the present.

I patted my mouth with my napkin and set it down next to my small, empty dessert plate. “How about we go walk off all of that delicious food?”

“Sounds amazing.”

After I paid for dinner, Cali took my hand and we walked out of the restaurant. Despite being late December, it was actually really nice outside.

*Must be the benefit of being in the south and along the gulf.*

Cali didn’t even need a heavy jacket. Her velvet dress seemed to be keeping her plenty warm.

We walked through the Garden District for a while until we came across a street full of bars and restaurants. Street performers clustered on the corners, and we stopped to watch a group of break dancers.

“How do they do that?” Cali asked, her eyes wide as she watched the dancers’ fluid movements.

I shrugged. I might’ve been a supernaturally strong Alpha werewolf, but the things those dancers were doing were absolutely beyond me.

Their set came to an end, and Cali clapped along with the rest of the audience. I dropped a few tens in their tip bucket before we moved on.

Another street over, a small jazz band was playing a live set on the outdoor patio of a restaurant. I was content to keep moving, but Cali tugged me back.

“Let’s listen for a minute.”

There was no arguing with that. We stood and listened, watching as a few couples started to break away from the crowd to go dance in the street.

Cali turned to me, beaming. “This is amazing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen something like this before.”

Her smile was so infectious, I couldn’t help but grin back at her. “Do you want to dance?”

She nodded, and I pulled her out onto the street where we’d have some room. I pulled her into my arms, and we swung around to the jazz beat. I leaned into it, hoping it would help her have a good time, and was rewarded by the beautiful sound of her laughter.

By the time the next song began, a much slower one, Cali was panting and grinning from ear to ear.

“Another?” I asked.

She nodded again, and I wrapped my arms around her. We slowly swayed to the moody song, our chests pressed together. I could feel her heart racing against mine.

Cali rested her head on my chest, and the moment was just so goddamn perfect, I couldn’t stop myself from wishing.

*How amazing would it be if this was our honeymoon?*

I usually knew better than to linger in those kinds of thoughts, but right now, it was just too intoxicating to resist. What if Cali and I had come here for no other reason than to enjoy our time together? We would’ve been able to just be with each other. We wouldn’t have had to think about anything other than how we wanted to spend each day. No Seluna. No witches. No Xavier.

Just me and Cali—the way it was meant to be.

I tightened my arms around her and kissed the crown of her head. “Are you having a good time?”

She looked up at me, a soft smile on her face. “I’m having the best time. I wish tonight could last forever.”

She had no way of knowing that was exactly what I wanted to hear, but my heart swelled to hear it all the same.

“Where do you want to go next?” I asked. “One of the bars nearby?”

She glanced over at the closest bar, which was crowded with people. She shook her head. “Can we just walk some more? It’s so nice out.”

“Anything you want, love.”

I took her hand and led her back down the street. After some wandering, we realized we’d circled back to the same park we’d visited earlier that day. Now, there were significantly fewer people.

I led Cali to a park bench. “Maybe we should sit for a little while. People watch. Rest our feet.”

She nodded. “That sounds nice.”

I slipped an arm around her shoulders. “You look amazing tonight.”

She grinned and looked down at her dress. “It’s the dress.”

“The dress is nice,” I conceded, “but the beauty is all you.”

Even in the twilight, I could make out the color dusting her cheeks. “Well, you really shouldn’t have spent so much on it.”

I shrugged. “Any money spent on you is money well spent, as far as I’m concerned. I just want you to have a good time.”

“I am. I love being with you.” She leaned up to kiss me on the cheek, but I turned my head at the last minute, and her lips crashed into mine.

She giggled and leaned back, but I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her in for another kiss, deeper this time. Just like on the streetcar, the kiss heated up fast, and I lost myself in the taste of her mouth. I wished I could’ve pulled her into my lap, wished we were back at our Airbnb instead of this very public place. Though, I knew Cali didn’t totally mind that…

I nipped at her full bottom lip, and Cali let out a sexy little groan that went straight to my cock. *Fuck.*

She groaned again, but this time it sounded like she was in pain.

I pulled back. “Are you—”

Suddenly, Cali let out a bloodcurdling scream and slumped against me. Unconscious.

“Cali?” Panic poured into me as I cradled her in my arms. “What’s wrong? Can you hear me? Cali!”

Then, I watched in horror as the handprint burned a hole through the back of her dress.

# Episode 3166

**Xavier**

I stared at Gabe expectantly, waiting for him to share his plan. If he were anyone else, I wouldn’t have left that bar without knowing the full plan in and out, but Gabe was different. He’d proven to me time and time again just how good he was with fighting strategy, and I had complete faith that he’d prove it to me again.

He nodded. “The guards here will recognize me and Mikah when we head in through the front door, which is why they won’t expect you to attack from the back. Twenty seconds after you hear the signal, bust through the back door and meet us inside. From there, we make our way to the snitch and get the intel we need.”

“And the signal is?”

Gabe grinned. “You’ll know it when you hear it.”

I nodded and darted around to the back of the building, moving as quietly as possible. Shouts echoed from inside the warehouse, and I would’ve bet anything that that was the signal.

*Gabe and Mikah must be moving in.*

I waited for a full count of twenty before bursting through the back door, scaring the shit out of the lone guard at the back of the warehouse. In seconds, the guard was on the floor, unconscious, and I rushed in to join the fray.

Some ten or so guards were clustered around Mikah and Gabe, who were holding their own. I almost did a double take as I watched them fight. They moved with the fluidity of two people who had fought together often enough to develop a shared fighting style. It was almost like I couldn’t tell where Gabe ended and Mikah began.

*They didn’t fight like that the last time I saw them, right?*

Had these two been working and fighting together since they’d helped me get into the Fae world?

Gabe’s eyes met mine, and his brows rose in a clear question. *A little help here?*

I dove into the fray, taking the remaining guards by surprise.

“There’s three of them!” one of the guards shouted before I grabbed him by the throat and tossed him across the warehouse. He hit the wall with a crunch and didn’t get back up.

The three of us worked in sync, though I couldn’t help but wonder if I was getting in the way more than anything else. Mikah and Gabe didn’t fight quite as fluidly with me at their side. Either way, we burned through the warehouse’s defenses quickly, and soon all the guards were either out cold on the cement floor or rolling around in pain.

Without missing a beat, Gabe headed for a steel door with a bunch of locks on it. He turned to Mikah, who nodded, then used his vampire strength to rip the door off its hinges. Again, they worked together smoothly, communicating wordlessly. I was seriously impressed.

*Next time the Redwood pack is facing another crazy threat, we should call these two.*

Behind the door, there was a thin man wearing a fraying suit, cowering against the wall. He looked like he was in his forties or fifties. He swept a hand over his sweaty, mostly bald head.

“Oh! G-Gabe! So nice to see you.”

I scoffed. “This is who all the fuss is about?”

Gabe marched forward and grabbed the man by the collar, using it as leverage to lift him off the ground.

“Hey, Warner,” Gabe drawled. “We meet again.”

“I w-was j-just about t-to call you!” Warner stammered.

“Sure you were.” Gabe laughed. “I’m glad we saved you the trouble. And isn’t a face-to-face visit better than a phone call?” He hefted the man higher, and Warner began to gag.

Mikah put a hand on Gabe’s arm—another wordless communication—and Gabe relaxed his grip on Warner’s collar and set him back down.

“If he can’t breathe, he can’t talk,” Mikah reminded him quietly.

Gabe nodded, then took a step back to let Mikah take the lead. I frowned. There was another oddity. *Gabe never takes the back seat in this kind of thing. Why is he letting Mikah run the show?*

But now that I thought about it, I realized Gabe *had* been leaning on Mikah and deferring to him since we’d started this job, and probably had been before I’d gotten involved. What was strange about it was that the last time I’d seen the two of them together, they’d been at each other’s throats. They’d barely been able to stand being in the same room, much less work together with a fluid shorthand that only happened after a long partnership.

*What is going on with these two?*

“We don’t want to hurt you,” Mikah said. “We just want to know what you know about our missing friend.”

Warner nodded so hard he looked more bobblehead than human. “Fine. Fine! I’ll tell you what I know. But you can’t tell anyone you heard it from me.”

I crossed my arms. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want the witches to know that I gave up any of their secrets!” If possible, the man paled even further. It looked like he was seconds away from passing out cold.

“Wait. Witches?” Gabe frowned. “How are they involved?”

I tensed, recalling what Gabe and Mikah had told me about respecting the power of the New Orleans witches. If they were involved in Mikah and Gabe’s friend going missing, it couldn’t bode well for us finding her.

“They’re the ones who took her! I thought for sure you would have pieced that together by now.”

Gabe snarled and prowled forward, but Mikah pushed him back with a hand on his chest.

Mikah turned back to Warner. “What else do you know? Where do we find these witches? Where are they keeping her?”

Warner held up his hands. “That’s all I know, I swear. You should have known this was a dangerous city for someone like your friend.”

Gabe and Mikah shared a look.

*What could that mean?* I wondered. I’d assumed that they’d come here searching for their friend, but if they’d come to New Orleans with her, and she’d gone missing after they’d arrived, that was new information to me. If it changed anything, I didn’t know.

“You want my advice? Leave town now. Without your friend,” Warner said. “There’s something that the witches need from her. There’s no way you’re getting her back.”

Gabe’s jaw tensed. “We’ll see about that.” Then he grabbed Warner by the collar again and threw him against the wall. The man crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Mikah sighed. “Did you have to do that?”

Gabe just shrugged. “Now we’ll have more time to make our getaway.”

The vampire rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything more.

With Warner knocked out and either unable or unwilling to give us any more information, there was nothing left to do but head back into the city. Silence had settled between the three of us, and I used the time to mull over what I’d learned from Warner, as well as the nagging sensation that Gabe and Mikah weren’t telling me everything.

I cleared my throat, breaking the silence. “I think you’d better tell me what’s going on here. Everything.”

Gabe met my eyes in the rearview mirror and sighed. “Our friend Tabitha is a witch of sorts herself. But her magic is special. It’s not even magic so much as an innate ability. She negates magic.”

I frowned. Now that was an ability I’d never heard of before, though I did know someone who could do the exact opposite.

“Okay, if you knew Tabitha was special and rare, then why would you risk bringing her to a city of powerful witches?”

“We didn’t have a choice,” Mikah said. “We were following an important lead on something.”

I waited for him to elaborate, but all I got was more silence. If they wanted to keep things a secret, that was their business. But they’d asked me to help, and, more than that, I *wanted* to help. But I couldn’t do anything if I didn’t know what I was even helping *with*.

“I want to help you guys. Really, I do,” I said. “I trust you both, but I need to know all the details of what we’re getting into. What else aren’t you telling me?”

“It’s not actually that important.” Gabe shrugged. “We were looking for another lost friend.”

“Wow. You two seem to be misplacing friends left and right. Maybe I should rethink my friendship with you.”

Gabe let out a dark, humorless laugh, but Mikah frowned.

“Bad timing?” I asked.

“You’re not wrong,” Mikah said. “We shouldn’t have come here. I should have known better.”

Gabe spared a glance at Mikah. “No, we were all worried about Adair. Tabby was the one who insisted we come here to find him. You can’t take all the blame.”

My head whipped up. I knew that name. “Wait. Did you say Adair?”

# Episode 3167

Being cursed by a demon was sometimes a real buzzkill.

One moment, I was kissing the daylights out of my mate and wondering just how far we could take things on this park bench before we became truly indecent, and the next, I was surrounded by darkness.

I tried to move, but something was boxing me in, pressing me down. I couldn’t do much more than twitch my fingers without meeting resistance.

*Where the hell am I?*

I tried to sit up, but I fell back down as fast as a box of rocks, and my head slammed against something hard. Pain lanced through my skull in time with my horrifying realization.

*Holy shit! Am I in some kind of box? How the hell did I end up in a box? And why does it smell like cedar in here?*

I lifted my arms as much as I could in the small, enclosed space—which wasn’t much—and tried to feel for a way out. Suddenly, something thudded against the top of the box. I paused, trying to listen for any kind of clue as to where exactly I was or what the hell was going on.

Another *thump* landed on the top of the box, along with a dry, earthy smell.

*Wait, that smells like—*

The puzzle pieces clicked together, and a wave of utter horror washed over me.

*OH MY GOD, IT’S DIRT. I’M IN A COFFIN. I’M BEING BURIED ALIVE.*

I let out a scream that was deafening in the small, confined place, and tried to pound on the top of the casket, slapping my palms against the wood and kicking my feet.

“Greyson!” I screamed. “Xavier! ANYONE! Help me! I’m in here! Don’t let them bury me!”

I screamed and screamed until my throat went raw, until my vocal cords felt shredded, but it was no use. The periodic *thump* of dirt hitting the coffin continued, getting fainter now that more and more dirt had been piled on.

I was being buried alive. Hell, from the sound of it, the burial part was almost done. And nobody was coming to save me.

A let out a gasp as blistering pain burned my shoulder. The handprint. Even now, it was torturing me.

And then my screams turned into sobs.

*This can’t be happening to me. Why is this happening? What did I do to deserve this?*

A dark, otherworldly voice whispered, “We are connected. Always. Even in death.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” I sobbed out.

“Because it’s what you deserve!” the voice hissed.

The mark was agonizing. It felt like it was trying to burn its way through skin and muscle and bone. I scratched at the coffin lid in desperation, my fingernails tearing and bleeding. Now, I wasn’t trying to stop the burial. I was trying to get away from the pain burrowing into my shoulder. My face was wet, but in the darkness I didn’t know what was tears and what was blood.

A voice broke through my panic. “Cali.”

“No! I don’t want to hear it!” I cried. “Please—just leave me alone!”

“Cali, wake up.”

*Wait. That voice…*

“Please, love. Please, wake up.”

*That’s not Seluna. It’s Greyson!*

“Cali!” Greyson roared, desperation bleeding into his tone. “Wake up! Wake up now, dammit! Don’t you do this to me, love! WAKE. UP!”

“Greyson—” I gasped, my heart slamming against my ribcage. Every breath came in shallower than the one before. I could barely speak. Could barely breathe around the panic and horror that pressed into me. “Grey—”

Suddenly, my eyes snapped open and I lunged to my feet. I was no longer boxed in. The air was humid and cool, not damp and earthy. I wasn’t lying in a coffin, trapped. I was in the middle of the park.

And Greyson? He was cradling me in his arms, his chest heaving in time with my own.

“Greyson?” My voice broke, and I began to sob. My eyes slammed shut, and it felt like I was tumbling back, back, back. Back into the coffin, back into Seluna’s burning embrace…

Greyson wrapped his arms around me tightly, burying his face in my neck. “Cali. Love. I’m here. It’s me. I’m here. You’re okay. Just—look at me.”

He pulled back, and I peeled my eyes open. Through my tears, I saw his face. He was here. I was here. I wasn’t buried.

I eased myself out of his arms and lifted my hands in front of my face. There wasn’t a drop of blood on them. My fingernails were clean. My hands were unmarked. They were fine.

I wrenched my lungs open and gulped down air, looking around. *Yes, that’s right. I’m in the park. I never left. It was some kind of hallucination.*

A chill rippled down my spine. It had felt so real…

A few of the people walking by were openly watching me, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. To feel embarrassed. To feel anything but horror and devastation.

I threw myself back into Greyson’s arms, sobbing into his chest. One hand landed on my waist while the other rubbed up and down my back. “Don’t worry, love. I’m here. You’re safe. We’re going to figure this out.”

“It’s getting worse!” I said. “Why is it getting bad so quickly? Am I out of time?”

“*No.*” His voice was stern, bordering on angry. But I knew that anger wasn’t directed at me. “No, you’re not out of time, Cali. I don’t know why it’s getting worse so fast, but I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I wished I could believe him. Because the ugly truth was, no matter how much he loved me or sought to protect me, he couldn’t stop what Seluna was doing to me. The nightmares. The hallucinations. They were happening to me, and there wasn’t anything any of us could do to stop them.

That realization laid another dose of horror on me.

“I don’t know how to fight it,” I whimpered. “I don’t know how to stop it. It’s going to keep happening, and I can’t do anything.” I sobbed harder, fearful of what was to come.

“Hey. Breathe, okay? Just take a breath.” Greyson gripped my shoulders gently. “What did you see this time?”

My body swayed with trauma and exhaustion. I could feel my mind, my body, trying to shut down. Trying to protect me in the only way it knew how.

I tried to swallow, but my throat was dry. “Buried alive. Couldn’t escape.”

Suddenly, the air around me took on a strange charge, and a wave of sickness slammed into me. My eyelids fluttered. Something was happening—something different than Seluna, but I didn’t know what.

“Cali?” Greyson’s grip on me tightened. “What’s happening?”

“I can’t…” And then my eyes rolled back, my body went limp, and darkness rushed in.

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I woke up to cool air blowing over my face, and a soft pillow beneath my head. I blinked slowly, trying to orient myself. I was in a bed, still in my velvet dress from earlier. I lifted my head to look around, and recognition settled in.

I was at the Airbnb. Greyson must have brought me back here. It was dark outside, though I didn’t know if that meant I’d only been out for a little while, or if I’d been unconscious for an entire day. I really, really hoped it was the former.

I lifted my hands to look at them again. I could still remember that horrible hallucination, but it was a little hazier now than it had been in the park. My hands were fine—just like they’d been earlier.

That was the thing I hated most about these nightmares and hallucinations. Whether I was awake or asleep when they happened, they were so visceral that I struggled to tell what was real.

I reached across my body to feel along my shoulder. Through the hole in my dress, I touched the handprint. The raised edges were still there, but it didn’t hurt like it had earlier. I tensed and pressed against it, harder this time. Still, it didn’t hurt.

*How is that possible?*

I climbed out of bed, and as I stood, I realized how alert I felt. My body wasn’t aching, either, like it had after my past hallucinations.

*What’s going on? Did Greyson do something for me before he put me to bed? Maybe he gave me one of Big Mac’s tonics or something.*

Whatever it was, I felt amazing. Better than I had in a long time.

I padded into the en suite bathroom and flicked on the light. I didn’t look half as haggard as I’d been expecting—more sleep-tousled than anything else. I took a deep breath before I tugged off my dress and turned to look at the handprint in the mirror.

It… It wasn’t red anymore. Now, it just looked like a pale white scar, vaguely shaped like a hand.

*What does this even mean? What is the state of the ashes?*

I headed back to my room and started pulling on new clothes so I could go search for my mates. My phone lit up, and Clementine’s number flashed across the screen. There was no way I was missing that call.

I picked it up. “Hello? Clementine? Have you made any progress?”

The witch’s voice slipped through the phone. “The opposite, actually.”

I frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I can’t do the spells for you anymore.”

# Episode 3168

“But what do you mean you can’t do the spells anymore?” I spluttered. “I thought you and I had a deal! I was supposed to have until tomorrow to talk to my sister about you using her Fae blood—why are you pulling out?”

*Do witches have NO HONOR AT ALL?*

However, Clementine then said, “I want the deal. I want to fulfil it, but I just can’t.”

I scowled while Greyson came into the room, mirroring my expression. “I don’t understand,” I told the witch. “What’s stopping you from doing the spell?”

*Put it on speakerphone*, Greyson mouthed at me. I did, and he and I huddled together, just as Clementine offered her ridiculous explanation.

“I am currently unable to perform any spells,” she said, clicking her tongue.

“What?” I asked. “Are you sick or something? I hope you feel better… Could you at least recommend someone else who can help us then?”

I loved that I was furious and panicked, but I’d still managed to send this woman a verbal *Wishing You a Speedy Recovery* card. Greyson seemed to think the same thing, shaking his head at me in what had to be both disbelief and amusement.

Meanwhile, Clementine sounded offended.

“I’m not *sick*! And how dare you even *think* about replacing me?”

Greyson’s voice was cold. “We came all this way just to speak to you, Clementine. But if you can’t assist us, you’re leaving us no choice.”

Clementine scoffed. “You *don’t* have a choice, actually. If you’d let me talk, I could actually explain.”

“What do you mean?”

There was silence on the other line.

“Right,” I said quickly. “Sorry, continue.”

“If my theory is right,” Clementine started, “no witch in the proximity of New Orleans can cast a spell right now—something is blocking all of us at the same time.”

I gasped. “*What?* Seriously? Who would do that? *Why?*”

“No clue. I’m going to get to the bottom of it, though,” Clementine declared. “I still want your sister’s Dark and Light Fae blood, so don’t you forget about that.”

“But—”

“I’ll contact you as soon as I hear anything,” Clementine said.

And then she hung up.

I stared at the screen, my heart pounding. I felt like I was going to burst into tears, or start screaming, or just bang my head against the wall. I’d really gotten my hopes up here. I’d believed that Clementine really could help me find who’d stolen the ashes, and where they were.

*But now we’re back to square one! It’s as if I never left Oregon at all!*

Greyson looked at me like my every thought was clear as day on my face. He immediately pulled out the big guns—resting his hands on my shoulders and staring deep into my eyes, his voice dropping as he said, “It’s going to be all right, love. We will figure this out.”

Not even Greyson being Greyson could fix this, though.

“What if she can’t figure it out, though?” I asked. I hated how panicked I sounded. “Wait! Could my magic be affected too? How do I look right now?”

Greyson examined my face. “Panicked but beautiful. So, the usual?”

Greyson’s calm tone somehow made me feel a little less freaked out right now. Until I recalled something that made my stomach drop.

“Before, at the park,” I said, swallowing roughly, “I felt this weird sensation, just seconds before I passed out… Could that be the moment when my magic got blocked?”

Greyson took a step back, gesturing outside. “There’s only one way to find out.”

I stepped out, Greyson right behind me. I stared at my hands, fiddling with them for a brief moment before I looked up at him. I recalled the accidental backyard fire incident.

“I don’t want to set anything on fire, though…”

He shook his head. “No greenery will be harmed in this experiment—not on my watch. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Let’s start with something small.” He picked up an empty clay pot, setting it on the opposite railing. Nodding to himself as if he’d just accomplished a major feat—he was fucking adorable, so I had that distraction going on for me—he turned to me again. “Now, it’s time for you to go William Tell on it.”

I blinked. “Who?”

“Never mind,” Greyson said, waving me off. “Just try and zap the pot.”

“I need you to stay behind me, though.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Because you know I’ll enjoy the view from the back?”

I pressed my lips together. “Because with all the craziness going on with magic, I don’t want to take a chance and blast you by mistake.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed, and stepped behind me. Lowering his voice, he said, “You can do this. I believe in you.”

I swallowed and nodded, focusing on the clay pot. I raised my hands and instantly felt my magic building, and the pot wobbled a little.

*I usually would’ve broken it to pieces by now*, I thought.

I tried again with the same result. I took a deep breath. “It’s not working.”

“Move closer to it,” Greyson instructed.

I did as he suggested, then reached for my magic and fought to fire it up. But the pot only shook a little all over again.

“What does it feel like?” Greyson asked.

“I can feel my magic, but it’s like someone has turned the volume down,” I said. “Like way, way down. I guess this is what Clementine was talking about.”

“So then it’s not just the witches who’ve been affected,” Greyson said. “It has to be all magic users in the area. Witches, Fae…”

“What does this even mean, though?” I faced Greyson, feeling shaky. “How will I be able to retrieve the ashes without my magic? What if I can’t even defend myself when…”

I choked on the sentence. Greyson pulled me into his arms, wrapping them around me tight. “I’m right here, okay?” he whispered in my ear, then kissed my temple. “We’ll figure it out. We always do in the end, don’t we?”

This whole Seluna situation had been an endless nightmare, but Greyson was right about one thing—we *had* survived everything else so far.

“I’ve got you,” my mate said, his breath warm against the skin of my cheek as he rubbed my back. I shivered at the sensation. It felt so good to be comforted like this, to be held and protected like this. And then I realized…

He’d just touched over the handprint on my shoulder, and I hadn’t even flinched.

“The handprint,” I said, pushing back to look up at him. “Is it still faded?”

Greyson’s face was serious as he examined my back. “It seems to be.”

“Does that mean Seluna’s demonic ash magic has been weakened, too? Because if all magic is being affected, that would make sense!”

Greyson’s eyes widened slightly. “That’s true—good thinking.”

I realized then that sure, I might not be able to use my powers to blast an enemy, or defend anyone using my shield. But if Seluna’s ghostly grip on me was slipping because of the magic suppression, then perhaps… Perhaps I didn’t need to worry about this.

*What? Me? NOT worry? Hah.*

A huge burden had been lifted off my shoulders, though.

Greyson trailed his fingers over my cheek. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Actually,” I said with an awkward chuckle, “I don’t know how long this suppression thing is going to last, but right now, I feel the safest I’ve felt in a long time.” I smoothed my hands down Greyson’s shirt, staring up at him. “Maybe somehow this will rebalance the world?”

Greyson was smiling at me. It was a soft, fond one that had my insides turning into goo. “Glad to see the fight’s still in you.”

“Hah,” I scoffed. “I’m way too stubborn to let it go.”

Greyson leaned forward, kissing the corner of my mouth. “I think it’s more about you always finding the bright side of things. It’s one of the reasons I love you.”

“Thank you for taking care of me through all this,” I murmured. “I don’t know what I would have done without you—probably combust at random or wind up in the ER.”

“You should give yourself more credit,” Greyson told me seriously.

“I’ve been falling apart for days now, Greyson.”

“After you saved us all from Seluna,” he reminded me. “You’re a badass—you’re allowed to go through a rough patch.”

“I feel like that’s a luxury I’m allowed only because you’re here to take care of me,” I said quietly.

Greyson leaned down to brush his lips over mine, just a small peck that had me clinging to him. A shiver ran through me as he stared. His gaze carried so much weight, and yet I’d never felt lighter.

“I promised to always have your back, love,” he said. “Doesn’t matter if we’re in Oregon, the Fae world, or New Orleans—I’ll always be there for you.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I know. I’ll be there for you, too.”

Somewhere in the distance, music was playing. The air was heavy with jasmine. Greyson looked at me, the streetlights reflecting in his dark eyes. All the emotion in there had me weak at the knees. His power, his care for me… It felt larger than life. The thought made me want to lock this moment down and never let it go.

“I love you,” I whispered, reaching up to wrap my arms around his neck. I held onto him, arching up to kiss him. I started soft, but I didn’t keep it that way for more than a couple of seconds—I wanted a real kiss, and when his lips parted, I got it. He made a low noise in his throat that had warmth spreading all over me, settling in the pit of my stomach with a sharpness that made me gasp.

Without a word, he scooped me up in his arms and gave me another kiss that had me trembling.

“Bed,” I whispered against his mouth.

“My thoughts exactly.”

He carried me inside, and a moment later, we fell onto the mattress together.

# Episode 3169

**Xavier**

“How the hell do you two know about Adair?” I asked, eyeing Gabe and Mikah. Both of them looked as stunned as I felt.

“Wait, how the fuck have *you* even heard of Adair?” Gabe asked me.

“One of the reasons we came to New Orleans was to help Cali’s half-sister, Artemis, find her father’s brother. Adair,” I explained, still trying to wrap my head around what was going on here. “Since I’m assuming that’s not a common name, I’m pretty sure we’re talking about the same person.”

Gabe burst out laughing. “Shit, dude. I can’t fucking believe this!”

“You’d better,” I said. “This isn’t a joke. Right now, as we speak, Artemis and her girlfriend Rishika are chasing down leads.”

As much as Gabe was grinning at this happenstance, Mikah frowned. He looked like this life just wasn’t enough to contain the weight of his disdain. Typical.

“Artemis and Rishika could be getting in way over their heads,” he said. “If Adair is here and doesn't want to be found, it’s not going to be easy to find him.”

Gabe shook his head. “We can’t give up. Tabitha insisted we try to find Adair—”

“You mean before she went missing herself,” Mikah said wryly. “I think we need to prioritize and find her first, obviously.”

“How did you two connect with this girl and get all close with her?” I asked.

Gabe’s earlier amused expression vanished. Wincing, he said, “Actually, it was because of your dad…”

“What?” That hadn’t been the answer I was expecting. “What the fuck did my father do?”

“Tabby has been looking for her kidnapped sister who was taken by Silas,” Gabe said. “She’s been missing her like crazy.”

I squinted at both of them, feeling like there was a bigger picture that I was definitely missing here.

Mikah stared at me, unimpressed. “Gabe. Why does he suddenly look constipated?”

Gabe shushed him. “That’s Xavier’s thinking face—he’s processing something.”

And I came to a conclusion, all right. “You’re looking for a girl named Tabitha. That name… And you said her sister was kidnapped by Silas…” It was all clicking into place.

Mikah squinted back at me with a nod. Gabe shrugged. “Yeah, man. Thanks for the recap.”

My mind went back to when Dani had first arrived at the pack. *Dani*. Of fucking course. It was such a small world, after all. Or was it destiny? I didn’t know if I wanted to high five someone or bang my head into the wall. Either way, it was obvious we were all fucking stuck together.

“Is Tabitha’s sister named Dani?” I asked.

Gabe and Mikah exchanged a look.

“How the fuck do you know about Dani?” Gabe asked me, clearly weirded out.

I crossed my arms. “Uh, probably because she lives in my pack house.”

Gabe gaped. Mikah’s eye twitched. “Tabby’s been trying to find her sister for *months*”— he pointed at me, turning to Gabe—“and you’re fucking telling me that Dani’s been at the Redwood pack house this entire time? Right under our noses?”

Gabe huffed. “Hey, don’t be pissed at me—*you’re* the private detective! You should’ve seen that coming.”

Mikah looked appalled and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Gabe didn’t press the matter further. Weird.

“Dani hasn’t exactly been sitting around fucking off. She’s wanted to find her sister, but she’s had various magical problems to deal with. We met her because the witch council had put her on trial. It’s a long fucking story, but she’s been crashing at our pack house, and she’s had to put everything else on the backburner.”

I should’ve made that connection sooner, I realized. Although I’d been a little preoccupied, and I had only heard Tabitha’s name from Dani maybe a couple of times. And honestly, I had to admit that Dani and her sister hadn’t been at the top of my list, even though we—especially Cali—obviously wanted to help Dani. Right now, though, I had to refocus. There was way too much going on right now. One thing at a time.

“What do you plan to do to track down the witches who took Tabitha?” I asked.

Gabe stared at me. “About that… We were hoping you could help us. It’s why I called.”

I’d promised my friend that I had his back. Plus, I knew that Cali would’ve been ecstatic to hear that Dani had a chance to reunite with her sister. Not to mention, all this could lead us to Artemis’s uncle, which would also please Cali.

But my first priority had to be to find the ashes.

“What are you thinking about?” Gabe asked, eyebrows arched. “Don’t tell me a few witches are making you gun shy?”

I shook my head with a huff. “I’ve got no love for witches, and I’ll never be scared of them. But the thing is that I’m in New Orleans to help Cali, and I don’t want to be completely sidetracked by something else.”

Mikah nodded solemnly. “Perhaps we can help each other, then. I’ve been around here a few times. I’m sure I know New Orleans far better than either of you do. Then we can help you with Cali.”

I eyed Mikah. I wouldn’t mind accepting a vampire’s help—*this* vampire’s help, at least—if it meant finally finding those damned ashes. I knew I should probably run the deal by Cali and Greyson, but neither one of them was here, and time was of the essence. Plus, I trusted Gabriel with my life, and Mikah wasn’t so bad. For a bloodsucker.

“One thing is a fact, man,” Gabe told me in a way that was uncharacteristically serious. “With all of us working together, we can save time and resources.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “I’m in.”

Gabe grinned, grabbing my shoulder. “Just like old times! I bet you fucking missed me, didn’t you?”

“As much as any man misses chaos,” I told Gabe sarcastically, and he laughed, patting my arm. I couldn’t help but smile. I had missed the guy.

Mikah stared at us like he’d just sampled a glass of expired hyena blood, all stiff and uncomfortable. But what had I expected from a vampire? At least he was a damn good detective. A useful vampire was a rarity, so I’d take what I could get.

“So, what now?” I asked.

“We find Tabby,” Gabe said. “That’s our priority.” He pointed at the man among us who most resembled an annoyed cat and said, “Mikah over here knows just the place to start.”

Mikah gave me a look. “Have you ever heard of The Bad Penny?”

I recalled the name from somewhere. At this point, who the fuck knew how? “Isn’t it a speakeasy?” I asked.

Gabe grinned. “A speakeasy for *witches*.”

“Should be a fun night,” Mikah said, looking as enthusiastic as a mortician.

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Within a few minutes, we were crammed into the back of a cab, on our way to the speakeasy. I texted Cali, to let her know that I was okay, chasing a lead that might help Artemis.

*Will fill you in later. Love you*, Ityped at the end, then sent the text.

I knew that if this actually paid off, Cali would be thrilled. I glanced out the window, enjoying the scenery of downtown New Orleans—even at night, everything was alive, colorful.

“Where is this speakeasy, exactly?” I asked the other two.

“Bourbon Street,” Mikah said.

“Fuck, are you serious, Gabe?” I asked.

“You know I am, baby.”

Great. I gagged, recalling the smell. I wished it was any other place. As I recalled the stench and recoiled, I turned to look at Gabe. He was actually already talking to Mikah—*muttering*, of all things.

“Hey,” he was telling the vampire. “We’ll find Tabby. I promise.”

Mikah took a break from looking eternally judgy. He sighed like he had true emotions. Which was kind of gross. And then Gabe’s hand—his pinkie, to be exact—brushed against *Mikah’s* pinkie.

These two had just intertwined their pinkies.

In front of me.

I had some questions for my old friend.

The cab stopped just then, and I had other things to think about.

“This is as far as I can get you,” the driver said. “I ain’t going into Bourbon Street after dark. You three had better be careful.”

The moment we piled out of the car, I was ready for the smell and ambience. It was pretty crowded, with lots of people drinking and partying.

Mikah pointed to a building up the block. “It’s just up there.”

“After you,” Gabe said, gesturing for Mikah to take the lead.

Mikah’s face twisted weirdly, like he’d have blushed if there was real blood coursing through his veins. That was a fucking ridiculous thought to have, so I discarded it and moved forward behind the other two. We made our way through the throngs of revelers, and I tried not to gag when I very nearly stepped in vomit.

Fucking finally, we came to a dark doorway, so narrow we each had to turn sideways to pass through. We entered a courtyard where a rickety staircase led to a balcony. The place was shady as all hell, but I wasn’t even surprised. As we climbed the staircase, I was pretty sure it was going to collapse. Good thing werewolves healed fast.

“Is this it?” I whispered when we were standing before a red door.

Mikah nodded curtly, then he knocked.

A panel opened up, and a pair of eyes glared at us. “What?” the person snapped.

Looking bored, Mikah said, “The password is alexandrite.”

The door opened, revealing a musclebound bouncer. She was a vampire—I could smell it. She motioned Mikah in, but then put a hand up to block Gabe and me.

Her eyes narrowing, she declared, “No werewolves allowed.”

# Episode 3170

**Greyson**

I loved the feel of her. I loved the sounds she made, the way she clung to me and squirmed closer and kissed me back, like she’d missed this as much as I had. I saw her all the time, but with all the stress and chaos, I still missed her.

Sometimes, I missed her so much that it felt like a constant ache.

And the danger never goddamn ended.

“Hey,” I breathed, after breaking off the kiss. “Are you feeling okay right now?”

She blinked up at me, her pupils blown wide, her lips so pink the sight made my gut throb. Breathless, she laughed. “Don’t I *look* okay?”

Cali’s well-being was my priority. Always. Even while she marched on as the sky kept falling.

“You just passed out earlier, love. I just want to make sure you really want this, and it’s not—”

“I want this. I want *you*, Greyson,” she said in a shuddery voice, wrapping her legs around my waist to pull me closer, her nails digging into my nape at the same time. It was like she needed to make a point, and her point was fucking taken. I kissed her again, a little deeper than before, licking into her mouth while she arched up underneath me.

I kissed down her neck, felt her pulse flutter and her breath come fast as I gently took off her dress, her bra. Ι watched how goosebumps and color scattered across her skin, her reaction to me instant.

I was so fucking wanted, it made me feel invincible.

“You like this, then?” I asked in a husky voice, teasing. I kissed her chin, her collarbones, and lower, slow and soft, and she whined a, “*God*, yes*…*”

“What about this?” My palm trailed down her side and belly button, then slid to the inside of her trembling thigh. She shuddered, nodding emphatically as she reached for my hair, running her fingers through it. Such a simple thing, but her touch made me groan in pleasure and shudder before she pulled me upward for another kiss.

I slid my hand downward, between her thighs, woozy at the hot feel of her. She moaned against my lips at the contact, her hips bucking upward, quivering. She was already so wet I could feel it through the fabric.

“What about this?” I teased some more, nipping at her jawline as her nails dug into my arm, her chest heaving. “Does this feel good?”

She said, “*Oh my god, yes*,” and opened her legs wider for me, chasing the feeling. I stroked her gently over the fabric that was now soaked through. When I rolled her underwear off and spread her thighs to see, I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself in check.

She came first. Literally.

I put my mouth on her, kissed her there like I’d kissed her mouth. My mate smelled amazing, felt amazing, and my wolf roared, the possessiveness in my chest sharp and raw.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me? How beautiful you are?” I asked.

She gasped out my name and looked down at me, her lips parted. She moaned when I dragged her hips closer, my grip tightening as I pressed my palms to her thighs to spread her wider. I used my mouth, my tongue, and fingers. I pinned her hips down, felt her writhe and spasm over and over because of me. I didn’t stop until she’d come four or five times—I lost count. By the end of it, she was so responsive she felt ablaze. My ears rang with the sounds she’d made, my scalp tingling where she’d pulled at my hair. It was fucking amazing.

Her voice hoarse, she choked out, “Greyson, you’re—that’s—*ridiculous*, oh my *god*…”

I laughed and wiped the wet corners of her eyes. She kept twitching in the aftershocks, grasping at me and shaking, kissing me. She whined when I broke the kiss and sat back on my heels, her legs on either side of me. I rested a hand on the middle of her stomach, to keep her still as I rubbed myself against her.

I hissed, and she shuddered. She used both hands to grip my forearms, so tight there’d have been a bruise if I were human. I loved the idea of her marking me. I loved the sight of her like this, spread open and messy and so needy for me, her thighs painted with her pleasure, her skin flushed all over and crackling like a live wire.

I thought I’d lose my mind if I didn’t get inside her right the fuck now, but I wanted this to count. I wanted this moment to matter the most, above anything and anyone fucking else.

I wanted her to hear her say it.

“You want this?” I rasped, guiding myself inside her, just the tip. I sounded like an animal.

She let out something close to a sob. “Yes—I love this—I love *you*, please don’t tease—”

I slid inside, shushed her and soothed her and thought I’d fucking die just like this. She kissed me, her arms and legs and body locked around me so tight, pulsating all over. I fucked her fast, came so hard I could’ve goddamn blacked out from it, panting and heaving.

I wasn’t done, though.

Breathless, I stared into her dazed eyes, reaching down between us. She was sniffling now. She felt molten, twitching and moaning as I rubbed circles where we were joined.

“One more,” I rasped. “Can you give me one more, love?”

She nodded again and again, grabbing me for a kiss, still needy as she shuddered underneath me.

And I was the fucking happiest man alive.

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My mate was sleepy, so I helped her clean up in the shower. Then we took a nap, cuddled together. When I opened my eyes, she was already staring at me. Wearing one of my T-shirts, she looked refreshed and glowing. Her grin was so gigantic and shit-eating that it made me want to burst out laughing.

She sat up swiftly and declared, “You’re awake. I’ll make you tea!”

Chasing Cali in the kitchen was a good time. She looked so delighted by everything, including the mugs in the cupboards, that I felt smug. She was acting like a delirious little butterfly, right after we’d fucked each other’s brains out.

Coincidence? I didn’t think so.

“This one says, ‘This is wine,’” Cali informed me primly, holding up a mug. “We cannot possibly use it for tea.”

“Right,” I agreed. “The authorities would know.”

She snickered and showed me another one. “This one says, ‘Coffee first, then relatives.’” She paused for a moment, staring up at me. “Oh, no. You’re going to steal the mug, aren’t you?”

I smirked, leaning down to kiss her cheek. And also take the most accurate mug in the whole world from her hands. “You know me so well.”

She laughed and kissed me. I grabbed her and picked her up, placing her on the counter. It felt like we were on vacation together, like life was great and nothing hurt. The feeling only intensified when Cali kissed me again, wrapping her legs around my torso, her hot, soft body glued up against me all over again.

The squealing teapot made me break the kiss, and she huffed in protest.

“The water’s ready. Tea and a snack first; you need your strength,” I said. She rolled her eyes.

A moment later, I sat back on a large sofa in the house’s living room, pulling Cali to sit down on my lap. I sipped on my tea as she ate an apple. I licked the juice at the corner of her mouth, and she giggled, swatting me on the chest before giving me another kiss. Then she started rambling about how pretty this Airbnb was, and how the décor this and the décor that.

I just stared at her, taking her in, feeling like the luckiest motherfucker in the world, getting to spend some alone time with Cali like this. I hadn’t expected in a million years to finally get that in New Orleans. I was pretty sure Xavier hadn’t planned on it either. He was probably very pissed off right now.

Well, not my problem right now.

“Why are you smiling like that?” Cali asked me suspiciously.

“Like what?” I asked, still smiling.

“Evilly,” Cali said, still looking suspicious.

“What are you talking about? I am the most innocent man I know,” I told her. Then I grabbed the back of her neck to pull her in for yet another kiss while my hand trailed up her thigh. She squirmed closer, spreading her legs, opening her mouth for me—

Her phone vibrated.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t tell her to ignore it. Not while we were dealing with so much shit all at once, in the real world that existed outside this little house.

“Xavier texted,” she said after checking her notifications. Her eyes widened. “He says he’s got a lead on *Adair*?”

“What?” I was as surprised as her. “Really?”

She showed it to me, and I read through it. Xavier actually signed off his texts with “love you.” I gave her phone back and frowned for more reasons than one.

“Where the hell is he off to, though?” I asked. “What kind of lead?”

Cali, clearly thinking about her own problematic sibling, said, “I should try to reach Artemis again, to let her know. She still hasn’t responded to my last message. I hope she hasn’t gotten into a fight or something…”

I didn’t comment on the possibility of that—which, knowing Artemis, seemed more than probable—and just watched as Cali screenshotted Xavier’s text and sent it to Artemis.

“This could be good, though,” Cali said afterward. “Like our lucky break.”

I wondered if that was why Xavier had left in the first place. Had he had this lead all along? If so, why had he kept it to himself? Perhaps he hadn’t wanted to get Cali’s hopes up. Still, it didn’t mean that I was happy with the way he’d dealt with things—he should have fucking told *me* something, at least.

“The ashes’ location might still be up in the air,” Cali continued, “but if Xavier can find Adair, this trip will be worth it.”

“True. At least Artemis will have what she came here for,” I agreed. Though on the inside, I was more determined than ever for it *not* to be useless. A vacation was nice, but finding the ashes would be much nicer. Cali’s wholesome, hopeful expression squeezed at my chest.

I looked over her shoulder while she texted Xavier back—to thank him, then to ask for more details. Within seconds, her phone rang.

And now the honeymoon was officially over.

“Xavier?” Cali said after picking up. “What’s going on?”

I leaned closer to hear, but that wasn’t necessary. Cali turned to me, her expression intrigued. “He wants us to meet him on Bourbon Street.”

# Episode 3171

We got to the Bourbon Street address Xavier had given us about an hour later. The street was busy, but something was wrong. I frowned, looking at the old building. “Did I make a mistake? This looks closed.”

“It does,” Greyson said as I checked Xavier’s text again.

“Hey there, pretty lady!”

“Nice ass!”

That was the telltale mating call of a douchey frat boy. I’d heard it before. Sure enough, they emerged a moment later, four of them, all looking tipsy.

My stomach immediately dropped.

“You’d better take your party elsewhere,” Greyson snapped, wrapping an arm around me.

One of them—a white guy with a backward baseball cap—laughed and took a step forward, clearly the drunkest of them all. “Come on, dude, all we want is a bit of fun!”

Greyson raised his hand to shove the guy in the chest. At the same time, his teeth elongated, his nose too, his eyes silver glowing like they did when he shifted to his wolf.

“I said *elsewhere*,” he growled while in half-shift.

The guy stumbled backward into his friends, saying things like, “What the fuck?” and, “Did you see that?” as they scurried away like cockroaches.

I was ready to say that I could have defended myself and Greyson hadn’t needed to do that, but I realized that with my magic short-circuited, I was just another human girl. And they were a bunch of drunk frat boys who’d probably done this at least ten times tonight.

*Fucking ASSHOLES!*

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked gently.

*I wish I could’ve blasted them, scared them*, I thought. *Maybe that way, they’d have thought twice before starting shit with a girl next time.*

“It’s fine,” I told Greyson. Because none of that was new.

He pulled me in for a hug, kissing my forehead. I hugged him back, for no other reason than that I loved it. I loved *him*.

“I swear I’m fine,” I repeated, looking up at him.

His eyes were still flashing silver. “What if they all just died?” he asked me in a mild tone of voice. “All the frat bros who get drunk and catcall women in the dark just to mess around? I think that would be fun.”

I let out an awkward laugh at the absurdity of his words. Only he looked completely serious. “Greyson?”

Locking his arm around my waist, he looked around and said, “Anyway, seriously, why did Xavier give us this address?”

“Let me call him—”

“Cali!”

Greyson and I turned around to see Xavier waving at us from a nearby doorway. I smiled and instantly rushed toward him. I had a million questions to ask about Adair. I wanted to tell him about my magic fizzling out, too. But before I had a chance, Gabriel popped up next to Xavier, right along with Mikah.

“Oh my god!” I shouted. “Hi!”

“Hey, Cali!” Gabriel grinned big, his smile brilliant. This man could change from class clown to bloodthirsty, unhinged, apex predator in a second flat—at least that was what I remembered about him. Either way, right now he was a teddy bear who leaned in to give me a big hug. “How’s it going?”

“Good, how are you?” I asked. “It’s good to see you!”

“Hello, Cali,” Mikah said with a brief smile. For him, that was a lot, and I appreciated it.

“Hi, Mikah,” I said. “How are you?”

“Yes, yes, very well—what exactly are we doing here?” Greyson asked.

The overly formal vampire turned to Xavier, who took a deep breath and started explaining to Greyson and me what was going on. As he spoke, my head felt like it was about to freaking explode.

*All of these seemingly unconnected things are tied together?*

This was a fucking mind meld.

“Wait,” I said, aghast. “So we can find Dani’s missing sister *and* track down Adair here? At the same time?” I asked. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

Xavier took my hand, squeezing. “I only just found out a short while ago, that—”

“That doesn’t explain why we’re standing on Bourbon Street,” Greyson said.

“This speakeasy is the go-to place for witches,” Xavier said, gesturing upward, at a large door at the end of a staircase. I hadn’t noticed that earlier at all.

*Gasp, it’s a secret door! Or at least secret to people who don’t pay attention!*

“What are we supposed to do there?” Greyson asked.

“We’re hoping to ask a few questions, find out the identity of the witches who kidnapped Tabitha, and where she is,” Gabriel replied.

“But the speakeasy has a no-werewolf policy,” Xavier said with a frown. “We got up there, and they shut the door in our faces.”

I glared at the door. “Um, excuse me? That’s discrimination!”

“Xavier has a resting bitch face, so I get it, but I am a fucking delight,” Gabriel said, looking offended. I noticed that Mikah was pressing his lips together.

Was he… hiding a smile?

*Focus, Cali!*

“Take me up there; I’ll talk to the bouncer,” I declared.

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “You think you could sway them?”

“No, she’s got a point,” Mikah said. “They’ll definitely let her in—pretty girls are like currency in entertainment venues down here.”

I blushed at Mikah’s comment as Gabriel told me, “You need to be relaxed about it then, Cali. You can’t seem too eager. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but these witches are not to be taken lightly. We need to get in there.”

“Forget asking, we can force our way in,” Xavier said. “Three werewolves, a vampire, and a Fae make a strong presence.”

I was about to agree when I realized something.

“We might not have to intimidate anyone, though,” I said. “Clementine said that magic is being suppressed, so the witches in there will be far less dangerous than usual.”

Xavier scowled. “But that means you won’t be able to do magic either, right?”

I winced. “It’s there but not as strong. Not sure if that will change. We can still get in, though, and see how it goes.”

“Perhaps it’s all connected more than we all think,” Gabriel pondered out loud.

“Elaborate,” Mikah said, peering at him.

“Just saying,” Gabriel said with a shrug. “Tabby’s magic power is the ability to negate other magic. The witches who are behind this must be using Tabby to do it.”

Mikah nodded solemnly. “That is a solid theory.”

“We have to get in there to find out,” Greyson said, his expression calm.

I took in Gabriel’s theory and ran with it as Xavier led us up the staircase. The pieces really did fit together, and I was impressed by Xavier’s friend. But if the witches were using Tabitha’s ability to essentially negate magic, and we ended up rescuing Tabitha, would the magic in New Orleans be restored?

*If that’s the case, then I’ll be getting my powers back!*

I winced a second later. Magic returning would mean that the strange hold that Seluna’s ashes had over me would return as well. It would be great for Dani and Tabitha, and ultimately, Artemis, but I would be back to square one—slowly breaking apart. And the vampire-witch could still come after Xavier.

*I need to keep hoping that all this will eventually help me find whoever stole the ashes.*

Tabitha would be found, the magic would be resorted, and then Artemis could give up some of her blood so Clementine would track down the ashes and the vampire-witch who’d stolen them.

First things first: find Tabitha.

I loved a clear goal.

“You ready?” Xavier whispered in my ear, squeezing my shoulder.

I nodded as Gabriel knocked on the door. A second later, a panel slid away, and a pair of mean, glaring eyes looked all of us over.

“I thought I made it clear,” the bouncer growled. “No werewolves.”

“This isn’t fair,” I declared, stepping forward. “I want to speak to the manager.”

The mean eyes rolled. “Oh, saints. Another whiny fairy. You’re a demanding, entitled bunch.”

“I’m not a fairy, I’m *Fae*. Now, the manager!” I clapped my hands. “Chop, chop!”

The panel slammed shut. I looked at my mates, and all my bravado deflated. “Do you think I oversold it?” I whispered.

“I mean, it wasn’t *relaxed*,” Xavier said.

Greyson was about to say something just as the door opened wide and a tall, pale man appeared. Definitely a vampire—you could just tell.

He straightened his tie and flashed me a smile. “Is there a problem here?”

“Well,” I said with a huff, “your bouncer won’t let my friends in, so—”

“Excuse me for a moment.” The vampire held up a hand to stop me from talking. His eyes traveled up and down my body, making me feel self-conscious.

My jacket was formfitting and red, a piece that I’d bought with Lola and couldn’t wear back in Oregon when it was so freaking cold, but I’d thought I could totally rock it in New Orleans. The vampire seemed to agree, but I wasn’t exactly happy about that. My mates weren’t either—I felt them both stiffening behind me.

The vampire smiled, then, taking a deep breath.

As if he was fucking *smelling* me.

*Oh my god. I’ve been spoiled at home with Lola and Jacqueline, and even Mikah. I forgot vampires LOVE my blood.*

“Are you with them?” he asked me.

I nodded, cringing internally. Before I could do anything else, the manager turned to the bouncer and said, “Let them in.”

I gaped. Could it really be *that* easy?

The bouncer glared, grumbled something under her breath about special treatment, but then stepped aside.

Gabriel grinned, offering me his arm. “Shall we?”

# Episode 3172

**Xavier**

The manager had checked Cali out a little too obviously, but at least he’d been smart enough not to push it further. The bouncer was pissed off. I grinned at her as I walked by, and she glared like she wanted to punch me. So I made sure to look extra smug.

On another note, I found it pretty weird that witches would hang out at a speakeasy run by vampires, but the world was a strange place. And New Orleans was even stranger. The moment I got into the place, I took in my surroundings. Everything was dimly lit, all atmospheric and shit, with groups of witches seated at the few tables and along the bar.

Nobody seemed to pay us much mind. That was good. Less trouble that way. I turned to Gabe, who was still holding Cali’s arm as if he were her guest of honor, and raised an eyebrow.

“We’re in. Now what?” I asked.

He let Cali go, exchanged a look with Mikah—*interesting*—and told me, “We need to find the names of the local witch coven elders.” His voice dropped as he added, “We should order a few drinks, strike up a few conversations, see what we can find out.”

I frowned. “That’s a little less direct than what you’d normally go for, isn’t it? I thought you liked the ‘slit throats now, ask questions later’ approach?”

Gabe snorted. “I’m just trying to be smart here, man.”

I squinted at him. “Right. But the point is, if Clementine is right, these witches aren’t going to be much of a threat.”

“And that’s going to make flirting with them even easier,” Gabe said with a smirk. He nudged me. “You should know how to do this.”

I paused. “You mean flirt?”

Gabe chuckled. “You always had a knack for it. Or at least women make it super easy for you.”

I looked at Cali, who was talking with Mikah and Greyson. I glanced at the vampire detective again before turning to Gabe.

“How’s Mikah going to feel about you flirting?” I asked.

Gabe’s smug little grin vanished. He paused. Cleared his throat. “He’s fine.”

I stared at my friend. “So you two *are* together?”

Gabe squinted at me. “How did you know?”

“You haven’t killed each other yet, for one,” I replied. “Also, you held his hand and offered him a tissue when he was sad in the car.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “You’re full of shit. I did *not* do any of that.”

“But you wanted to,” I shot back. “I’ve known you for a long-ass time—I know when you’re into someone and when it’s more. Though this might be a bit much.”

Gabe stared. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shrugging. “He’s a vampire who likes to seek justice or whatever. I bet he sits there and ponders the meaning of life like he gets paid for it. You’re a homicidal werewolf. How the fuck does that work?”

“We’re actually mates,” Gabe blurted. “Also, opposites attract.”

“Wait, *mates*?” Shit, I hadn’t expected that. I glanced over at Mikah, shocked. “Damn. That’s… Wow.”

“Hey, if you and a half-Fae like Cali can be mates, why not a vampire and a werewolf?” Gabe smirked. “Plus, you and Cali are definitely another ‘opposites attract’ kind of pairing.”

I snorted, nodding. “You’re right.” I squeezed Gabe’s shoulder. “I’m happy for you, man.”

I actually was. Gabe was a good guy and one of my closest friends. He deserved someone who knew exactly how good he was. But I also felt a twinge of envy that made me feel like shit—Gabe and Mikah weren’t cursed by *due destini*. As difficult as life might be for a vampire-werewolf mated couple, it would be *nothing* compared to what Cali and I went through.

I hadn’t thought about my brother vanishing in a while, but he we were again.

“Thanks, Xavier,” Gabe said, smiling a bit before shaking himself. He put his game face on. “Time to get to work now. Let’s get our asses moving!” He drifted toward the bar, a little too much swagger in his step.

I sure hoped he knew what he was doing.

“I’m going in, okay?” I told Cali a moment later. “I’ll try and find out all I can. Don’t take my talking to anybody in here too seriously.”

Cali chuckled, looking up at me through her lashes. “I get it—you have to flirt. I might just do the same.”

I bristled at her words. Where the fuck had *that* come from? Cali wasn’t supposed to flirt. Or know how to do it in this kind of situation. I needed to smother the urge to kiss her just to mark my territory to everyone in here. But that would defeat the purpose of this little expedition.

“Happy hunting,” I told her with a wink.

She smiled at me coyly, tucking her hair behind her ear as she walked toward a group of mixed company, sitting at a table nearby. I turned only to be faced with Greyson’s blank expression.

“Gabe said we should—”

“You don’t have to explain the obvious to me,” Greyson said curtly. “I don’t need tips on getting info.” My brother really thought that he was all that. I had no fucking idea what anyone saw in him, honestly. I was about to tell him just that, just to be a dick, but then he said, “Have you noticed anything about Cali?”

I paused. Then I did a full mercenary reading on my mate. She’d gotten all mad earlier and managed to get us in. Also, she looked great tonight, like she wanted to take care of her appearance, which was always a good thing.

“She seems more like her usual self,” I told Greyson.

“She’s okay now, but earlier, she passed out.”

I swallowed down a growl, grabbing my brother’s arm. “What the *fuck*? Why the hell didn’t anyone tell me? Did she mention what happened while she was passed out? Was it more Seluna bullshit?”

My stream of questions didn’t seem to rattle Greyson. He freed himself from my grip and shook his head. “Cali didn’t say much to me, but I highly suspect it was Seluna. The handprint burned her dress. How much more obvious could it be?”

My jaw clenched, worry surging its ugly head inside me. “Fuck,” I said, shaking my head as I prepared to march toward Cali—just to make sure she was okay. Greyson blocked my way, his expression calm.

“Cali’s on a mission right now,” he said, “and mentioning this is going to throw her off her game. She seems fine now—you noticed it too—so maybe talk to her later.”

“But—”

“Even the handprint has faded,” Greyson said. “I suspect it’s because of the suppressed magic.”

I took a deep breath, looked over at Cali. She was talking with a couple of girls around her age, and she seemed fine. I realized that, unfortunately, Greyson was right, and tearing her away right now would just blow our cover.

“Let’s just keep an eye on her,” I conceded.

Greyson nodded, and that was that.

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I spotted a couple of hot witches seated at the bar. Listening in, I nodded at one of the bartenders and ordered a beer. The dude got me the drink as I listened to the witches gripe about the local witch coven leaders. Was this a potential jackpot?

“… how could they just shut down our magic?” the one on the left said. “How are we supposed to earn a living now? And without our magic, we’re vulnerable!”

“Exactly! How can we protect ourselves?” the one on the right replied.

“Maybe I can help with that,” I said, finding my way in. I flashed a smile for good measure.

The one on the left raised an eyebrow. Her tone was flat. “You don’t say.”

“Of course—I couldn’t help but overhear—losing your powers must really suck,” I said, leaning closer. They both stared at me at me suspiciously when I added, “Have you complained to the coven leaders?”

The one on the right scoffed. “We tried.”

“This is so messed up,” I said, shaking my head as I looked over at the bartender. “Hey, bring the girls another one of whatever they’re having, on me.”

When I turned to look at the witches, both of them looked unimpressed. I wondered what the fuck was going on—usually all I needed for women to open up to me was to drop half a smile, but apparently all witches were hardasses. I had to get a name here, though—a name that could lead to Tabitha.

“So, from the coven,” I said. “Is there anyone in particular you spoke to?”

The one on the left snorted, while the one on the right rolled her eyes. “You’re cute, pretty boy. But you ask too many questions, and you’re not from around here, are you?”

With that, they both literally turned away from me. While drinking the drinks I’d just bought them, because of course they had the fucking audacity. I realized I’d made a mistake here, though—I’d overplayed my hand and hadn’t been subtle enough.

Fuck.

Shaking my head, I was looking around to locate my next target when I spotted Cali talking to a tall guy who was wearing a beanie. One whiff of the air, and I realized he had to be a warlock. A soon-to-be handless warlock, because the son of a bitch had his hand on Cali’s shoulder.

My blood started boiling.

Without another thought in my head, I made a beeline for them. But then Cali broke away from the guy. “I have to go to check in with my friend—I’ll see you later, okay?”

She threw in a squeeze of the guy’s arm, and he looked *crestfallen* at her departure.

This couldn’t stand.

“Xavier,” she said in a low voice, grabbing my hand to pull me aside. “What were you about to do just now?”

She didn’t seem pleased, so I took it down a notch. “That guy was looking a little too chummy.”

Cali scoffed. “We are strategically flirting to get info, remember? And it’s actually working.”

I frowned in confusion. “What?”

Cali grinned excitedly. “I got some info about the local witch coven, Xavier. I got the name of a witch elder!”

# Episode 3173

“I actually can’t believe how easy flirting is,” I told Xavier, still feeling puffed up and strangely confident. “Smile a little, bat my eyes, and pretend I’m really interested in whatever the warlock had to say—that’s all!” I laughed. “How are men so *easy*?”

Xavier didn’t seem happy at all. But he still said, “I’m not surprised you were able to seduce him so easily.”

I blushed, scoffing. “I didn’t *seduce* anyone, I just flirted. Strategically. Because I know how to flirt and get what I want, apparently. It’s weird!”

Xavier frowned, and I waved him off.

“Anyway, Paolo—”

“Paolo,” Xavier repeated, looking unimpressed.

“Yes, *Paolo* the warlock said that he was here drinking because he got into an argument with his aunt, who happens to be good friends with one of the coven elders.”

“And her name is?” Xavier asked, his tone impatient. He wasn’t as interested in my brilliant sleuthing coup as he was in getting the name. I wished he’d support my strategically-flirting-spy endeavors more enthusiastically, but I refrained from telling him that at the moment.

“Her name is Odette Stephans,” I told Xavier, and he seemed thoughtful.

“I wonder if Gabe or Mikah have heard of her.” He looked around, and I followed his gaze. Gabriel was seated at a table with a couple of warlocks—or at least I assumed that was what they were, because they didn’t seem like vampires.

“I’ll go check in with him,” Xavier said. After squeezing my arm reassuringly, he headed over to the table. I watched as he pulled Gabriel away, whispering something in his ear. Gabriel took it in and eyed me with a smile. He seemed satisfied, and my confidence soared.

*Hah! I’m doing a great job!*

I didn’t have my magic at full strength, but I could still help, just by paying attention and being polite. Which was actually my biggest strength. Sometimes being a little Minnesota nice paid off.

*Do guys think being polite is flirting?*

Very happy with my newfound abilities, I looked around for Greyson so I could let him know about the name. I bet he wouldn’t be as disgruntled as Xavier to hear my success story. He was more mature than that.

But *I* apparently wasn’t, because when I spotted Greyson at the corner of the bar, leaning toward an attractive older woman who laughed at something he said, I felt the pit of my stomach stir with a little green monster that had to be jealousy.

*Cali, you’re being absurd… There’s no reason to be jealous.*

There wasn’t—I knew that logically. But watching Greyson talk to this sophisticated, well-dressed woman so easily and effortlessly had me feeling some type of way. Even though I knew that at the end of the day, he’d be coming back to me, not the witch at the bar. Even if she looked very experienced in all realms of life.

*You were just with Greyson, Cali*, I reminded myself, trying to stop the madness. *Barely an hour ago! And he seemed very, VERY happy about it!*

The back of my neck heated up at the memory, my heart doing a little flip.

“Gabe is happy you got the name.” My other mate’s voice made me snap out of my horny daydream. I turned to face Xavier in all his tall, dark, and handsome glory, and that decidedly did NOT help me to feel less flustered.

*I’m out of control here, aren’t I?*

Meanwhile, Xavier continued. “He still wants to snoop around, though. The more names and info we can collect, the better.”

“Right, sure,” I said, nodding to clear my head.

“I think I’m going to try to hit up the bartender,” Xavier said, looking over at the bar. “They always seem to know everything.”

As Xavier sauntered over like some sort of male model, I stared at the bartender in question. She was hardly unattractive. Why was everybody hot in here?

“Hello there!” A well-manicured hand fell on my forearm, and I turned to face a woman with dazzling green eyes. God, *more* hot people? “I require your help, darling. Come along now!”

She dragged me over to a table where three other hot women were seated. It was like *Love Island* over here. It was obvious by the number of glasses on the table that they’d been drinking.

“We noticed you arriving earlier with a brood of gorgeous men,” the woman said with a huge grin. “This prompted a debate among us!”

I blinked. “A debate?”

“Why yes! My friends and I have found our two finalists, and we are now split over who the most attractive man is in here.” She gestured toward Greyson. “Is it the tall guy at the end of the bar with the blond hair and sexy, stormy eyes?” She gestured at Xavier. “Or is it that guy, flirting with the bartender—the one with dark hair and blue eyes so deep you want to dive in?”

The women started giggling, and I just stood there, sputtering like a dork. First of all, how the hell had they seen *both* my mates’ eyes in this dark scenery? What kind of literal witchcraft was that? Second, they were asking ME to make THIS choice?

*The universe needs to stop playing sick jokes on me.*

This was, literally, the decision that was ruling my life: not only did I find each of my mates incredibly hot and sexy, but if I favored one right now, that would be like making a choice. And I couldn’t do that, obviously.

“They’re both equally attractive,” I told the women after I’d gathered my wits. Then immediately thought to add, “But I doubt either is the type you’d want.”

The green-eyed woman looked intrigued. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The entire table had stopped laughing and talking. All eyes were on me, and I realized I’d probably messed up.

Recovering as quickly as I could, I stammered, “Uh, well, the blond guy has a bad rep—he’s a certified heartbreaker, extremely dangerous.”

“That doesn’t sound half bad to me,” one of them said.

“Well, it should,” I said quickly. “And as for the dark-haired guy, he’s equally as bad. And he’s involved with someone. They both are.”

Everybody stared at me all over again. And then they burst out laughing.

“That’s too bad. But regardless,” the green-eyed woman said, “they’re both sexy as hell.” She waved a hand at me. “Come now, take a seat with us.”

Relieved, I took a seat and tried to ignore the way the women kept talking about my mates. It looked like they’d find shiny new toys to play with, and I felt both proud and annoyed by all the implications. Nevertheless, I figured I might be able to glean some useful info from them if I played along.

“Thanks for letting me sit with you. I’m actually new in town,” I said, steering the conversation. “I was looking to meet some other witches.”

Another one of the women, one with a gorgeous ruby pendant around her neck, said, “You’ve come to the right place. Though your timing is actually very bad.”

“Why?” I asked, feigning innocence.

“Ever since the psychic storm, everyone’s magic has been fucked up,” said the green-eyed woman.

Another woman, a redhead, said, “The balance is totally messed up!”

That was exactly what Vander had told me, I realized. The magical storm had been induced by an imbalance caused by the missing ashes. And now, it had somehow happened again, only through Dani’s sister who negated magic, just as Gabriel had theorized.

*Everything is connected…*

“What do you mean, everything is connected?” someone asked, and I looked around. Everybody was eyeing me all over again, and I realized that I’d said that out loud.

*Shit!*

I cleared my throat, scrambled to say, “I mean—it’s probably connected to how I’ve been having trouble with my magic. Has that happened to anyone else here?”

A unison of groans started up.

“The coven put a moratorium on magic until the balance is restored,” the redhead said. “It’s preposterous!”

“That sucks,” I said, nodding in agreement and glancing over at the bar, where both Xavier and Greyson were standing. Until the witches had their magic back, I was mated to two of the most powerful supernaturals in town.

*That’s very, very fortunate, isn’t it?*

Logically speaking, if the witches had taken Tabitha to squash magic, they themselves would be as powerless as the rest. Right? At least in theory. All we had to do was find them. And I was certain that that would start with finding Odette Stephans.

*I need to let Xavier know that these witches aren’t happy about the coven’s moratorium. That’s useful to know, isn’t it?* I thought, ready to excuse myself. But I had barely opened my mouth when suddenly, I heard yelling.

“Oh no you won’t!” someone screamed, and I whipped around—

Just as the bouncer punched Gabriel in the face.

# Episode 3174

**Artemis**

The bayou boat was traveling over swampy, alligator-infested water. Rishika looked around, eyes watchful, while Nikkos chatted with the boat’s captain—a tough-looking woman who reminded me of Big Mac. Albeit a version of Big Mac who constantly spat tobacco juice out of one side of her mouth.

My eyes flickered back to Rishika. I sat closer to her, and the shift in weight on the bench had her turning to me. My voice was loud, to overcome the roar of the engine and fan. “I meant what I said, you know.”

She raised an eyebrow. Her tone was equally loud as she said, “You can talk normally.” She pointed at her ears. “Werewolf.”

“Oh. Right.” I shook my head and nodded right after, which probably looked odd. I hoped I still seemed determined and steady, though. Those were the only qualities that I allowed myself, most of the time.

“You don’t have to do this,” I told Rishika. “Nikkos said our next stop will be dangerous, and you’ve already done so much to help me.”

Rishika’s eyes flashed golden under the moonlight. “Don’t even think about it!”

She was, actually, speaking very loudly, because I needed that to hear her over the noise. But I realized that there was a big chance that she would’ve yelled at me anyway. She looked aggravated. A very sexy look on her, but also a little worrisome.

“What are you—”

“You think I’d leave you to take this on all on your own?” she asked, aghast. “I’ve faced every kind of terror the world can whip up, and I’m not afraid of facing a few more.”

I believed her when she said she wasn’t afraid. She *never* seemed afraid, not even when Letifer had invaded. But that didn’t mean that I wasn’t afraid for her. I couldn’t help it.

Ignoring the way those thoughts made me ache, I said, “If anything happens to you and I’m the reason, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Rishika took my hand and gripped it tightly. “I love you, Artemis. And when I love someone, I give them everything.”

“That’s not what—”

Rishika pulled me closer. “If you love me back, you’ll understand what I mean.”

I paused, processing her words. I knew that she was right—when you loved someone, you’d lay down your life for them.

“I get it,” I said. My voice was low now, cracking a little, but I knew that she could hear me. I reached up to touch her cheek, and she leaned into it. “I’d risk anything for you in a heartbeat.”

She took both my hands in hers. “I’m glad to be here with you. Never forget that.”

“I…”

I was still scared for her. Never for myself, but for her. I’d burn the world down if she got hurt. But at the same time, I focused on another glaring truth that co-existed with my fear.

“I’m actually feeling a lot better, having you by my side,” I admitted.

Rishika smiled. She looked gorgeous, the pale lights bathing the angles of her sharp features. And while I’d had my fair share of facing the world’s worst, I knew that with her here, we could face anything together.

I leaned closer, glancing at her full mouth, always so tempted to kiss her, but then the captain yelled something that caught Rishika’s attention. I turned to see that Nikkos and the captain were no longer talking. The captain slowed the boat and pointed off to the side.

“Gators,” she said.

I could see their shiny eyes reflecting in the moonlight, just above the surface.

“They seem vicious,” Rishika said. She said it matter-of-factly, not like she was intimidated.

They did. They looked like they could kill with one bite.

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A few moments later, we came to a wide inlet. Rishika was still looking around, eyeing every inch of the scenery, scanning it for threats like a general. Finally, the captain steered the craft toward a dock. It lead to a rustic-looking building that looked like it had seen better days… probably a hundred years earlier.

“That looks—”

“Shady,” Rishika completed my sentence. “That looks very shady.”

“It’s beautiful, too,” I said. “In its own way.”

Rishika snorted but didn’t disagree.

There were other boats docked alongside us, and string lights trailed from the dock to the building, where what the captain called zydeco music wafted in with the breeze.

This almost would’ve been romantic, if Rishika and I were to stumble on here in any other context. The bigger picture right now, though, was simple. The warning that Nikkos had given us before we’d agreed to come here had been loud and clear.

*If they think you’re any kind of a threat, they’ll feed you to the gators. That’s after they chop you up into bite-size pieces while you’re still alive.*

I set my jaw at the thought. I’d love to see them try.

“Let’s go,” Rishika said, taking my hand and getting ready to climb out. But then I noticed that Nikkos was still seated. His legs were crossed at the ankles as well, arms folded. He looked *very* comfortable, as if he didn’t expect to be going anywhere anytime soon.

“Aren’t you coming?” I asked.

“I can’t go inside,” he said in an even voice. “I’ll wait for you here.”

Rishika glared at him. Stepping closer, she lowered her face to his and hissed, “Sounds like either you’re too scared, or there’s something you’re not telling us.”

Nikkos didn’t flinch. “It’s a combination of the two. Though instead of ‘scared,’ I’d prefer to be considered cautious.”

I snorted. “He’s scared.”

He frowned up at me. “Well, some of the Fae inside would recognize me. Fae who are working with the Fae court. And if they did, they’d kill me, and it could put Adair in further danger. So if you really want to find him, you need to go in there without me. How’s that for an explanation?”

I rolled my eyes while Rishika shook her head. “Let’s get this over with,” she muttered.

“Good. Go in there and ask for Catey,” Nikkos said.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “And if we don’t?”

“You’re back to square one again,” Nikkos said firmly. “According to my sources, Catey was in contact with Adair just under a week ago.”

As Rishika asked Nikkos a few follow-up questions, I took in his words and grounded myself in the knowledge that this wasn’t a wild goose chase. My uncle had been in New Orleans only a few days ago. He was real. This could finally be real, and not just a fantasy of mine.

This could actually *work*.

My heart pounded with adrenaline as Rishika and I climbed out of the boat, then walked up the dock toward the building. If we did this right, I would be a step closer to finding my uncle and learning the truth about my Fae family. The truth about Kadmos. People said that figuring out your past was something that could bring out regret, but I wasn’t about to think any of that right now.

I had a quest to complete.

The closer Rishika and I got to the building, the louder the music got. Rishika didn’t hold my hand, but she walked so close to me that our shoulders brushed, and somehow that was more than enough.

“What is this place?” she asked quietly when we finally started to hear people laughing, shouting.

It was unnerving.

“I have no idea,” I replied. “Nikkos was a little vague.”

Rishika gritted her teeth, glancing over her shoulder at the dock. “That sounds like him.”

I huffed. “All he said is that the place we’re looking for is off the map, under the radar—what does that even mean?”

Rishika stopped walking and faced me. “Let’s just agree for now that it’s going to be dangerous, but also that we’ve dealt with worse and always come out on top.”

I nodded determinedly. “That we have.”

We walked a few steps further, and Rishika stopped just shy of the door.

“You okay?” she asked, like this was one last check-in. She was so incredible, I wanted to kiss her, but I wasn’t sure who was looking. We needed to be focused here, aware of our surroundings, so I decided against it.

“I’m ready,” I told her, nodding. “No matter what Nikkos said, no matter how dangerous it might be in there, we’re together. We’re doing this.”

Rishika smiled, her shoulders straightening. “Let them try to turn us into gator chow.”

She swung the door open, and we stepped inside.

The conversation came to a grinding halt, the music petered out, and every eye in the place was on us. A dart flew through the air and struck the wall with a thud.

The tension was so palpable, I felt goosebumps across the back of my neck.

A group of people were gathered around a table, in the middle of some kind of card game.

I could tell that they were Fae right away.

One of them, an imposing woman with cold eyes, stood up, pulled out a couple of chairs, and eyed Rishika and me. “Are you here to stand at the door and stare, or are you here to play?”

# Episode 3175

I was back on the streets, along with my two mates and the odd couple of Mikah and Gabriel. I had no idea what was going on with these two, but there were *looks* from Mikah, and huffing from Gabriel. A lot of huffing.

“What did you say to the bouncer that annoyed her enough to punch you?” I asked Gabriel.

“I thought I was paying her a compliment,” Gabe explained. “I was a perfect gentleman, and she—”

“I think your definition of a compliment is different to other people’s,” Mikah interrupted coldly. “What you told her was probably an insult.”

Gabriel glared. “It wasn’t.”

Mikah glared back. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“It doesn’t matter what Gabe did to get us kicked out,” Xavier said, interrupting both of them before it became a full argument. “We got what we needed—or Cali did. She has a name, and we learned about the coven.”

Mikah’s attention was on me instantly. “What name?”

“Odette Stephans. Does that mean anything to you?” I asked. “She’s supposed to be one of the coven elders.”

Mikah’s eyes narrowed. “I know I’ve heard her name before. If she really is an elder, her name is bound to have popped up during one of my past investigations.”

As Xavier, Mikah, and Gabriel—the latter two seeming to have automatically made up—started discussing Mikah’s past investigative work, Greyson gently took me by the elbow and pulled me off to the side.

“You kicked ass back there, love,” Greyson said, eyes shining. “You got us into the joint, then found the name.”

I felt at least three inches taller at his praise. “Thank you.”

“How are you feeling in general?” he asked quietly.

I knew he was concerned because of what had happened in the park.

“I’m feeling good, actually,” I said. “Surprisingly, I guess. But not really, because magic is still suppressed, and Seluna…”

I stopped talking. Greyson and I locked eyes. I didn’t want to think of the pain the handprint would cause me when the magic in New Orleans came back to life.

I took a step closer, stroked a hand down Greyson’s solid chest, and said again, “I’m feeling good. Let’s do this.”

He gave me a smile so gorgeous that I could only smile back.

“We need to track this Odette person down…” Xavier was saying loudly in the background, and Greyson and I turned to him. He had his war face on, and there was something about the aggression that made my heart pound. “Do you know where we might find her?” Xavier continued, looking between Gabriel and Mikah.

“I recently found out that the coven meets in a greenhouse,” the vampire said. “Now that we have a name, scouting the place could be our best bet.”

“That’s where we should start, then,” Xavier said.

“It could be where they’re holding Tabitha,” Gabriel said. He stared forward, his gaze intense enough to make my stomach twist. “We can walk it. It isn’t far from here.”

The boys were quiet as we walked. Xavier tried to hold my hand, but I didn’t let him because then Greyson would want to hold my hand too, because that was how shit like that worked. To avoid the awkwardness, I just moved to the front, between Gabriel and Mikah

“So,” I said, looking between them, “what are we going to do? Just knock on the door and ask where Tabby’s at?”

Greyson snorted from behind me. “That wouldn’t go over so well.”

“We should stake it out,” Gabriel said. “See who comes and goes.”

Mikah nodded. “Perhaps this Odette will appear.”

I was in newfound territory here, therefore I had a few questions. “I’ve never been on a real stakeout. Is it exciting? Boring?”

Mikah said, “Exciting,” while Gabriel said, “Boring.”

I arched my eyebrows, looking between them.

“It’s mostly boring, because we usually just stare at shit,” Gabriel replied with a smirk while Mikah rolled his eyes. “But most of the time it works.”

“What if nobody’s there?” I asked.

“More knowledge for us to gather,” Mikah told me.

I frowned. That did sound boring.

*And we don’t even have any snacks*.

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Gabriel had been leading the way, and finally he brought us to a stop. He pointed right across the street. “Right over there.”

It was a greenhouse. Literally. From here I could see the foliage peeking through the windows.

It wasn’t a magical haunted greenhouse with flesh-eating flowers, or a haunted mansion covered in green moss—now THAT would’ve been the kind of place where witches conspired to do witchy things. At least, that was what I’d imagined. Instead, this looked like any other greenhouse. Anticlimactic*.*

As we moved closer, I started to get a bit worried, though. Had we made a mistake?

“That place looks abandoned,” I whispered.

“It’s probably not,” Gabriel replied. “I can smell the witches.”

“But what if they’re not in there right now?” I asked.

“They must be,” Gabriel insisted.

“Can you smell Tabitha?” I asked.

Gabriel didn’t speak, which wasn’t encouraging at all.

I turned to Xavier and Greyson, who had matching severe expressions. That rarely happened, and when it did, it was *bad*. The thought that something would go wrong, that I’d let Dani down, invaded my head.

If we didn’t find Tabitha in there, where could she be? I’d hoped this would be a breakthrough moment, that Odette or some other coven member would be here and we’d gently—forcibly—make them lead us to Dani’s sister.

*Cali, stop freaking out*, I told myself sternly. *You knew this wouldn’t be easy. And besides, we haven’t been here that long.*

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that we could simply keep looking, eventually find Tabitha, restore the magic, and get Clementine to help locate the ashes. And then I’d be free.

“This way,” Mikah whispered, steering us to a row of bushes. He did that vampire thing of his and melted into the shadows for a moment, which was jarring, so I was relieved when I spotted him again in front of me.

“Now what?” Xavier asked.

“Now,” Mikah said with authority, “we wait and see.”

“I have a better idea,” Gabriel said pointedly. “Why don’t we walk up and check it out?”

Even through the dim light of the street lamps, I could see Mikah glaring at Gabriel. Were they still mad at each other?

“Don’t be stupid,” Xavier told Gabriel before Mikah could say anything. “We can’t just charge in.”

“If Xavier is against charging in, you know shit’s about to hit the fan,” Greyson commented in my ear. I pressed my lips together to suppress an awkward snort.

“Consider this: until we get Tabby back, we have more power than these witches,” Gabriel said, tapping his temple in an “I’m smart” gesture. “They got no magic right now! What are they going to do, throw sticks at us?”

“How about we *don’t* do anything adversarial?” Greyson said.

Mikah stared at Greyson. “Continue.”

“We’re going to need some kind of cooperation from these witches,” Greyson said. “We want them to release Tabitha to us, so starting a fight wouldn’t look good. Not to mention, we don’t want to do anything to put Tabitha in harm’s way.”

I paused. I hadn’t thought of that.

*Oh my god, who knows what the witches might have already done to Dani’s sister? And what will happen if we fail? What would they do to her? How long do the witches plan on keeping her? And what will they do to Tabitha once they’re done using her to suppress magic? Is she even okay right now, or is she drained and sick? Shit shit shit.*

I was spiraling. Slightly.

“What are you talking about?” Gabriel scoffed at Greyson. “These New Orleans witches are nuts! Cooperation is *not* in their lexicon!”

“He’s right about that,” Xavier agreed. “When are witches cooperative, ever?”

Xavier’s comment helped me refocus, and for that I was glad.

“Don’t say that,” I told Xavier. “Big Mac has helped a lot, so we shouldn’t assume all witches are bad. And Marta brought Lilac back from the dead, so—”

“Excuse me, Cali?” Gabriel said, sticking his head between my face and Xavier’s. “Yes, hi, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, babe—but we might have to consider this a hostage situation.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “I mean, I know they took Tabitha, but what are you thinking?”

Gabriel grinned. He looked eager, all right. “We go in guns blazing and extract the target.”

Xavier considered Gabriel. “I’ve changed my mind. If the witches don’t have magic, you just might be right.”

I gasped. “Oh my god, what have you been doing since the last time I saw you, Gabriel? Binging action movies?”

Gabriel shrugged, still smirking. “I just want us to consider all angles, and if all angles include a mass eradication, then—”

“We’re not doing that,” Mikah declared with a scowl.

“Definitely not,” Greyson said in the same determined tone. “We’ll just sit and watch.”

Both Xavier and Gabriel huffed in a way that was actually *identical*. Spooky.

On another note, if I’d known that the night was going to turn into a stakeout, I would’ve worn more comfortable shoes than these booties. As everybody else kept arguing, I fought to find a good position to watch the dark building and wondered, yet again, if anyone was even in there.

Meanwhile, in the background:

“This is fucking ridiculous,” Xavier said, while Gabriel repeated, “Ridiculous! And boring!”

“You’re not wrong,” Xavier agreed.

“We’ve been here not even five minutes,” Greyson said flatly. “Stop acting so fucking impatient.”

Gabriel gasped, turning to Xavier. “Did this motherfucker just call me impatient?”

“Maybe he wouldn’t have if you weren’t acting like it!” Mikah declared.

As I was about to tell them to stop fighting, a flicker of light appeared in the greenhouse.

“Shit, look!” I whispered, gathering everyone’s attention before I pointed at the building. “Someone’s moving in there!”

# Episode 3176

**Greyson**

“Everyone quiet the hell down!” I said in a, hopefully, barely audible hiss. I was done debating bullshit with these assholes—Cali was tugging on my sleeve, pointing at the greenhouse.

She was right. Someone was in there, moving around with a candle.

Did witches not believe in electricity, then? Was that why the building was so dark? Nah, Big Mac loved to keep all the lights on all the time. Even Xavier arched an eyebrow at the electric bill, and he rarely noticed anything when it came to spending cash. For a man who had a truckload of money (due to his super shady and former mercenary ways), he didn’t tend to get fixated on it.

It was one of Xavier’s less annoying qualities.

“We should get closer,” Mikah whispered. “Get a better look.”

I was already moving, Cali right by my side, her warmth as familiar as ever. I kept to the shadows, away from the streetlight, taking Cali’s hand to make sure she knew that I was right here for her. I was aware of how much all this meant to her, and I had to do all I could to get what we came for.

When Xavier took Cali’s other hand, I had no issue with it. I recognized that Cali needed all the support and love she could get right now, and I wanted her to have it. Even if it came from my brother. This was as serious as things could get—Cali had realized that the only reason why her Seluna handprint didn’t hurt was the suppressed magic in the area. She knew now that if we did rescue Tabitha, the witches wouldn’t be the only ones to regain their power.

So would Seluna’s magic, and her hold on my mate.

The thought made white-hot rage burn inside me. I hated thinking like this—I fucking despised expecting the worst—but I’d never shied away from the truth. No matter how painful. As soon as we freed Tabitha, we would have to push Clementine to do her spell.

I couldn’t let Cali go through another episode like when she’d passed out in the park. I hadn’t shown it—I hadn’t wanted to upset her further—but in that moment I’d felt powerless, useless, so worthless in my inability to protect her that I’d needed to shove down the lingering effects of the feeling afterward.

I knew she hadn’t told me everything about the way she’d felt. Was she too afraid to admit what happened? To speak about Seluna? Cali had talked about the demon so many times that by now, she had to be exhausted. And the pain—she’d been in so much fucking pain, right before my eyes.

If I could take her pain, I would. Every day, in and out.

“Over there,” Xavier mouthed as we approached the yard. At least he knew about the episode too, now. We could both keep an eye on Cali, should something like that happen again. Xavier was always ready to jump between Cali and danger, anyway.

It was another of his less annoying qualities.

*Where did the light go?* I mind linked to Cali and Xavier, looking around to search the windows.

Cali gasped and pointed toward the greenhouse.

Sure enough, a light had moved between the plants inside the greenhouse. The warm glow of a flickering candle appeared, passing through the gigantic space. I squinted, but it was too dark to make out who was carrying it—could it be this witch, Odette?

Odette was an obstacle, plain and simple. Knowing the domino effect that would commence once we had Tabitha with us, and how it could bring us closer to the ashes, made me contemplate Gabriel’s earlier plan. I could just shift and burst through the tall windows, grab the witch who was holding that flickering candle, and force her to tell me everything she knew.

My wolf rejoiced at the idea, growling on the inside.

There was so much at stake, though, so I had to rein it in. At least for now.

*I’m going to check that out*, I mind linked to Cali and Xavier, gesturing at the window just ahead. I glanced at my brother, made sure he was still holding Cali’s hand to steady her in case any fucked-up shit happened, and then slipped over to the window.

I carefully peered inside—I couldn’t see anything initially, but I was a werewolf, so that would change fast. I blinked again, trying to see, and then my eyes finally adjusted to the darkness. The place was full of empty planters, dirt, and, of course, plants. Part of it was almost like a shed with different tools. Different archways led to more parts of the greenhouse—this place was huge.

The flickering light appeared again.

Someone was coming inside—the shape of a woman, holding the candle. She was wearing a long dress, her hair trailing down her back. I watched, holding my breath, as she made her way to the center of the room amongst all the potted plants. She settled the candle on the ground, then lifted a beige rug that looked like it had seen better days.

*What’s going on?* Cali’s mind link almost made me jump out of my fucking skin. I looked down, and there she was—she’d probably slipped through my brother’s fingers like a curious kitten. I just had to make sure that curiosity didn’t harm a hair on the cat’s head. She stood on her tiptoes, trying to peer into the greenhouse.

*It’s a witch*, I mind linked back. *She’s opening a trap door in the floor.*

Cali looked up at me with a pleading expression. *I wish I could see*, she said.

I acted without thinking, taking her in my arms and holding her up to look through the window. My mate gasped when her gaze fell on the witch.

*What’s down there, do you think?* Cali mind linked.

I didn’t have an answer to that. The witch stepped into the trapdoor opening, grabbed the candle, and pulled the door shut behind her. I placed Cali back on her feet, grabbed her hand, and led her back to the others. I let Cali describe what had happened, her eyes wide as she told the other three what we’d seen.

“Right,” Gabriel said wryly. “From what I know, having a trapdoor in your floor means that you’re a shady motherfucker who’s hiding something. Or perhaps some*one*—a someone called Tabitha, for example.” He looked at Mikah sharply. “I want to go in.”

Mikah nodded in agreement. He’d been so vehement about waiting and watching earlier, agreeing with my call, that I was surprised. But at this point, with all the information we’d gathered, my opinion was rapidly changing as well. I glanced at a nodding Xavier—of course he would want to go in—then set my gaze on Cali.

“We have to get Tabitha,” she told me, her face serious. Obviously expecting me to start a PowerPoint presentation about her being in danger, she quickly added, “I don’t have much of my magic, but I’m with three werewolves and a vampire. Plus, if *I* don’t have magic, neither do the witches. This shouldn’t be too difficult.”

The determination in her eyes made me realize that she’d go in with or without me.

“Fair enough,” I said.

Gabriel’s face was stoic as he turned to the greenhouse. “Let’s do this.”

And then he sprinted across the yard.

“For the love of *god*,” I heard Mikah grumble.

A second later, he was by Gabriel’s side, grabbing his arm before he could punch through the window. Vampires were really fucking fast, huh?

“… or we could just walk in?” Mikah was whispering to Gabriel as Xavier, Cali, and I caught up. “Perhaps we should try the door first?” Mikah continued patiently, and Gabriel huffed.

“Where’s the fun in that?” he hissed.

Xavier smirked, covering his mouth to suppress a chuckle. “You’re always trying to break shit, man.”

“Maybe I’m just going for the most effective method that’s never let me down.”

We all crept to the side door, and Mikah reached for it.

It was locked. Classic.

“See?” Gabriel said smugly. “Now can I break it?”

“That window’s open,” Cali muttered, pointing right next to the door.

In the blink of an eye, Cali stuck her head in, and then all I could see was her round ass wriggling through the opening. Xavier and I hustled up to her, but she was already over halfway in. I watched her reach the floor inside, crouching with no issues.

What’s that saying? When a door closes…

Soon after, all of us were gathered inside.

The room fucking reeked of witches and magic and soil.

*Where is it?* Xavier mind linked.

I pointed to the trapdoor, and my brother carefully walked over to it. He reached for the handle, and—

*BAM!*

There was a thundering blast of magic, and Xavier flew back, crashing to the ground in a heap.

# Episode 3177

“Xavier!” I gasped, running over to him.

He sat up slowly with a groan, looking dazed.

“Are you okay?” I asked, dragging my palms over his face, his chest.

He grunted a yes while Greyson stood between us and the door, very obviously ready to cut a bitch. In the absolute silence of the dark dusty house, the door creaked. I almost jumped back, realizing it was slightly ajar.

*This is so fucking creepy.*

Gathering my wits, I placed myself in front of Xavier and raised my hands, ready to fight right next to Greyson. But nothing happened. The treacherous door stood there, looking all innocent.

“What do we do now?” Greyson asked me.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Xavier trying to stand with a bit of effort, and Mikah reaching over to help him. “Now, we go see who the hell can still use magic in a city that is free of magic,” Xavier growled.

My heart was pounding. Greyson stared at his brother. “Do you really think you’re up for this?”

Xavier nodded. “We can’t miss this opportunity, and we’ve already come this far.”

Xavier was a powerful Alpha, but he was very pale right now.

“Xavier, you don’t look well,” I said shakily. “And you’re right—who the hell can use magic when no one else in this city can? The facts have changed, and this is more dangerous than we expected, so—”

“I’m fine,” Xavier said sharply, grabbing my hand. Staring deep into my eyes, he said, “We need to do this, Cali. It’s the key to everything.”

I knew he was right.

Without a word, Greyson walked up to the door and slowly reached out a hand to tap on it. He pulled back the way that someone would when checking an electric fence.

“Xavier seems to have used up whatever magic was in play,” he said, looking over at Mikah and Gabriel.

“Well then, let’s go,” Gabriel said and marched forward, pushing the door open the rest of the way.

I gripped Xavier’s arm and followed as we all climbed down a flight of stairs. I needed to make sure he was okay. The quiet in this place was unnerving. The boisterous sounds of New Orleans were long gone. It was as if we’d stepped into a whole other universe.

My pulse thundered hard enough that I felt it in my ears. There was a long hallway with a bunch of doors down the bottom, but it seemed like everyone was on the same page about not opening any more doors.

*What if there’s one that’s already open, though?*

I pointed to the end of the hallway, at a door that was ajar, with yellow light pouring through. Gabriel and Greyson were leading the way, ready to pounce. Xavier was standing at his full height now, seemingly healed, and he gripped my hand, his stance protective. I felt the exact same way about him.

The image of him lying on the floor earlier, hurting, was burned into my brain.

When we made it to the door, Gabriel gave Greyson a look. A silent communication passed between them. Greyson stepped in first, with all of us following—

*SHIT!*

I flinched when I saw a bunch of witches sitting in a semi-circle, as if they were waiting for us. Their silent, grim expressions almost made me swallow my tongue—their eerie gazes were pinned to us as if we were nothing but specimens to be examined.

Which one of them was Odette?

And then Greyson spoke. “We’re here for our friend.”

The room’s otherworldly yellow glow bathed the women’s features. They seemed majestic, proud in a way that was terrifying. I didn’t want to be scared, though. We *were* here for our friend, after all.

And then the witch in the middle stood up.

She had to have been in her late fifties, tall and willowy. Her flowy dark dress reached the floor, and she was elegant and poised, with pale skin, long, wavy, golden hair, and catlike light-colored eyes. She stared at Greyson, her gaze icy. “You are intruders in our territory. Why should we give anything to you?”

*Did she… Did she just speak about Tabitha like she’s an* object *to be traded?*

My fear was overwhelmed by absolute fucking fury—which was the norm for me. I gritted my teeth, ready to step forward and literally start a fight, but Xavier grabbed my arm to hold me back.

*Wait*,he mind linked sternly while Mikah stepped forward, right next to Greyson.

“We aren’t here to interfere in the workings of the New Orleans witches,” he said. “We respect your authority. But you took our friend against her will. We hope you understand that we are worried about her.”

The head witch narrowed her eyes. “If you respect our authority, then *you* will understand that anything that falls under the purview of magic is under our authority as well. As your friend is magical, that includes her.”

The witch’s words made my fury roar. They reminded me so much of Seluna—the entitlement, and the fact that these witches had entrapped someone to exploit for their own purposes.

*How fucking DARE THEY?*

“Tabitha is not a thing for you to use,” I declared, my voice loud and enraged as I shoved Xavier’s hand away and pushed forward. “She’s a person, and she’s probably terrified right now.”

The head witch’s sharp gaze whipped to me.

My mates went rigid behind me, but I didn’t give a damn. This fancy scary witch wanted to glare at me? Fine, I’d glare right back. Her gaze swept up and down my body, and her lips twitched into an arrogant smile that made me want to blast her to hell.

“How like a Fae, to think she has the right to tell us what is right or wrong.” She chuckled. “You lot will drown in your self-righteousness.”

I clenched my fists tightly and took a deep breath. I was *this* close to losing my shit, so—

“You might be the authority here,” Xavier said, stepping right next to me, “but we have powerful friends. If you keep our friend, then we will have no choice but to retaliate.”

My fury was grounded for a moment there. Xavier was talking about the Redwood pack, the witches of the Redwood pack, and that kind of power—

Didn’t seem to matter.

Because the witch threw back her head and laughed. “You think you’ll be able to use magic just by stepping out of our territory?” She pointed at me. “You were all marked by being here when we cast our spell. Go as far as you want, but until we deactivate the spell, you won’t be able to touch magic.”

“I’m a werewolf. I don’t fucking *need* magic to do anything!” Gabriel snarled, his nostrils flaring as he seemed to get ready to pounce.

Mikah had to grab his arm, to pull him back. The vampire spoke between his teeth. “If all magic is turned off, then how was that door spelled?”

The head witch looked at us as if we were a bunch of stupid children. “Do you *really* think we’d have turned off our own magic? Why would we do that?”

The other four chuckled at her comment, nodding along.

“So all New Orleans witches still have magic?” Greyson asked carefully.

The head witch raised an eyebrow. “All New Orleans witches who *need* magic have it, pup.” She sniffed with disdain. “And, for now, everyone else will have to do without.”

*Pup?* Did she just call the Alpha of the Redwood pack a pup?

Everyone was on edge now. I reached for my magic, and I could still feel it. It was muted, but thrashing underneath the surface. Did these witches realize that their spell didn’t work perfectly on Fae magic? Apparently not.

*And I’m not about to give them that bit of information*, I thought grimly. *We need every advantage we can get right now.*

“Why are you telling us all this?” I asked her. “What do you want from us?”

The head witch stepped away from the circle.

She moved toward me with dangerous grace, her full attention as formidable as she was. Greyson and Xavier instantly moved to either side of me as she approached, their low growls echoing through the space.

I shook my head at them, though. I wasn’t going to back down.

The witch stopped before me, her gaze penetrating, like she was trying to break me apart. Her voice was low, gravelly in a way that made chills run up my spine. “Because we know that there is something unnatural affecting our city, affecting magic all throughout the world. An imbalance. Is it connected to you, Fae? Just what are you?”

If the witch had been intimidating before, up close, she aimed to immobilize and terrify. Her eyes and skin glowed with a faint, otherworldly white light. The force of her stare was so powerful that it felt like a physical weight.

Still, I didn’t back down.

I hadn’t survived and killed an ancient demon to be brought to my knees by anyone else.

Despite the terror, despite the lingering pain of it all, I fucking *refused*.

“What do you want from me?” I said. It sounded like a dare.

For a brief moment, there was a quiet so imposing that I stopped breathing.

*Breathe, Cali. You should try to—*

The witch’s voice was a roar that broke through the space, tearing everything apart at the seams. “Stop putting your nose where it doesn’t belong!”

She grabbed my arm, and the pain was instant—right at my shoulder, where the mark was. The witch’s pale skin and eyes went glowing white, and my throat burned with the cry that escaped me.

*Not again… Not this pain again… Please, no more pain…*

I didn’t know who I was begging.

“CALI!” Xavier and Greyson growled my name, both attacking only to be shoved back by the white light surrounding the witch, as my pain grew and grew. The witch’s piercing light was an agonizing cocoon, swallowing me whole. It was like I was an object all over again, like I was no longer my own all over again, like Seluna was back, and I couldn’t speak, I wasn’t allowed, I couldn’t even shout—

*NO!*

It felt like a whisper. Tiny and seemingly insignificant until it came at you, and then—

*SNAP.*

My magic released with a blast, crackling through the air like the scream I’d been forced to hold. Like a loud, deafening *NO*.

The head witch went flying back.

# Episode 3178

**Artemis**

I looked over at Rishika, and her steady look gave me the confidence I needed.

I turned to the Fae and nodded. “We’re here to play.”

“Which game?”

I paused at that and looked around the dim room. There was one that I *thought* I understood, so I pointed. “That one?”

The Fae nodded and motioned toward the dealer. “The minimum for each hand is a Fae favor,” she explained. “For high stakes, the tables in the back can go all the way up to a Fae promise.”

I stared at her, shocked. They were literally betting with *Fae promises*? That was huge, and insanely risky. I glanced over at Rishika—it was clear that I was the only one who was going to be able to play here. There was no way they were going to let a non-Fae play at these tables if those were the stakes.

“Maybe we should go,” Rishika said quietly.

“No,” I said automatically. I understood her concern, but I wasn’t going anywhere. “We need answers. Let’s go.”

The Fae woman led us over to the table I’d pointed out.

“The newcomers are playing with you,” she said shortly to the dealer.

“No problem, Catey.”

My head whipped around. *This* was Catey?

I looked closer at the Fae. She was beautiful, as all Fae were. But her beautiful face was cold, and she looked closed off, like a castle with its drawbridge pulled up. Like a woman who wasn’t going to answer my questions.

“Hey,” I said, trying hard to sound casual. “Why don’t you play a hand with me? You know, since I’m new here and all.”

Catey frowned at me, and for a moment I worried that I’d overplayed my hand.

But after a moment, she nodded and pulled out another chair.

My relief was short-lived, however, because as soon as I sat down, I realized that whatever this game was, it wasn’t what I’d expected it to be. From a distance it had looked like normal poker—which I’d learned to play at the pack house—but close up, that was far from the case. Even the deck wasn’t a normal fifty-two card deck. This deck consisted of cards with illustrations on them, each one labeled. I looked closer and read: *The Tower, The Fool, The Lovers.*

*They’re tarot cards*, I realized.

But I still had no idea what kind of game we could play with them. I hadn’t exactly come here looking for spiritual guidance.

The dealer shuffled them expertly, then smiled up at us. “New players! Minimum bet is one favor. Maximum bet is one Fae promise.”

I felt my stomach clench as I looked down at the chips in front of me. Each of them read *favor* or *promise*. Shit. I had a bad feeling about this. I hated to feel indebted to anyone. Ever. It was a holdover after what I’d gone through with the Kollector. But I knew I didn’t have a choice now. I’d committed to this.

But I was a little pissed that Nikkos hadn’t give me a little more of a heads-up before Rishika and I had walked into this place.

Catey looked over at me. “You know how to play, right?”

I opened my mouth to lie and say of course, but something stopped me. I *didn’t* know how to play, and if there was a time to be honest about that, it was probably now.

“It’s my first time,” I admitted.

Catey’s eyebrows went up, but after a moment she laughed. “Okay, well, the first round can be practice, then.”

I was relieved to hear this, but also suspicious. Why would Catey have any reason to be generous to me? What could she possibly get out of that?

But I didn’t argue.

“Everyone draws a card,” the Fae dealer said. We all followed directions and took one. “Who’s got the lowest value? That’s you,” she said to Catey. She cut the deck then pushed the cards toward her. “Deal.”

Catey took the cards and began to hand them out, dealing them in sets of three, dealing others into a pile in the middle of the table as she went.

“Okay,” she said, looking over at me. “It’s pretty easy from here. You’re bidding first.”

“I am?” I asked hesitantly.

Catey nodded confidently. “By bidding, you state your confidence that you’ll be able to meet the contract, and state your terms.” She motioned down to my chips. “If you don’t want to bid, then you can pass, and you can only bid higher than the previous bidders. The preneur wins. The bids are prise, pousée, garde, garde sans, and garde contre. The Fool can be played to any trick. The Fool never wins the trick, and it never changes sides. When the last trick is played, the round ends, and the preneur counts the number of oudiers.” She gave me a sly look. “And that’s how we know who wins.”

I swallowed hard as we started to play. It was brutally fast and deeply confusing. I wished Rishika could pull the rules up on her phone. Before I knew it, I had lost. It had just happened so damn fast.

But there were things about the game that seemed strangely familiar. I thought hard as I sifted through my cards. I picked up the Fool card and looked at it curiously. It could do so much. There was something about these cards that I thought I recognized.

Catey, watching me, laughed. “Do you want to play an actual live round now?”

I nodded. “Absolutely,” I said with more confidence than was probably warranted, considering I’d lost so badly in the practice round. “Let’s deal those cards.”

The Fae dealer drew the card with the lowest value this time, so she dealt the cards, her hands moving fast over the worn deck. I stared at my cards as she handed them to me, separating them by value so I could keep track. I could feel my brain calculating my next trick in my head. I was hyper-focused.

“Do you need help?” Rishika asked, leaning close to me.

“No,” I said quietly, shaking my head. “I’ve got this.”

“Artemis?” Rishika didn’t look fully convinced, and I had to admit I understood her hesitation, but I gave her a steady look.

“Trust me,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. She still looked a little worried, but it was clear that she was prepared to trust me. “You’ve got this,” she added, putting her hand on my shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

Catey was looking down at her cards with a smile on her face. It was the expression of a person who was certain she was about to win, and win big. And as we started to play, she was betting like it, too.

She kept adding Fae favor after Fae favor until she finally looked up at me. “You know what? Why don’t we just bet a full Fae promise? Winner takes all?”

I had known this was where Catey was heading, and I had to fight to keep the grin off my face. I feigned reluctance for a moment, then nodded. “Okay. I guess so.”

I pushed a promise chip across the worn green felt into the center of the table, my heart pounding.

“Okay, let’s see what you’ve got,” the Fae dealer said briskly.

We laid down our cards, and she took a moment, counting up our points. My heart beat even faster, and when I looked over at Rishika, she was looking intently at the cards as well. It looked like she was doing some quick calculations in her head.

“And the round goes to the newcomer,” the Fae dealer said, her voice laced with surprise. “By three points.”

Next to me, Rishika gasped.

“*You won!*” She threw her arms around me and kissed me, hard.

I smiled as I pulled away from her embrace, feeling pretty pleased with myself. Who knew French Tarot was going to be my game?

Catey was staring at me with unmasked shock. “What the hell?” she asked. “You said you’d never played before.”

I shrugged. “Not this version of the game. But you’re obviously playing the human version of Elius, which is popular in the Fae world. I was actually really good at it.”

Catey scowled at me. “You hustled me.”

I just shrugged again.

Catey huffed and reached out to take back her Fae promise chip, but I was quicker and snatched it away.

“Nope. I won, fair and square, and now you owe me a promise.”

Catey’s scowl deepened.

“But don’t worry,” I assured her, “I’ll make it really easy on you.”

Catey crossed her arms over her chest. “What do you want from me? And why did you *really* come here?”

I flipped the chip up, then snatched it out of the air. It felt small and light in my palm as I looked at the scowling Fae. “I want you to promise to help me find Adair.”

# Episode 3179

**Xavier**

A blast of light exploded in front of my eyes, and the witches were all blown back, their outraged shrieks echoing in my ears.

Cali—spent from her own magic and whatever else that witch had done to her—collapsed, but I lunged to catch her before she hit the ground.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here!” Gabe bellowed.

No one argued with him, and we raced out of the room and into the hallway. Behind us, there was a furious shout from the witches, and a blast of magic chased us out the door. Gabe reached out and slammed the door shut at the last second—just as the magic hit it, rattling the door on its hinges.

“Help me!” Gabe ground out. Greyson grabbed the knob with him, and the two of them fought to keep the door shut.

“Come *on*!” Mikah urged, heading down the hallway. He waved us urgently toward the window. We climbed through—I was careful with Cali—and dropped down onto the street. As we wove in and out of the strolling crowds, I kept a tight hold on her. Her eyes were still closed, but she clung to me as I raced after the others. I tried to keep up, but I was starting to lag behind. I could feel my strength beginning to ebb, and it its place, pain was rearing up as my injuries caught up with me.

No one seemed to have noticed I’d dropped back until finally, up ahead, I saw Greyson stop and look around. Not seeing me, he looked behind him, and at a glance he could see something was wrong.

“Hey, slow down, guys,” he called to the others. He jogged over to me. “Are you okay, man?”

“I’m fine,” I said automatically.

Greyson frowned. “I can carry her.”

“I’m fine!” I growled, angry now.

But Greyson didn’t rise to the bait. “Hey, I’m just trying to make sure *both* of you are okay, Xavier. I’m not trying to step on your toes, man, but if you need help, you should let me carry her so one of us can look at your injuries.”

I was clenching my jaw so hard it was making my head ache, but I let out a breath and tried to release the tension. Greyson was right. I was fighting through a lot of pain, and if I dropped Cali because I was hurt, I’d never forgive myself.

“Yeah, okay,” I grunted, and when Greyson stepped toward me, I let him lift Cali from my arms.

Without her weight, my body seemed to go into exhaustion mode. It was like my fight-or-flight response was all focused on Cali’s safety, and now that Greyson had taken her, my legs started to buckle. I would have fallen to the ground if Gabe hadn’t been there to catch my weight.

“Thanks,” I muttered. When I looked down, I realized my left leg had swollen and was soaked with blood. There were stabbing pains running up and down my right arm, so sharp they took my breath away, and for the first time I noticed that my shoulder was dislocated.

Gabe took a look at me and shook his head. “I can’t believe you carried her in this condition, man.”

I only grunted in response.

“Mikah!” Gabe called.

Mikah walked over, taking in my swollen shoulder. “Yikes, man. We have to set your shoulder so you can heal correctly. You’ll feel better pretty much right away, but it’s going to hurt like hell.”

I could only nod.

Mikah gripped my shoulder and—without so much as a word of warning—jerked it hard, popping it back into its socket.

I clenched my teeth just in time, but I still let out a muffled shout of pain.

Greyson eyed me warily. “Do you think you can shift? We’re going to have to move quickly.”

“I’ll take Cali,” Mikah said. “It’ll be easiest for us to move that way.”

I nodded.

Greyson didn’t look convinced, but he said, “Okay. Be careful.”

He handed Cali to Mikah, then shifted. Then Gabe shifted too.

It was my turn next. I’d told Greyson I’d be fine, but now I wasn’t so sure. My body still ached like hell.

I called out to my wolf. It was there but seemed to be butting up against my will. I struggled with it, not knowing exactly why. I could feel the urgency building—I needed to shift. NOW.

So what the hell was the damn hold up?

When the transformation finally did happen, I nearly sighed in relief. Given my history, I’d been worried for a moment there.

*We have a safe place to go outside the city*, Gabe said. *That sound good to you gents?*

*Sounds good to me*, Greyson agreed.

*Fine with me*, I added.

*Better than going back to our Airbnb*, Greyson said. *That’s the first place the witches are going to go to look for us.*

*Then we follow him*, I said, taking off after the already-running Gabe.

We made quick work of getting the hell out of the city and arrived at what looked like an abandoned mansion at the quiet edge of the city. It looked like it might have once been a stately home but had been in a state of disrepair for the last, oh, hundred years or so. The white columns of the porch were nearly invisible, covered with climbing vines, the shutters of the upper floors were hanging at odd angles, and the peaked attic window was missing panes of glass, like missing teeth.

The place was set right on the edge of a bayou, and the sound of the bullfrogs singing was so loud I almost couldn’t hear myself think over the racket.

It was blessedly quieter as Mikah led the way into the decrepit old house. The floors were thick with dust, but I wasn’t complaining. The place was secluded, and it seemed like a good place to lie low for a while.

We shifted back, and Mikah gently placed Cali on a low couch. Looking around, I saw that the whole house was furnished as it might have been a hundred years ago, but everything was covered in white sheets, which in turn were covered in dust. It looked abandoned and smelled stale, like it had been untouched for decades—if not longer.

“What is this place?” I asked, looking around. We were in what looked like a receiving room, and through the wide double doors I could see a grand staircase sweeping up to a second floor. “How’d you know it was here?”

“It belonged to some rich dude I once did a job for,” Mikah said.

“Why is it empty?” I asked.

“The guy died, and his family has been fighting over the estate. Especially over who owns this house. The legal battle’s been going on for a while. But it’s not bad here,” Mikah said, looking around. “It’s dusty, but the water’s on. So’s the electricity and the gas. But technically no one owns it right now. That’s why I can come in without being invited.”

“What about getting caught?” Greyson asked.

“If anyone from the family tried to come onto the property right now, they’d get in trouble with the court and it would affect their ownership claims, so they’re not risking it. It’s off-limits, which means no one’s coming around to check on it. That makes it the perfect place for hiding. For now.”

“That works,” I said, looking around. “It’s good to have a place to hide for now that we haven’t been to before. Those witches can still use their magic, so they’ll definitely be trying to track us. We have to be on alert.”

We had to let Artemis and Rishika know. They didn’t know any of this.

I pulled out my phone. I was going to need to call her to warn her, but when I dialed, her phone went right to voicemail.

“Rishika, it’s Xavier. Listen, if you get this before you head back to the house, don’t go back there. If you’re already there, get the hell out. You and Artemis get a hotel somewhere else. I’ll explain why later. Stay safe.”

I hung up and slipped my phone back in my pocket, then headed toward a door I was hoping led to a bathroom. I wanted to wash off the blood and dirt. Inside, I turned on the light, and I was surprised to find the bathroom cleaner than I’d expected. Maybe because the door had been shut, there wasn’t as much dust as the rest of the house.

I was glad to see that my leg looked better. It was less swollen, at least. I thought back to when I’d shifted, trying to get away from the witches. It hadn’t happened as quickly as it normally did. It had been more of a fight than I was comfortable with. Which was weird.

Suddenly, a thought hit me, and it made my stomach clench. Had I been right? Was my shifting was being affected now that I was far away from Ava again?

# Episode 3180

**Artemis**

Catey slammed down her cards, making the rickety table wobble. She glared at me, her eyes flashing dangerously. “That’s why you came to find me?” she asked coldly. “Because of Adair?”

I nodded. “Yep. Now.” I raised an eyebrow. “Will you honor your Fae promise?”

Clearly frustrated with her position, Catey’s jaw worked as she thought about my question. “I promise you that I will *tell* you everything I know about where Adair is.”

“That’s not what I need—”

“But I can’t help you find him,” she cut in. She shook her head stubbornly. “I have enough of my own dealings to get involved in any one of Adair’s problems. But I suppose I can give you the information you need, newcomer.”

I could feel my own frustration bubbling up within me. “Okay. Fine,” I said shortly. “Then tell me what you know.”

Catey glanced around the crowded room, then pushed back her chair and got to her feet. “Come with me.”

I got to my feet. “Where are we going?” I asked as she led us through the room. I didn’t like moving to second locations—they could put me at a disadvantage. “Why are we going back here?”

She had led us out of the game room and into a narrow hallway, lit with dusty sconces mounted on the walls on either side.

“For privacy,” she said, pushing open a door.

I hesitated for a moment, looking over at Rishika before we both walked into the room. “Fine.” I turned to look at the woman, crossing my arms over my chest. She’d been setting the tone so far, but it was time to get what I’d come for. “Now tell me everything you know about Adair.”

Catey sighed and dropped down onto a low couch. “Now that would take far more time than I’m sure you have. Suffice to say, Adair is an old friend.”

“How do you know him?” I demanded.

She looked down at her hands. “I met him when he first ran away from his family in the Fae world to come here.”

I stared at the woman, flabbergasted. That was *not* what I had been expecting to hear, and I was shocked.

“He ran away from his family?” I asked.

Catey nodded.

*Well, I guess he and I really are related*, I thought to myself. We’d both bailed—we had that in common.

“But why?” Rishika asked. “Why did he run away from them?”

“It was after his older brother died,” Catey said, leaning back on the couch. “He was being looked at to head the family. But he was no heir—that life wasn’t for him.”

“Why not?” Rishika asked.

Catey gave a mirthless laugh. “Let’s just say that Adair didn’t buy into all the politics that goes into running a family. *Especially* a family as renowned in the Dark Fae courts as his.”

I stiffened at that. “What does that mean?” I asked, my mouth feeling dry.

Catey gave me a cool look. “You’re Fae, Newcomer. Surely you know the story of Kadmos and his family? Adair knew all the things his family had done to get their power in the first place, and how hard they’d fought to hold onto it once they had it. He knew what it took.”

I suddenly felt like my body had been carved from ice. I couldn’t move. I knew my family wasn’t the warmest family in the world—the Wrenthorns on my mother’s side weren’t going to win any awards for outstanding kindness or anything—but I hated hearing that it seemed that trend hadn’t been any different on my father’s side. They had literally driven Adair to run away from them.

“So what does all of this have to do with where he is now?” I asked.

“His family found him in this world once and forced him to go back,” Catey explained.

“*What?*” Rishika asked, shocked. “How did they find him?”

“Hell if I know,” Catey said, shaking her head. “They’ve got their ways, I guess. But he escaped from them again. Which was good for him, but now that means now they’re extra pissed off at him. That’s why he’s in hiding. He has to stay underground right now. He can’t let anyone know where he is because he’s sure that they’ll find him. Just like they did last time.”

I thought of what Nikkos had told me.

“I’ve heard that people from the Dark Fae court are looking for Adair,” I said, thinking that Nikkos might have actually been telling the truth about that.

Catey’s expression was dark. “Yeah, but it’s worse that even that.”

“What do you mean?” Rishika asked. “Worse how?”

“Adair had made a deal to go back,” she told us. “I don’t know if he fulfilled the deal—he wouldn’t tell me. But if he didn’t fulfill it, then that means these people will do anything they have to to find him and force him back. And anyone who gets in their way could be in serious danger.”

Rishika and I shared a look. I could practically hear her thoughts. I knew she was worried, and she was right to be. But I’d already come this far. I wanted to find my uncle. I *had* to find him. And if what Catey was saying was true, then it sounded like he needed my help. I’d never felt any responsibility to family before, but things had changed since I’d met Cali and my mother. Now that I knew what it felt like to actually be accepted as part of a family, my sense of familial loyalty was stronger than ever. And I couldn’t get rid of this nagging feeling that I had a responsibility to help Adair.

“Do you know how to get in touch with him?” I asked.

“Why?” Catey asked warily.

I rolled my eyes. “So I can let him know I’m here.”

She gave me an assessing look. “Who are you to Adair? Why do you want to find him so badly?”

Once again, I thought about lying, but I realized that if I wanted more of Catey’s help, my best bet was to come clean.

“He’s family,” I admitted.

Catey’s eyes opened wide. “Are you here to take him back?”

I held up my hands. “No, nothing like that!” I said quickly. “I escaped the Fae world, too. I just wanted to meet him. To find out more about my family. I left them a long time ago, and I don’t know much.” I left out the part about me being practically thrown away—I wasn’t ready to reveal too much, only what I had to to find out where Adair could be hiding. I figured that if I made it sound like I’d left the family, Catey might trust me more.

Satisfied, Catey nodded. “Okay, well, I don’t know how to contact him.”

“What?” I asked in disbelief. “How is that possible?”

“He always gets ahold of me. But I do know that he’s still in the city, because he’s looking for something. I tried to convince him to leave, because I know there are Dark Fae here looking for him, but he was adamant that he can’t leave until he finds whatever it is that he’s looking for.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you know, just tell me. Maybe I could help him look for it.”

She shook her head. “I really don’t know. All I know is that—whatever it is—it seemed really precious to him.”

I frowned. “Okay… Is there anything else you can tell me?”  
 “No,” Catey said shortly. “I’ve told you everything I know.”

“Okay,” I nodded. I hated that this was probably the truth, but Catey had made a Fae promise to give me information, and she couldn’t break that. So—insufficient though it was—that was all Catey had to tell me. “Thanks.”

“Good luck,” Catey said stiffly. She hesitated for a moment, then added, “If you really are on Adair’s side, then I hope you can find him.”

“Thanks,” I said with a nod, then walked out the door, Rishika following behind me.

We were quiet as we headed through the gaming hall, but when we hit the humid outdoor air, Rishika spoke again.

“Well, at least we know he’ll probably be sticking around this place for a while—if he’s looking for something.”

“Hey there. Looking for what?” Nikkos asked, appearing out of nowhere.

Rishika opened her mouth to answer, but before she could say anything, I stepped in front of her. “We’re not telling you anything until you tell us why you sent us in there without a warning.”

Nikkos scowled. “Am I required to hold your hand through this whole thing? We’re partners, but I’m not your dad, ladies.”

I glared at him, seething with anger. “You knew they bartered with Fae promises in there, and you didn’t warn me.”

“What’s so strange about that?” Nikkos said uncomfortably. “So they barter in Fae favors and the occasional Fae promise. It’s not that big a deal.”

“Well, if I can’t trust you, then I’m not going to work with you,” I said decidedly.

Nikkos’s expression went suddenly dark. “Oh, I wouldn’t make such threats idly, *girl*. You might regret it.”

# Episode 3181

When I opened my eyes, Greyson was standing over me. He was close enough to touch, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was speaking in low tones to Mikah, who leaned close to hear him. The vampire nodded, then turned and left the room.

“Greyson,” I croaked, surprised by how rough my voice sounded.

Greyson turned and dropped down next to me. “Hey. Are you okay, love?”

I tried to sit up to respond, but when I moved, I realized that my whole body was one big ache. I sucked in a breath. “Could I have some water?”

There was a glass on a small, round table next to the couch, and Greyson handed it to me. I grasped it in both hands and took a grateful gulp. The water felt like heaven flowing down my throat, and it helped me feel a little further away from death’s door.

Feeling slightly revived, I looked around the room in confusion. “What time is it? How long have I been out? And where the hell are we?”

“It’s morning,” Greyson said gently, taking the glass from my hands. “And we’re somewhere safe.”

I nodded but stopped when the movement made my head spin. Maybe I should have pressed for the location, but I didn’t. I trusted Greyson. And it made sense that we were at a safe house, rather than back at our rental. I was sure we’d had to run from those witches, after what had happened. Which reminded me…

“What happened, exactly?” I asked, looking up at him. I felt like I was missing part of my memory.

Greyson smiled. “You saved us, that’s what happened. You used your Fae magic to blast those witches back when they started coming for us.”

I frowned, trying to remember this occurring, and—very slowly—bits of information started to come back to me. I could suddenly remember the burning fire in my veins and the sonic blast of my magic. That explained why everything hurt.

The feeling still echoed in my hands, and I curled them into tight fists. “I didn’t mean for that to happen. Are the others okay?” I asked, looking around quickly.

“Try not to move too much, love,” Greyson said. “Everyone’s fine. Xavier and Gabriel are on patrol outside to make sure no one followed us, and Mikah just went to get some food for you.”

I leaned back with a sigh. I’d just woken up, but I felt exhausted.

“What do you need?” Greyson asked, tenderly pushing a stray lock of hair off my face.

“A hot shower, for a start.”

He smiled. “I think we can manage that.”

He moved to help me up, but before I could get to my feet, his phone rang. Greyson pulled it out of his pocket and looked down at it with a frown.

“Who is it?”

“The pack house.”

“You should answer it,” I urged.

“Yeah?” he said, answering reluctantly. I heard him grunting, offering up some noncommittal “yeahs” and “nos” here and there until, “No, it’s going to take longer than we thought. Any new issues with Dick or Lucian? Anyone else causing problems?”

I strained to hear the answer, but it was just incomprehensible muttering.

“Well, that’s good, at least. I’m glad the pack is safe.” Greyson nodded. “Yeah, I’ll try to give you a call in a couple of days. Okay—”

“Wait!” I shouted before he could hang up.

Greyson frowned at me. “Hang on.” He looked at me. “What?”

“Can I talk to Dani?” I asked urgently.

Greyson’s eyes lit up in understanding, and he nodded. “Get Dani, will you, Jay?”

He handed me the phone, and I listened to the sound of Jay moving through the pack house, asking if anyone had seen Dani. I was feeling nervous. I wasn’t sure how I was going to put it, but I knew that she deserved to know about her sister.

“Hello? Cali?” Dani’s voice came over the phone. She sounded confused.

“I’m sure there’s a better way to say what I’m about to say, but screw it,” I rushed in. “Tabitha is in New Orleans.”

There was no answer for so long that I looked down at the phone, wondering if the call had dropped.

“Hello? Dani? Are you there?”

“Are you sure?” Dani asked. Her voice was quiet, but there was a note of hope in it too. “Is it really her?”

I nodded but stopped when I remembered that I was on the phone and Dani couldn’t see me. “Yeah. I’m almost certain. But there’s a problem. She’s… Well, she’s been kidnapped.”

I could hear Dani give out a gasp of clear panic down the line.

“But we’re with her friends, who it turns out we actually know. It’s a long story,” I said hurriedly, “but she definitely sounds like your sister, and she’s been looking for you. Her story syncs up with yours. We just have to get her back.”

Dani began to softly cry. “Thank you, Cali. Thank you, thank you! I’ll be on the next flight out there!”

“Dani, no!” I said quickly. The last thing we needed was Dani getting down to New Orleans and the witches catching wind of her amplification power. She could be taken next.

“What?” she asked, surprised. “Tabitha’s my sister. I should be there—especially if she’s been kidnapped.”

“No, you can’t. It’s too dangerous,” I explained. “You should let us handle it.”

“Why?” Dani said, her voice growing harder. “She’s my family. She’s my responsibility.”

“There’s so much going on here,” I said, practically pleading at that point. “You have to trust us. She’s in danger, and we need to figure out how to get to her safely. I think that if you come here, it might make you a target too. I don’t want that to happen.”

Dani didn’t answer for a moment. “I don’t know. I’ll think about it,” she said.

I let out a sigh. It wasn’t enough, but it felt like the best I was going to get. “Okay. Please don’t come out here yet. Wait until I call you in a couple of days with an update. Okay? Will you promise me that much?”

“Okay,” Dani said reluctantly. But she didn’t promise anything.

“I promise to call again soon. And I’ll let you know the second we have your sister safe with us.”

“She can’t come here,” Greyson said to me as I ended the call.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I huffed. “I’m so worried that if she does come down here, the witches might try to kidnap her, too. And Dani’s magic would probably amplify Tabitha’s abilities, not to mention the witches’ magic. That would be a catastrophe.”

Greyson ran a hand through his hair, looking worried. “I’ll call Big Mac and give her an update.”

“Why?” I asked, confused.

He shrugged. “It just might help to have Big Mac taking care of things on her end.”

“That’s actually a great idea. Now,” I said, “about that shower…”

Greyson’s worried frown disappeared, and he smiled down at me. “Think you’re going to need any company?”

I could feel my face heat, but before I could answer, the front door opened, and Xavier and Gabriel walked into the house.

“Maybe later,” I said softly, with a pang of regret.

I got to my feet and wandered around until I found a bathroom with a shower. I dropped my clothes on the floor and turned on the water. I let it warm up, then stepped in. Almost immediately, I felt my tight muscles start to untense. I stood for a long time, letting the water wash over me, then soaped up, rinsed, and stepped out.

It was amazing how drastically different I felt, now that I was clean again. All I had to put on was my old clothes, which were covered in dirt and sweat—but at least *I* was clean. I pulled the clothes on, toweled off my hair, and went looking for everyone else.

I found the guys in the kitchen, where the smell of coffee hung in the air. Xavier handed me a mug of tea when I walked in, and I gratefully accepted it.

“So, what’s the next step in the plan?” I asked, sitting down at the old wooden table.

“Well, we have to figure out where the witches would be keeping Tabitha,” Greyson reasoned. “I’m thinking it’s inside that greenhouse. It just seems likely that’s she in there. But as long as they’ve got the magic turned off, Clementine can’t use any of her spells, so it’s not like we can just ask her to track her down and confirm it.”

“And now that they know about us, we’ve lost the element of surprise,” Mikah pointed out.

“We need more intel,” Greyson said, frustrated. “We need to go back out and get any information we can. Safely,” he emphasized.

“Yeah, we’re going to have to be extra smart about it now,” I said, thinking hard. “Those witches are really powerful, but we’re not going to get anything done just sitting in a safe house all day.”

Glancing over at the counter where Mikah was making coffee, I noticed my phone, wallet, and a tube of chapstick I’d been carrying gathered together in one corner. The guys must have put it there when they’d put me to bed.

I stood and grabbed my phone, noticing that the battery was almost dead.

“Shit,” I muttered when I saw all the missed calls from my sister. My heart rate ticked up. Had Artemis gone back to the Airbnb? Was she okay?

My hands shaking, I dialed her number, and—to my great relief—she picked up on the first ring.

“Cali? Where the hell are you?” she demanded.

I breathed out a sigh. “I’m safe. Where are you? I need to see you.”

There were a few reasons for that. I wanted to make sure she was okay, but I also needed her blood for Clementine. Or I *would* need it, if magic was ever turned on again.

But before Artemis could answer my question, there was an ear-splitting scream on the other end of the line.

# Episode 3182

**Marta**

I was surprised to find the other side of the bed empty when I woke. Lilac wasn’t there, and for a moment I sat up, flummoxed by this information. Then the warm, sugary smell of pancakes wafted into my room, and I smiled.

Of course. That was where he’d gone.

I swung my feet out of bed and padded to the bathroom to wash my face. As water flowed over my hands, I couldn’t stop staring at them. It was so strange to see my wrists so bare. The only thing I had circling them was the bracelet Lilac had given me for Christmas.

And it was even stranger to think of how far I’d come with my magic. Almost surreal. And in such a short period of time.

I smiled at my reflection in the mirror as I pulled a sweater over my head. Maybe I was always meant to be this good at magic—I’d just needed some direction.

But as I headed downstairs, I felt a bead of worry beginning to form. What about when my lessons with Okorie ended? What then? Was I going to be able to maintain my control over my magic? Or would I regress?

I shook off the dark feeling as I walked into the kitchen, where a crowd was gathered. Unsurprisingly, Torin was at the stove, flipping pancakes, and Jay, Lola, Elle, Ravi, and Lilac were gathered around the table, eating them.

I leaned in to give Lilac a kiss on the cheek as I grabbed a plate from the stack at the end of the table.

“You have to try these, Marta,” he said, a forkful poised at his lips. “They’re next level. The best ones yet.”

Torin turned to grin at him. “It’s a new recipe I’m trying out. They’re coconut cream. Do you want some, Marta?”

“Sure,” I said, handing him my plate before I dropped onto the bench next to Lilac. “I’d love some.”

Lilac barely looked at me. He was too busy devouring the stack of pancakes on his plate.

“How did you sleep?” I asked.

“Fine,” he grunted.

At least, I *thought* he said fine. It was hard to tell with his mouth full of pancakes, but I decided I wasn’t going to overanalyze his half-answer. I’d spoken with Violet, and I knew what I was going to do. I was just going to have to let Lilac come to me when he wanted to discuss whatever was bothering him. If it was his parents and just the time of the year in general, then I was just going to have to wait. I *wanted* to talk about it, but I knew I shouldn’t force him to talk about something so potentially painful.

As I waited on my pancakes from Torin, Sage and Zainab shuffled sleepily into the kitchen. But their eyes brightened when they saw Torin by the stove, so they must have been drawn in by the sweet coconut smell wafting through the house.

They weren’t the only ones dragged in. Charlie and Violet came in from outside, shaking snow from their fur, and shifted back to human. No one was allowed to shift outside because of Dick, and everyone was being careful about the rules, though it was driving everyone crazy.

“How’d patrol go?” Jay asked through a bite of pancakes and bacon.

“Nothing to report,” Charlie said, his cheeks red from the cold.

“It’s snowy out there. No sign of any drones,” Violet said.

“That’s good,” Jay said, pouring himself more orange juice. “Maybe that means we’re finally rid of that dick.”

“You know,” Zainab said, sitting down and reaching for the platter of toast, “without Greyson, Xavier, Cali, Rishika, and Artemis kicking around, this place is almost… boring.”

“Yeah, it is really quiet,” Lola noted. “For once… Hope I don’t jinx anything by saying that.”

Jay shot her a look, and Ravi snickered into his pancakes. It felt almost truly domestic. The werewolves were always complaining and getting themselves into some kind of drama or another, but when the drama was gone, they were bored.

Go figure.

“And for you, Marta,” Torin said, setting a stack of pancakes in front of me. I grabbed my fork and dug in, then closed my eyes. They were hot off the griddle and so sweet and buttery. They were possibly the best things I had ever tasted.

I felt even better when Lilac slipped his arm around my shoulders, and I leaned into him.

“Okorie texted this morning,” I said. “We’re only going to have a few more mentoring sessions, and then Dani and I are going to graduate.”

Lilac looked at me in surprise. “You have his phone number?”

I chuckled. “*That’s* what you heard out of all of that? Of course I have his number—he’s my mentor. But what do you think about the rest of it? The graduation?”

Lilac’s face relaxed into a smile, and he leaned over to kiss my cheek. “You’ve earned it. We should celebrate when it’s time.”

“I’d like that,” I said. I still felt that tense clench of my stomach. I was looking forward to that going away for good, and not having the witch council breathing down my neck would be a welcome change.

And so would controlling my magic.

But not seeing Okorie would be the biggest change of all. I hadn’t thought it would be possible when we’d first started out, but I’d gotten used to having that grumpy warlock around.

Dani appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, her eyes wide. “Marta, I really need to talk to you.”

There was something in her voice and in her eyes that set off alarm bells in my head. I got to my feet, abandoning my breakfast.

“What’s going on?” I asked, walking over to her.

Dani looked past me at everyone else gathered in the kitchen, and I wondered what it was that she wasn’t saying.

“I just talked to Cali,” she said quietly.

I frowned, confused. “Really? Is everything okay?”

What would Cali have to talk to Dani about? Could it have been about the Seluna ashes?

“Marta, you haven’t finished,” Torin called, looking at my half-eaten plate in dismay.

“I’m sorry, excuse me,” I called over my shoulder as Dani tugged me from the room.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Why did Cali call you?”

Dani’s face was flushed, and she pulled me into the small study near the front door, but she didn’t answer.

“Dani. What’s going on?” I demanded.

“Cali thinks they found my sister!” Dani burst out.

I gasped. “That’s terrific news! You’ve been so worried about her. You must be so relieved.”

“Well, they’re looking for her, but Tabitha might be in danger, so they’re trying to save her,” Dani explained in a rush.

I stared at the girl, my happiness for her rapidly getting replaced by concern again. “What kind of danger?”

Dani started to pace the small office. “Cali said she was kidnapped.”

“*What?*” I gasped.

“But why?” Dani wondered, ignoring me. “Why? I have to go help her. She’s my sister, and she’s in New Orleans. Cali told me not to come, but how could she say that? After all the time I’ve spent looking! All I’ve ever wanted was to find my sister…”

Dani stopped pacing and started to cry, tears rolling down her face.

“Hey,” I said, wrapping my arms around her. “This is good news, right? They’re going to get her back, okay? And then you’ll get to see her.”

“But she was *kidnapped*,” Dani wailed. “How can I know that and not go try to help her? Even if there is danger—”

“But if you go and put yourself in danger, would that be what your sister wants?” I asked, cutting her off before she started to spiral.

Dani shook her head. “No,” she said, her voice shaky with sobs. “But still…”

I hugged her harder. Dani was overwhelmed, and who could blame her? “This is good news.”

She nodded.

“I think you need some food in you. Let’s get you some breakfast?”

Dani nodded, and we headed back to the kitchen. She took a shaking breath as she dropped into place next to me on the bench. I slid my plate toward her, offering my last—untouched—pancake.

“Here,” I said. “I think you need this more than I do.”

Lilac had been texting someone on his phone, and he slipped it back into his pocket as I sat down. He looked up at me, almost bewildered. I ignored it, though it was another weird thing to add to the list of weird things he’d been doing.

“What’s up?” he asked, glancing at Dani’s red, swollen eyes.

I kept it short. “Cali called. She thinks she may have located Dani’s sister.”

“Cool,” Lilac said absently, clearly not really listening to me.

He looked down as his phone buzzed.

I gritted my teeth, frustration clawing its way up my chest. I couldn’t take it any longer.

I got to my feet. “Get up, Lilac. You and I need to talk. Right now.”

# Episode 3183

**Artemis**

“Artemis! Artemis! Are you okay? Can you hear me?” Cali cried through the line.

“Yeah, I can hear you, and no, I’m *not* okay. These damn tourists are annoying the shit out of me,” I said grumpily.

I eyed the screaming bachelorette party that had just spilled through the door, and I moved quickly to the other side of the circular bar.

“We should have come to a city with less day drinking,” I grumbled. “But, yeah, Cali, we should meet up. We need to talk. What happened to you all last night, anyway? I was really worried when I got Xavier’s message last night that we had to abandon the Airbnb.”

Cali sighed. “Yeah, I know. Let’s meet, and I’ll tell you everything. We need to get some information from you, too. We have to be careful being out in public, though.”

“Really? Why?” I asked warily.

“Well, we might have pissed off some witches,” Cali admitted.

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Where are you?” Cali asked.

I looked up at the brightly colored lights and garishly colored pictures decorating the bar. “We’re at some place called the Carousel Bar. It’s on Royal Street.”

“Carousel Bar on Royal. Got it. Meet you there in an hour?” Cali asked.

“Yeah, see you then.”

I ended the call and slipped my phone back into my pocket. Then I walked back to the table where Rishika was sitting—head in her hands—nursing an Irish coffee. She looked puffy-eyed and dazed. After getting Xavier’s ominous voicemail warning last night, we’d managed to find a last-minute room, but it was in a run-down hostel in the middle of the French Quarter and the walls had been paper thin, so neither of us had gotten much sleep. Though we were probably lucky to have gotten a private room. In any case, we were both pretty exhausted, and looked it, too.

“Is Cali okay?” Rishika asked, rubbing her face. “What’d she have to say?”

“She’s fine. They’re all heading over to meet us here.”

Rishika nodded, then winced as the bachelorette party screeched again. There were about a dozen women, all dressed in short pink cocktail dresses, but they seemed to sound off like one high-pitched hell-bird.

“Maybe we should move somewhere else,” Rishika suggested.

“There are outdoor tables. That has to be better than this,” I said, gesturing over my shoulder as the bride-to-be climbed up onto a rickety bar table and began to dance—out of tempo—to the music.

We picked up our drinks and walked outside to settle at a table on the sidewalk. The morning was chilly, but it felt warm in the sunshine, and—most importantly—it was quiet, so I could put up with a little chill.

“Do you have any clue what your uncle could be looking for in this city?” Rishika asked me, wrapping her hands around her tall glass mug.  
 I shook my head. “There’s nothing unique about this city—not when it comes to Fae items that I know about, anyway. So maybe it’s a witch thing? This city is crawling with powerful witches.”

Rishika nodded slowly. “That would probably make more sense. But what could a Dark Fae prince want so badly that he’d stick around in such a powerfully magic city with a bunch of the Fae court on his tail?”

“I’m not sure,” I said thoughtfully. “I keep turning it over in my brain, but nothing sticks out.”

We lapsed into silence, and when Cali called my name from down the street—pulling me out of my thoughts—I was surprised to realize it had been an hour.

I stood to hug her as she drew near, but I frowned when I saw two strangers trailing Greyson and Xavier.

“What’s going on here?” I asked warily, looking around at all of them.

“It’s a long story,” Cali said. “We met up with some old friends of the pack. Gabriel is a werewolf mercenary friend of Xavier’s, and Mikah is a vampire PI. They’ve been in the city, and it turns out we’re all kind of working on the same problem.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do they know how to find the ashes?”

Cali shook her head. “There are new roadblocks to that.”

I sat back down at my table. “Tell me.”

As Cali sat, Rishika got to her feet.

“I’m going to go get more coffee,” she said, heading inside.

“There’s a lot, so I’ll keep it short,” Cali said. “The New Orleans elder witches have turned off everyone’s magic except their own.”

“*What?*” I stared at her. “Are you kidding me? How can they do that?”

Cali shrugged. “I don’t know how yet.”

“Is it affecting werewolves, too?” I pressed.

I glanced inside at Rishika. The guys had followed her in, and she was talking to Greyson at the bar.

“It doesn’t seem to be, but we’re trying to turn the magic back on. That’s why we’re with Mikah and Gabriel—Xavier’s friends. There’s a girl they’re friends with who was taken because of her power to negate magic. And—you’re not going to believe this—but it’s Dani’s sister, Tabitha.”

“Are you *kidding* me?” I asked, shocked.

Cali nodded. “I know. It’s nuts.”

“It’s so fucked up to hold her prisoner for something like that,” I said.

“Agreed. So if we want our witch Clementine to be able to do magic, we need to turn it back on.” Cali sighed. “How’s your search going? Did the magic being affected mess up the search for your uncle?”

“No, but there are plenty of other things getting in my way,” I said dryly. “Apparently people in the Dark Fae court are after Adair, which has driven him underground and into hiding, so that’s what we’re dealing with. It’s going to make it even harder to find him.”

“Oh,” Cali said slowly. “So that’s why we couldn’t find him, either.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, that’s the other thing I wanted to tell you—Tabitha, Gabriel, and Mikah all know Adair.”

My eyes widened with surprise.

“That’s why they came here—they’re looking for him, too.”

I was shocked. I looked over at the werewolf and the vampire.

“How do they even know him?” I asked, stunned. “And how well do they know him? Do you think they could tell me more about him?”

“Maybe,” Cali said slowly. “Mikah, Gabriel—can you guys come over for a second?”

The pair walked over.

“Mikah, Gabriel, this is my sister, Artemis. Artemis, this is Mikah and Gabriel.”

“Nice to meet you,” one of them said, giving me a warm smile that didn’t quite hide his fangs—Mikah, then.

“Yeah, hi, do you know what Adair is doing in New Orleans?” I asked, unwilling to let small talk slow me down.

Mikah shook his head. “I’m not exactly sure, but Adair is really mysterious about his motives on his best day. What I *can* tell you is that if he’s sticking around, he’s got a good reason.”

“Still,” Gabriel added, “it kind of stings that he’d keep himself hidden from *us*.”

I looked between them for a moment. “Hang on, who is my uncle to you?”

Mikah glanced at Gabriel.   
 “Tell her, Mikah; it’s not news to me.”

Mikah nodded. “Adair and I were involved once. A long time ago.”

I blinked in surprise. I wasn’t sure what to say. More than anything else, this information made my uncle seem like more of a real person, and less like some rumor I’d heard.

“What’s he like?” I asked nervously.

Mikah frowned, thinking. “He’s strong,” he said finally. “And he can be kind, when he wants to be.”

I nodded, understanding that Mikah was being diplomatic in his responses. Mikah was nice, but hearing about Adair from his ex wasn’t the same as actually meeting him. It wasn’t the same as actually learning more about my family.

Still, I had to admit he felt more tangible now.

“Thank you,” I said.

Mikah gave me a kind smile. “Of course.”

“What did you guys want to eat?” Xavier called from the bar. “We can’t order the whole damn menu!”

Gabriel rolled his eyes and grabbed Mikah’s arm. They moved back into the bar to finish their order.

“Hey,” Cali said quietly, taking my hand. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said.

“Maybe you could ask Mikah more questions about Adair,” she suggested.

But I shook my head. “No. I’m going to find my uncle and ask him the questions. That’ll give me the answers I’m looking for.”

She nodded. “What do you need from me? I can help you find him.”

“No, you need to keep to your own path, Cali,” I said, shaking my head. “If anything, I should be helping you.”

“No, you need to find your uncle. We have our end of things covered.”

“Cali,” I said warningly.

“Artemis,” she said, matching my tone.

We stared at each other, each one of us as stubborn as the other.

After a moment, we both burst out laughing, realizing that neither of us was going to stop trying to support the other.

It was a big change for me, considering how independent and lonely I used to be.

“Actually, there is something I need, if you’re willing,” Cali said hesitantly.

“Of course I am. Whatever you need. What is it?”

Cali flushed. “Will you give me some of your blood to barter with a witch?”

# Episode 3184

As I waited for Artemis to reply to my bizarre request for her blood, my palms grew sweaty with nerves. I was ready for her to tell me to forget it, but she surprised me.

“Of course. I trust you.”

I let out a huge sigh of relief. “Are you sure?” I asked. “I would do it, of course, but Clementine didn’t want my blood. She wanted yours. Light and Dark Fae blood…”

“Ahh, I see.” Artemis nodded. “People in this world seem to really value Fae blood, so it makes us a target, for sure. But I can take care of myself. And I know this is important, otherwise you wouldn’t have asked. I want to do what I can to help protect my sister.”

My heart felt like it was swelling as I looked across the table at Artemis. It was something else to hear her say that she would do anything for me, considering how long it had taken us to get to a place where she even would acknowledge the relationship between us. We’d come a long way since we’d first met.

“*Thank you*,” I whispered, tears in my eyes. I threw my arms around her and gave her a tight hug. “But let’s do a better job keeping in touch now that we know that the witches are up to something. And I don’t love that these Dark Fae might be on your tail while you’re chasing after Adair.”

“I don’t like it all that much either,” Artemis agreed. “But if you can’t reach me by phone, try Rishika’s.”

“Good call,” I said, surprised that I hadn’t thought of that. We all had phones. Duh. “We’ll check in every day, right?”

Artemis laughed. “Of course. Okay.”

“Hey, Cali, you ready to go?” Xavier asked, walking over.

I looked up in surprise. “I thought you were getting food.”

Xavier scowled. “They got mad at us for trying to order an all-meat platter, so Greyson is just going down the street to get some bagels or something. He’s also calling Big Mac and his mom to let them know what’s going on with the magic down here. We should find out if this magic blackout has spread, or if it’s just New Orleans.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. Was it possible for this to affect magic all the way back home? I looked up at Xavier. “Yeah, I’m ready. Let’s go.”

We’d already decided we needed to go back to see Clementine. We needed to verify the things that the witches had told us, and now that I had Artemis on board for the blood, I was going to need to officially accept Clementine’s deal.

I thought about how quickly Artemis had agreed to give me her blood. She hadn’t even hesitated when I’d asked, and it made my throat feel tight with emotion to remember. I just loved my sister so much. I hadn’t grown up with her, but now I couldn’t imagine not having Artemis in my life.

I just wished I could have done more for her in her search for Adair. But I would just have to keep my eyes and ears open to see if I could pick up on anything else. It was true that my mission was now parallel to the one Artemis was on, now that I’d teamed up with two people who had literally traveled with Adair, and had also come to New Orleans to find him.

I glanced over at Mikah as we walked down the busy Royal Street to meet up with Greyson. “Do you think my sister is going to be able to find Adair?”

Mikah thought about my question before he answered. “Truthfully? I don’t know. If Adair really doesn’t want to be found, it’s going to be almost impossible to find him. Disappearing is one of his best skills. He’s had to hone that particular talent in real time, living on the run for so long.”

Nodding, I felt my stomach drop. I was disappointed on my sister’s behalf. “Do *you* still want to find him?”

Mikah shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe, if that’s what’s best for him. But I also don’t want to get in his way, if staying hidden is what’s best for him. Of course, for Tabby…” He trailed off, looking troubled.

I frowned. “I know what Adair is to you—now what is he to Tabitha? Why were you all looking for him together?”

Mikah gave his head one sharp shake. “That’s their business.”

I didn’t love the cryptic non-answer, but I also knew that I’d been asking a lot of personal questions, and it was possible he just didn’t want to answer any more.

When we got to Clementine’s building, someone was coming out just as we reached the door, and Gabriel reached out and grabbed the door before it slammed shut.

He held it open with his manic grin. “Welcome,” he said with a wink.

I had some doubts about arriving without buzzing, but I kept my mouth shut as we trooped up to Clementine’s floor and knocked on her door.

There was no answer.

I glanced at my mates, but they only shrugged.

I knocked again, louder this time.

Again, no answer. Which was starting to get worrying. And frustrating.

“Clementine!” I called. “Can you hear me? Are you home? It’s Caliana Hart!”

Finally, there was a muffled sound and after a moment, we heard the sound of feet shuffling near the door. There was the click and slam of locks turning, then the door cracked open.

The door only opened as far as the still-attached chain would allow, but Clementine’s scowling eye appeared in the space.

“What’s going on?” I asked, baffled. “Why aren’t you opening the door?”

“You can’t come in. Any of you.”

I stared at her. “Why not?”

“I’ve been thinking about it—none of this no-magic shit happened until y’all rolled into town, and I’m starting to think that’s not a coincidence.”

I was fully taken aback by this. Was Clementine really blaming *us* for that? It was ultimately Seluna’s fault and the stupid ashes. This is exactly what Vander was talking about: the imbalance affecting magic everywhere…

“We actually think we know why this is happening. We’ll tell you all about it if you let us in.”

This was a big gamble, but I had a feeling that Clementine was too curious to let an opportunity to learn more about what had been happening go.

Her scowl deepened, and the door slammed shut.

“Shit,” Xavier murmured.

Then there was the metallic scrape of the chain, and the door opened again.

“Just you,” the witch said shortly, looking at me.

I glanced over my shoulder at my entourage. “I’ll be fine.”

No one looked happy about this—especially Xavier and Greyson—but everyone nodded.

“We’ll be right here,” Greyson said.

Clementine slammed the door behind me, and as I walked in, I saw that the witch’s apartment was half-packed. Boxes lay strewn around, like she was expecting the moving truck to arrive at any moment.

“You going somewhere?” I asked.

Clementine shot me a dark look as she picked up a pile of clothes and dropped them into an open box. “I didn’t sign up to have my magic turned off like a freaking faucet. My magic is how I make my living, and how I keep myself living. I’m getting the hell out of here. I don’t need to deal with this shit.”

“We talked to the witches, and they said that it won’t make a difference if you leave,” I told her.

Clementine stopped packing for a moment and narrowed her eyes. “What kind of trick are you trying to play here, girlie?”

“No trick,” I said, holding up my hands. “But they told us that even if we leave, we still won’t be able to use magic.”

Clementine stood up straight and looked over my shoulder, thinking hard. “Of course,” she finally muttered. She looked back at me. “Shit. It’s a goddamn switch spell, isn’t it?”

She spun around and slammed the lid of a suitcase so hard, the thing tumbled off the bed with a clatter.

“What?” I asked. “What’s a switch spell?”

But Clementine wasn’t listening to me. She had started pacing the floor and muttering softly to herself. “So, that means they have something to power it. A charm or something. But what could that be? What do they have…”

I cleared my throat loudly to recapture Clementine’s attention.

“What?” she snapped, rounding on me.

“Could it be a person?”

The witch stared at me, her dark eyes wide. “What kind of person can turn off magic?”

“A person whose power is to negate magic?”

Clementine’s eyes widened for a moment, then her whole face seemed to darken like someone had switched off a light. She lunged for her bed and began to paw through the piles of clothing and blankets and books, searching for something.

Finally she stood, a deadly sharp knife in her hand. “Then I know how to undo this.”

“Clementine, what are you—”

“That person has to die.”

# Episode 3185

**Marta**

I grabbed Lilac’s hand and hauled him up the stairs, pulling him into his room. Then I slammed the door shut and rounded on him.

“You need to tell me what the hell is going on. *Now*. I don’t appreciate all the secrets you and your sister are keeping from me.”

Lilac’s expression was confused, but he frowned and rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t—”

“Stop,” I interrupted, holding up my hand. “Please don’t say that you don’t know what I’m talking about, or try to make up any excuses. You *do* know what I’m talking about. I know something is going on, and I don’t appreciate being kept in the dark.”

Lilac gave me a long look. “Can’t you just trust that I’m doing this for *us*?”

I frowned and thought this through as quickly as I could. I knew I was new to relationships, but I also had enough experience to know that keeping secrets from the person you loved wasn’t the way to make them work.

“If you can’t be honest with me, then maybe there shouldn’t *be* an us,” I said shortly.

This stopped Lilac, and he looked taken aback.

“Do you really mean that?” he whispered.

My heart was pounding like it was about to pop, but I crossed my arms over my chest. “Yes,” I said, though it physically hurt to say the word. “I can’t be with someone who obviously doesn’t trust me.”

“That’s not what this is about,” Lilac said quickly.

“That might not be what it’s about to you, but that’s what it feels like to me.” I could feel tears pricking at the corners of my eyes.

Lilac looked miserable. “I can’t tell you. Not yet. Please, Marta, let me have more time.”

My heart was breaking. “I guess that’s my answer then,” I said, my voice cracking. As I turned to leave the room, Lilac reached for my arm, but I pulled it away. “I need some time. I don’t want to see or talk to you for a while, okay?”

And when I stepped out of the room, Lilac didn’t follow. I wasn’t sure if that was a relief, or if it was worse that he didn’t even try to come after me.

Glancing down the hallway, I thought about just going back to my room to wallow, but I heard a strange thud coming from the direction of Dani’s room, and I walked toward it.

“Dani?” I said, pushing open her door. “*Oh my god!*”

Dani was poised in the frame of her window, halfway out.

I raced over to her and grabbed her, pulling her back inside. “Dani! What’s going on?”

Dani looked angry and desperate. “I’m going to New Orleans to save my sister. Don’t try to stop me!” she added, pulling out of my grip.

“Didn’t Cali tell you not to do this? If she said not to, there must have been a good reason, don’t you think—”

“You don’t get it!” Dani burst out. “My sister is in danger! She was kidnapped! I can’t just sit here and do nothing when I know she’s in trouble!”

Dani so looked frantic, I almost forgot my own worries for a moment, but I wasn’t sure what I could do for her. But the last thing I wanted was my friend diving into something that could hurt her or put her in danger.

“Please, let’s just talk this out first,” I said.

Dani’s jaw was set in a determined sort of way, and I realized I was going to need some backup.

“Come with me,” I commanded, grabbing hold of her hand. “Please.”

Dani tried to pull back for a moment, but she finally gave in and let me drag her out of the room and down the hall.

I finally found Big Mac in a small study. She was sitting by the fire with Mrs. Smith. They were both reading and looked so cozy I almost regretted bothering them, but it was an emergency.

“Hey, sorry, could we speak to Big Mac, please?” I asked breathlessly from the doorway.

Both women looked up, surprised, but Mrs. Smith got to her feet.

“Good luck,” she said, giving her fiancée a quick kiss before she left the room.

Big Mac sighed. “What is it?”

For a moment I felt a real sense of guilt. I knew Big Mac rarely got any time off from the pack’s problems, but I knew I needed someone more powerful than I was to convince Dani of the risks.

“Cali and the others found Dani’s sister in New Orleans,” I started.

Big Mac nodded. “They told me something of the sort, but that’s a big deal.”

I was grateful that she was aware of the scale of the situation. That would save me some explaining.

“Cali said that it’s too dangerous for Dani to go to New Orleans right now because Tabitha—that’s Dani’s sister—was kidnapped. And I wanted to know if you agreed with that assessment,” I said, all in a rush. “Because whatever you think, that’s what we’ll do. Right, Dani?”

Big Mac looked at me, then at Dani. She finally sighed and stood, tossing her book onto her chair. “Look, I spoke with Greyson earlier. All about Tabitha and the magic in the city. Magic for witches in New Orleans has been effectively turned off. It seems like only witches in that southern quadrant are affected by it, since I’m still able to cast. But Dani.” Big Mac’s voice was grave. “You need to think seriously about this. If your sister was targeted because of her ability to negate magic…”

Dani opened her mouth to respond, then closed it. With a gulp she said, “She can do that?”

Big Mac nodded. “It seems you and your sister have very similar abilities in how they operate, despite being different.” Dani took this in, and Big Mac continued. “So what do you think those witches would do with *your* power? They could spread their non-magic bubble even wider. Can you honestly say that you could control that? After only a few weeks with a mentor?”

“I don’t need magic to save my sister,” Dani finally said stubbornly.

Big Mac gave her a steady look. “You’d be going up against some of the most powerful witches in the country. Do you really think you’re just going to shove past them and grab your sister without the use of magic?”

Dani scowled. “I wouldn’t be alone.”

“Exactly. There are already two Alpha wolves and two Fae there, working their asses off to save your sister. Do you think you could help them without actually having magic?” Big Mac asked.

“I could try,” Dani said stubbornly.

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “And would you want to bet your sister’s life on a *try*?”

That seemed to finally deflate Dani. “Fine,” she said disconsolately. “Maybe you’re right.”

Big Mac stepped up to the girl and put comforting hand on her shoulder. “I can see this is hard on you, Dani. I’m sorry. I understand that you feel helpless. But we don’t know everything that’s going on in that city, or *why* it’s happening. I don’t want to send you in there without knowing all the details. I can’t have you getting hurt. Not on my watch.”

Tears filled Dani’s eyes, and she nodded. “Okay,” she said in a shaking voice.

“Come on,” Big Mac said, putting her arm around the girl’s shoulders. “Let’s get you to Sabine. She’ll make you some hot cocoa.”

Dani nodded and let the older witch lead her out of the room.

I let out a sigh of deep relief. Dani seemed to have given up her plan to go running after her sister, and I couldn’t have been happier about that. But now that Dani’s issue was taken care of, my thoughts immediately went back to my own problems, and my head ached as I thought about the ultimatum I’d just given Lilac.

Had I been too harsh? He’d looked so upset. But he *was* keeping something from me. I was sure of it.

Maybe I should explain to him why that was so upsetting to me, rather than just make demands of him. Despite what I’d said to him, I didn’t want to give up on us. Not like this.

I needed to talk to him again.

I headed upstairs and back to his room. His door was partially open, and I was about to knock when I heard a female voice. I paused, and, though I couldn’t see who it was, I recognized Violet’s voice.

“—and what did you think was going to happen?” she was asking. “You *are* keeping a secret!”

“But it’s just so she won’t get upset!” Lilac said. I could see him pacing back and forth.

“Well, it’s too late now. She’s upset no matter what.” Violet paused. “She deserves the truth, Lilac, so she can make the choice *with* you.”

“But I don’t even know what I want,” Lilac said, running a hand through his hair.

Violet made an annoyed sound. “That can come later, man. Right now, you have to tell her that you’ve found your mate!”

I gasped, and Lilac turned, drawn to the noise, and looked directly at me through the crack in the door.

# Episode 3186

**Greyson**

Standing in the quiet hallway after Cali had gone inside, I watched Clementine’s door closely, my mind spinning a thousand scenarios about what could be happening in her apartment. I wished I could hear what they were talking about, but the apartment building—the converted church—was so old, the walls and doors were all too thick to hear through clearly. Even with my extra-sensitive werewolf hearing, I was only picking up every other word or so.

I considered mind linking with Cali, but I didn’t know what was happening in there, and I didn’t want to risk distracting her. Not when she was talking to a witch.

“Hey, guys, we should come up with a plan while we’re out here,” Mikah said quietly.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea,” Gabriel agreed.

“We need to get into the greenhouse without being blasted to kingdom come by the only witches in the southern states who still have magic. Then we rescue Tabitha and turn everyone’s magic back on. There. That’s the plan,” I said, not taking my eyes off the door.

Mikah chuckled. “Yeah, that’s a helluva plan, man, but we might want to work out a few of the minor details.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Now that we know that some of those witches can still use their magic, they’re definitely going to have some magical protection over that greenhouse. Especially if that’s where they’re keeping Tabitha,” he pointed out. “So we’re not just going to be able to stroll into the place. We’re going to need some magic of our own.”

I thought I saw where he was going with that, and I scowled.

“Yeah, that’s true. Hey, maybe we can get Cali to use her Fae magic,” Gabriel suggested, catching on.

“*No*,” Xavier and I said together.

Gabriel backed up, holding out his hands. “Sorry, sorry, guys. It was just a suggestion.”

“Absolutely not,” I said.

“Listen, Greyson,” Gabriel said, his voice reasonable. “Cali can use her magic, and no one else can. That’s important, and it just seems ridiculous not to take advantage of that.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t plan to ask her to put herself at risk for this.”

“Yeah, you can fucking forget about that,” Xavier added hotly.

Mikah shrugged. “Well, to be fair, she’s already at risk. We all are. Those witches aren’t going to be happy to see us, not after what we pulled.”

I hated having that pointed out to me, and I hated it even more because I knew he was right. So even though everything in me fought against it, I thought the suggestion over. Gabriel and Mikah *were* right—we did have Cali and her magic—but that was one Fae against a bunch of witches. When Cali could control her magic, she was plenty strong, but the odds still weren’t good, even with the rest of us there to help her.

I shook my head. “No, there must be another way into that greenhouse. Other than that first way we went in. We just have to think.”

“I hate to point this out,” Mikah said slowly, “but what if Tabby *isn’t* at the greenhouse?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if she’s not there?”

“She has to be. It’s the only place that makes sense so far,” I said. “It’s a witch meeting place.”

Mikah rubbed a hand thoughtfully along his jaw. “I agree with Greyson. I think we should try to find a way inside. No matter what, the witches are hiding something in there, and we should find out what that is. But I just want to make sure we’re going in there with a backup plan, just in case Tabby isn’t there. We need to have a step two.”

“If she’s not there, then I’m just going to have to crush some skulls to find out where the fuck she is,” Gabriel growled dangerously.

“Okay, okay, take a breath, Gabe,” Mikah said, glancing over at the werewolf, his deep voice mild. “We not going to be able to help anyone if we go in there blinded by anger. We have to be able to think this through.”

Gabriel took a deep breath and visibly relaxed as Mikah spoke, then nodded in agreement. I was surprised to see it. Gabriel had always had a hair-trigger temper, but it seemed that Mikah had a calming effect on him.

I was about to say something about it when a door down the hall opened suddenly.

A tall, unkept man stepped out and looked disdainfully at us, and I got the sudden whiff of a vampire. It was a heavy, sickly-sweet smell. The scent of rot.

I tensed, and I felt Xavier do the same. Mikah stepped forward.

“Good afternoon,” he said in a diplomatic voice.

The other vamp looked Mikah up and down with a sneer, then looked past him, at the rest of us. “I don’t think this building allows *pets*.”

I rolled my eyes. This was perfect. Exactly the kind of interaction I wanted to add to the day. A snarky vampire.

“What was that?” Gabriel asked testily, stepping forward.

“Yeah, you want to repeat that?” Xavier asked, his voice laced with threat.

“We’re just visiting a friend,” Mikah said hastily, trying to redirect the conversation.

“We’re not looking for any trouble, man. Why don’t you do us all a favor and just move along?” I added, trying to help Mikah out.

“A *friend*?” The vamp scoffed. “Can dogs even have friends?” he asked, clearly enjoying pushing everyone’s buttons. He looked at Mikah. “Be sure to clean up after your animals. The police ticket in this neighborhood for not cleaning up after your *dogs* when they do their business.”

There was a beat of tense silence, and the vampire’s words hung in the air.

“That fucking does it!” Gabriel bellowed, breaking the silence. He lunged at the vampire, who grinned maniacally.

The vamp bared his fangs and leapt toward Gabriel. “Come and get it!”

Xavier shouted, leaping after his friend into the fray.

For a moment there was nothing but a confusing tangle of arms and legs and the sickening thump of punches landing on flesh. When I looked over at Mikah, he sighed wearily.

“We should probably stop them before they crush the guy,” he said.

“Probably,” I said as the vampire yelped in surprised pain.” I lifted an eyebrow. “Maybe let’s give them ten seconds, though?”

Mikah rolled his eyes. “Five.”

“That’s fair.”

Mikah and I walked slowly toward the fight as Gabriel and Xavier took turns punching the vampire. He was backed against the wall and, between taking the blows, looked pretty worried that perhaps he had bitten off more than he could chew.

Finally, just as I was about to grab Xavier’s arm, the sound of a door bursting open rang through the hallway, followed by a shouting female voice:

“Carl! Are you kidding me? Did you start *another* fight?”

We all froze, then turned to see a woman step toward us, her eyes flashing dangerously. “If the board finds out about this, you’re going to get kicked out of the building. This would be your *third* strike, Carl.”

The vampire—Carl—scowled. “I don’t like strange *animals* in my building.”

“You fucking *fuck*—” Gabriel reared back, preparing to slam his fist into Carl’s already disturbingly bent nose, but I grabbed his hand and pulled him back.

“Enough,” I said firmly. “Stop.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “Go home, Carl.”

The vampire sneered at the woman but pulled himself out of Xavier’s grasp and stormed back into his apartment, slamming the door behind him.

The woman turned to me. “Sorry about him. He really isn’t the most pleasant vampire to have as a neighbor. He wouldn’t pick up anyone else’s mail if his immortal life depended on it.”

We all just stood there, awkwardly staring at the woman. I was pretty sure we were too surprised by her sudden appearance to do anything but nod.

But she seemed perfectly at ease, and she smiled at us. “Anyway, I’m Harlow. Are you clients of Clementine’s?”

Before we could answer, Harlow took a second look at me, then cocked her head, and in a flash, I realized that I recognized her. Harlow must have realized it as well, because her smile faded as recognition dawned.

“Wait,” she said, “you’re the werewolves and the vampire from last night, at The Bad Penny!” She pointed at me. “And you were the one asking me about the witch council. *And* trying to flirt. Which was pretty damn cute.” She smiled again.

Xavier gave me a sideways glance, and I was immensely glad Cali wasn’t out here listening to this.

“Well this is funny,” Harlow continued.

“Why is this funny?” Gabriel asked, rubbing his knuckles.

“I was actually going to go out to try to find the four of you today,” she said.

“Really? Why?” Xavier asked, surprised.

“Because,” Harlow said, “I need your help.”

# Episode 3187

Without another thought, I rushed to the door and put my hands out, blocking the way.

“What are you doing, Caliana?” Clementine demanded.

“I can’t let you do that,” I said breathlessly.

The witch brandished the knife, which glinted menacingly. “Let me go. I don’t want to hurt you, girl.”

I shook my head. “Clementine, please, think about what you’re saying. This is a *person*, and they don’t deserve to die. They’re being used by these witches. They’re a victim!”

“I don’t *care*!” Clementine snapped. “I want my magic back, and there’s only one way to do that.”

“NO!” I bellowed, and thrust out my arms toward the woman.

Hit with a blast of my magic, Clementine went flying back, the knife clattering out of her hand as she hit the wall and slumped to the floor. She was still for a moment, then she got unsteadily to her feet, looking disoriented.

“What the *hell* was that?” she asked, shaking her head. “I thought magic was turned off.”

“Not all magic. My Fae magic seems to work. In small bursts,” I added quickly.

Clementine considered me for a long moment. “I have to say, I’m impressed, Caliana Hart. I didn’t think you had it in you. Maybe you *can* figure out this issue.”

I nodded. “I’m sure we can. So does that mean you’ll let us handle this situation ourselves?”

Clementine bent to retrieve the knife. She looked at it for a moment, then tossed it back onto her bed. “I don’t want to go on a suicide mission. I might as well wait for y’all to try, and if you die in the process, then I’ll go in and kill this person without worrying about you getting on my case about it.”

I winced at this, but I nodded. At least I’d gotten the witch to agree not to rush out the door to hunt down Tabitha. It didn’t seem like much of a victory, but it *was* what I’d wanted.

“So are you saying the deal is still on?” I asked slowly.

Clementine stared at me for a moment, then burst out laughing, showing off her straight, white teeth. “Really? You’re going to ask me to help you after you just attacked me?”

“Hey, you threatened me first,” I pointed out. “Remember?”

She laughed again and nodded. “Well, well, well. You’re really not the mousy little girl I thought you were when you first walked in here. Okay, I’ll respect the deal we made. As long as you can confirm payment.” She narrowed her eyes. “*Can* you confirm payment?”

I nodded. “When the magic is turned back on—and when you prove you can find the person we’re looking for—you’ll get your Fae blood.”

The witch thought about that for a moment, then held out her hand. I shook it, and we smiled at each other, finally reaching an understanding. But before we could say anything more, we heard a crash from outside the door, followed by shouts.

It was coming from the hallway, and I spun around, my heart beating fast. My mates!

Clementine reached the door first and opened it to show Greyson, Mikah, Xavier, and Gabriel standing at the end of the hallway. Xavier and Gabriel looked a bit rumpled and bruised, and there was a woman standing with them who I didn’t know.

“Because I need your help,” the woman was saying. “It’s something—”

“Help with what?” I interrupted, striding down the hall toward the group. “What’s going on?”

I looked around. Gabriel’s shirt was torn, and I could see a fresh cut on Xavier’s cheek, though it was already healing. “What the hell happened? I left you alone out here for like two seconds!”

“We’re fine,” Xavier said off-handedly. “It was just some asshole bloodsucker causing trouble.”

“*What?*” I gasped.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Gabriel added.

Mikah closed his eyes and pressed his index fingers to his temples.

I frowned as I looked from face to face. Why were they being so open about the supernatural in front of this stranger? Was that just something we did now? Or was she a supernatural, too?

Greyson stepped toward me. “What happened with Clementine?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but I glanced over at the stranger and closed it again. I wasn’t sure how much to say in front of this random woman, but I knew my mates needed to know what had happened.

“Um, we reached an agreement,” I said, keeping it vague. “We’re on, once this little—uh—problem is fixed.”

“You mean the magic problem?” the woman asked, looking over at me keenly. She smiled at the confusion on my face. “I’m Harlow. I’m a witch. I was just telling your friends that I needed their help, and it’s with exactly that.”

“How’s that?” Greyson asked. Then he shook his head. “Maybe you should start at the beginning.”

“I’m a New Orleans witch,” Harlow explained. “Every witch in the city has lost their magic.”

*Except for the council of five witches we ran into earlier*. But I kept that information to myself for the moment.

“—and we’re pissed,” Harlow continued. “There was no warning, no heads-up. They just cut it all off.”

“Your witch council still has it,” Mikah said.

Harlow spun to look at him, her eyes flashing again. “What did you say?”

“It’s true,” confirmed Gabriel. “Your witch council still has their magic. Ask anyone.”

She looked stunned. Like she’d been slapped. “What? Is this true?”

I nodded.

Harlow’s face flushed. “That just makes this that much more important.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“A lot of my sister witches and I don’t agree with the direction the elders are taking,” Harlow explained.

Clementine had finally joined us at the end of the hall, and she chimed in. “A lot of other witches are in the same boat, even if they’re not New Orleans witches, but it’s hard to make change if you don’t have enough power.”

“That’s true,” Harlow agreed. “And exactly my problem. I want to turn magic back on, but I need muscle to do it. We might not be able to convince them on our own.” She smiled. “And who better than a group of werewolves and a vampire?”

*And a half-Fae with Fae powers*, I thought to myself.

The guys all looked around at each other. They looked optimistic, but I wasn’t sure if this was such a good idea. There were just so many variables with something like this. We didn’t know anything about this woman, or if we could even trust her. And even if we *could* trust her, could we really fight a bunch of witches?

But—on the other hand—if Harlow *was* telling the truth and she was a New Orleans witch, then that would mean we’d have an insider on our side. That might be just what we needed to finally understand this complex city and its supernatural politics.

*Can we trust her?* I asked each of my mates in turn.

*We can at least hear her out*, Greyson responded.

*We shouldn’t lower our defenses*, Xavier said. *I don’t trust any of these witches.*

*I agree.*

“How do we know we can trust you?” Xavier asked Harlow out loud, cutting to the chase.

“You don’t, I guess, but I only have one goal right now. To get our magic turned back on. And if I’m understanding correctly that a friend of yours is involved in why this happened, we might be able to help each other out.”

I shared a glance with my mates.

“Maybe we could go somewhere to talk about this,” I said. I glanced back at Clementine, who was leaning against the hallway wall. “Thanks for your help. I really appreciate you agreeing to our deal. We’ll be in touch, okay?”

Clementine nodded and pushed herself upright. “You be careful out there, Caliana.”

“You too, Clementine. And don’t worry about us. We take care of ourselves.” I turned back to Harlow and the rest of the guys, but before we could go anywhere, Clementine gripped my hand.

“Since I’m trusting you to end this magic moratorium, let me give you some information that might help you.”

“What?” I asked.

“I just found this out last night. I was playing with these before the shutdown.” She waved her hand, almost like she was doing a cheesy magic trick, and Xavier’s fused medals appeared in her hands. My breath caught as I watched.

Xavier stepped forward. “What? What did you find?” he asked.

“I was just poking around, doing a little research to find out if I wanted to be involved in any of this—”

“And now you are, so just tell us,” Greyson said. “We’re not playing games.”

Clementine gave him a chilly look, then turned back to Xavier. “The person who cast the revenge magic on these medals is *in* this city.”

Shit. My heart sank as dark realization broke over me like a crashing wave. The vampire-witch must have followed us here.

# Episode 3188

“The vampire-witch is in New Orleans?” I couldn’t believe it. I looked over at Xavier warily.

*Does that mean he’s in danger?*

I’d thought, maybe foolishly, that the bright side to coming out to New Orleans was that the only danger we’d face would be directly involved with locating Seluna’s ashes. It had never occurred to me that the vampire-witch would follow us here.

Xavier frowned as he looked at Clementine. “How do you know this?”

“Just before the city’s magic shut down, I was able to trace the revenge magic through the medal. It was easy because it didn’t have far to go. I have no doubt the person responsible for casting that spell is here, in New Orleans, as we speak.”

“That can’t be a coincidence, right?” I looked from Clementine’s face to Xavier’s. “Did they follow us all the way from Oregon? To what end?”

Clementine shrugged. “I can’t answer that. It could mean any number of things. The vampire-witch could be following you, or they could have business here that doesn’t involve you at all. But you’re right, Cali, it doesn’t *seem* like a coincidence.”

I bit my lip. That was the last thing we needed. We were already facing an ancient and powerful coven who, in a crazy *actual* coincidence, had abducted Dani’s sister and were using her to take over New Orleans. We already more than had our work cut out for us—throwing the vampire-witch into the mess was a disaster waiting to happen.

“This is good news,” Xavier declared.

I found that *ridiculously* hard to believe. “*How?* The person who put a revenge spell on you has stalked us across the country!”

“Sure, but at least now we know the pack house isn’t in danger from the vampire-witch.”

“But *you* are,” I pressed.

He shook his head. “You have it backward. We know she’s here now. We’ll have the element of surprise now, instead of her. We can use that to get to her and finally get the upper hand. All we have to do is find out where she’s staying.

Clementine shook her head. “I can’t help with that. At least, not until I have my magic back.”

“I imagine the vampire-witch is having the same problem,” Greyson mused. “She’ll be unable to use her magic, which gives us an even greater edge.”

Even without her magic, I hated the idea of my mates going toe-to-toe with a being so powerful—and one who clearly had it out for Xavier, and me by extension.

“How are we going to find her?” I asked.

“Well, if we can restore the magic, which is on our list anyway, we might be able to track her again,” Clementine said.

I narrowed my eyes at the witch. Her interest in our problem was entirely self-serving. She couldn’t have cared less about Xavier’s problems, or about keeping any of us safe. But I guessed that was fair enough. We could be fair-weather allies, then go our own ways.

“You should still be careful,” Clementine said, giving Xavier a pointed look. “That vampire-witch might not have her magic, but she’s still a vampire. And still powerful.”

My mate shrugged and wiped some dried blood from his bruised cheek. “I can handle a vampire.”

Mikah gave Xavier a glare that would have made a lesser man recoil, but Xavier just smirked.

“You got something you want to add, Mikah?” he asked.

The vampire crossed his arms over his chest and rolled his eyes. Gabriel moved to stand next to him.

“It might have been nice to know you were being stalked,” Gabriel said to Xavier. “You know, cards on the table and all that.”

Xavier shrugged. “Maybe you should just assume I’m in danger until proven otherwise at this point. Besides, it doesn’t change anything. We’re still taking out the witches who abducted Tabitha. We’ll just have a new task on our list along the way.”

Harlow nudged my arm. “If you and your friends”—she gestured to Xavier and Greyson—“can protect me, I’ll help them find your friend and restore the magic.”

I frowned. “Sorry, protect you from what?”

It wasn’t like me to refuse help to someone who needed it, especially someone who was willing to help us out too, but our to-do list here in New Orleans was getting pretty long. And the second the magic returned, I was going right back to my old self: cursed, with little time to spare. Could we really add another element to this job?

*I’m already having a hard time wrapping my head around everything!*

“Protect me from this vampire—his name is Albin. He came to me and wanted me to do a spell for him, and I refused. He’s not exactly used to hearing the word ‘no,’ and he considered it a huge insult that I wasn’t willing to take on the job. He’s never forgiven me for refusing, and he’s been after me ever since.” Harlow sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Without my magic to shield me, I’m a sitting duck.”

I nodded, then turned to Xavier and Greyson. “What do you think?”

Xavier grimaced. “This isn’t exactly what we came down here for.”

“It’s not,” Greyson agreed, “but if this is the best way—or, hell, the *only* way—we can do what we came here for, then we’ve got no other choice.”

They both made good points. I, like Xavier, hesitated to sign up for anything more than what we’d come here for, but Greyson wasn’t wrong. We needed to do whatever it took to get the ashes back. And that started with taking down the New Orleans witches. And it probably wouldn’t hurt to get all the help we could.

I turned back to Harlow. “I accept your offer. We’ll do our best to protect you from Albin, and in return, you’ll help us find Tabitha.”

“Albin is as impulsive as he is cunning. Don’t let his outward appearance deceive you. He looks like a tall, gangly, nerdy kind of white guy—someone who couldn’t hurt a fly—but don’t be fooled.”

I thought of Iñigo and Sabyr, of the careful personas they wove around them—and how easy it was for them to reveal the true depths of their savagery.

I nodded. “Don’t worry. We have a lot of experience dealing with vampires. Greyson and Xavier in particular are more than a match for Albin.”

“Cali, Xavier, can I talk to you for a second?” Greyson asked.

He pulled us outside.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Is something wrong?”

Greyson heaved a breath. “Outside of the obvious? I think we should be careful—we’ve been making deals and alliances left and right with people we know nothing about. If we weren’t so out of our depth here, I’d say we were asking for all of this to blow up in our faces.”

Xavier scowled. “You’re the one who agreed to help Harlow right away. You want to be the one to tell her we’re going to nix the deal we just made? Be my guest.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Obviously, I’m not saying we should cut and run right now.”

“Are you sure? Because you can’t have it both ways. You don’t get to play the caution card and then sign us up for guard duty on every witch who comes along.”

“That’s not what I’m doing. I’m just saying we need to be careful.”

I was reminded suddenly how much of their petty squabbling Greyson and Xavier had been setting aside recently for my own benefit. Their sibling relationship was getting better, sure, but their rivalry was clearly as strong as ever. And now, just like back at the pack house, Xavier didn’t like Greyson calling the shots.

“I thought I was being careful when I suggested we not add any more dead weight or complications to this plan,” Xavier huffed.

“Harlow is offering to help us. If you have a better idea on how to make this anti-magic bubble go away, I’m open to hearing it.”

“I’m only pointing out that for once, I wasn’t the one rushing ahead here. I was being cautious, so don’t pull me aside to lecture me about safety.”

I rolled my eyes. “It doesn’t matter right now! I made the deal with Harlow—and with Clementine. We need help, and they’ve both offered. We don’t know enough about what we’re up against to refuse help. Got it?”

Even Artemis was chipping in to help by agreeing to give her blood to an unknown witch. My stomach twisted at the thought, and I sighed. *Maybe Greyson’s right. We do need to be more cautious about making any new allies.*

“So, we all agree?” I pressed. “Can we move forward?”

Both of my mates nodded, though I could tell Xavier was still a bit miffed. He’d just have to learn to deal.

I led them back inside and turned to Harlow. “It’s official. We’ll help you out.”

She nodded. “That’s great. I’ll start gathering everything I know about the elder witches and all their known and even unknown locales around the city.”

Xavier narrowed his gaze on the witch. “If we’re going to protect you from this vampire, we need to know more about him. What does he look like? Where is he hiding out?”

She shrugged. “I can take you right to Albin, but first tell me, have any of you ever been on a jazz cruise?”

# Episode 3189

**Xavier**

This was fucking ridiculous. We were supposed to be taking out a coven of super powerful witches who were holding all of the magic in the city hostage, and instead, here I was flipping through a rack of overpriced men’s formal jackets like an asshole.

*I can’t believe we have to play dress up to attend this jazz cruise.*

I couldn’t think of many things to do in New Orleans that were more touristy than a jazz cruise, and last I checked, white tennis shoes weren’t formal wear. Why the hell did I have to change my clothing?

“Xavier, how long does it take to pick an outfit?” Gabe laughed. “Go for the Bond look—it’s timeless.”

Naturally, Greyson, Mikah, and Gabe had already picked out their tuxedos for the night. I had no idea what the latter two had picked out, but I’d seen Greyson eyeing a dove-grey three-piece suit earlier. I sometimes had to wonder if my brother had a licensing deal with the color grey or something.

Apparently, he hadn’t gotten the message about black being the new black.

“And generic,” Mikah added, “which may come in handy if we get into trouble. It’s always better not to risk standing out when you’re venturing into parts unknown.”

Gabe slanted a smile at him. “You have a knack for making an undercover job sound boring as hell.”

The vampire frowned. “Thank you?”

Gabe slung an arm around his shoulders. “Anytime. I know how important it is for me to help keep you grounded.”

Mikah rolled his eyes and turned to me. “Think you can find a suit soon and put us all out of our misery? He’s insufferable when he gets bored.”

“*He* can hear you.”

While Gabe and Mikah kept bickering, I turned back to the rack of jackets. I grabbed one with a lavender lapel.

*Cali might like a splash of color.*

Plus, it had the added benefits of ruining Gabe’s Bond suggestion, ignoring Mikah’s “generic” comment, and setting me apart from Greyson. A triple win.

I draped the suit over my arm and headed to the dressing room to show it to Cali. Fortunately, the upscale boutique Harlow had suggested we stop at catered to both masculine and feminine tastes.

I stopped short, my jaw dropping as Cali stepped out of the dressing room in a form-fitting sequined flapper dress.

“Holy shit,” I breathed.

She frowned. “What’s wrong? Does it look that bad?”

I shook my head. “Hell no. The only thing that’s wrong is that I have to share you with a boatload of strangers. You look beautiful.”

I set the suit I’d selected on a chair just outside the dressing rooms and took Cali by the hand, pulling her behind a rack of feather boas.

“What are you doing?”

“What do you think?” I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her. “Don’t think I’d make it through this little trip without kissing you, especially when you look like that.”

“Right.” She laughed. “So, this is a preventative thing.”

“Mm. Yeah. Something like that.”

She smiled and led me back to the dressing area. Immediately, she zeroed in on the jacket I’d selected.

“Lavender lapels?” Her brows rose.

“Is it too much?”

She shook her head. “It’s perfect. They bring out the color in your eyes. Go try it on.”

I loved having Cali’s approval like this. The grin on her face was more than worth the smirk from Gabe.

“You look great!” Cali grinned.

I glanced at the full-length mirror in front of the dressing room and looked myself up and down. “It’s a good fit.”

“It’s a *great* fit,” she said. She pressed herself against my side so we could get the full effect of our appearance in the mirror.

Gabe sidled up to us with a low whistle. “You’re going full nineteen-twenties, I see.” He winked at Cali. “If you wanted a Gatsby, all you had to do was ask. I think I’d make a better one than this sourpuss.”

I rolled my eyes. “How did things go for Gatsby again? I seem to remember him floating facedown in a pool. Not exactly a perfect ending for a pretty face like yours, Gabe.”

Mikah came over and carefully placed a hat on Gabe’s head.

Gabe took one look in the mirror and grimaced. “No, not feeling the hat.”

“It’ll add anonymity. Make you less identifiable.”

Gabe took the hat off and pressed it into Mikah’s hands. “I’ll take the risk.”

“Hey, you guys think we can get going sometime today?” Greyson cut in.

I smirked at him. *Guess the Big Bad Redwood Alpha doesn’t like feeling left out.*

After purchasing our fancy outfits for the evening and changing, we took an Uber over to a dock in the French Quarter, on the banks of the Mississippi River. The riverboat was like something out of an old movie, three stories tall and made of polished white wood and steel with three smoke stacks protruding from the top.

Greyson headed to the counter to buy our tickets, and Gabe straightened. He put on what I could only imagine he thought was some kind of posh accent. “How do I look? Fancy, I hope?”

Mikah laughed. “These cruises are mainly for tourists. Try not to get too excited.”

“But we *are* tourists,” Cali reminded him, then glanced at Gabe with a grin. “So we can get as excited as we want.”

Greyson returned with the tickets, handing one to each of us. “Remember, we’re here to find Albin and make sure he’s not going to be a problem for us, or Harlow. We’re not here for the scenic cruise.”

“But if we enjoy the scenic cruise *while* we take care of Albin, then all the better,” Cali added.

My brother gave her a rueful smile. He was never going to argue with her when she sounded so excited. He led us up the gangplank and onto the boat.

Gabe and Mikah stuck close to me.

“So, what’s the plan here?” Gabe asked.

“It’s easy. We find Albin—he should be pretty obvious, since he’s the sax player in the jazz band—and we threaten to use him as gator chum if he goes anywhere near Harlow.”

Mikah glanced around the boat, no doubt cataloguing any number of Sherlockian observations that might come in handy. “Let’s wait until there’s a break in the set—that way we can talk to Albin discreetly. The last thing we want to do is cause a scene. Remember, we don’t have much in the way of exit strategies if things go sideways. I’ll go find out when the band will start playing.”

He headed off, leaving Gabe and me alone. Greyson and Cali were talking nearby, standing next to the railing and looking out over the Mississippi River.

*No touristy shit, my ass.*

I was about to head over there when Gabe spoke. “So, how are things going with you and Cali?”

I tore my eyes away from my mate. “They’re good. And once all this bullshit is behind us, I expect we’ll be in an even better place.”

Gabe chuckled. “Who’d have thought a douche like you would end up head over heels?”

I smacked his arm. “Excuse me? Pot meet kettle.”

I noticed Gabe’s gaze shifting toward Mikah, who was reading the placard on the wall that detailed the schedule of events.

“So, you and Fangs are pretty serious, huh?” I asked.

Mikah turned to look at Gabe, as if he’d felt the werewolf’s eyes on him, and smiled. Gabe laughed, even though I hadn’t said anything and Mikah was a ways off.

I remembered what Gabe had said about the two of them being mates. I still couldn’t wrap my head around it—the concept of a werewolf being mated to a vampire, our natural enemy. I’d never known that was even a possibility. It was totally different from any mating I’d heard of before. Even Lola and Jay—as unique as their situation was, they’d both been (mostly) werewolves when their mate bond took root.

Not that my own mate situation could ever be called conventional.

“Hey, it’s rude to mind link in the middle of a conversation with someone.”

Gabe shot back, “Hey, it’s rude to interrupt a mind link between mates.”

“You know, I’ve never seen this side of you. I never thought you were the type to settle down—commit. You’ve always lived the mercenary lifestyle to its fullest.”

“And that all changed when I met Mikah.” A smile tugged at his lips. “Not that it was all flowers and sunshine right away—it was more like a slow drip.”

I patted his shoulder. “I’m happy for you, man.” I looked over at Cali again. “I used to think the same thing about myself, for what it’s worth, but ever since Cali entered my life, I haven’t wanted anyone else.”

*Despite who my wolf thinks he wants.*

Cali glanced over and noticed me staring at her. She smiled, and I swear to god, I felt butterflies in my stomach. *She looks so hot in that dress.*

Gabe slapped me on the back. “Who’d have thought we’d both end up mated, huh?”

Before I could respond, the blast of a trumpet echoed across the boat. The band was about to perform.

*Let’s get this show on the road.*

# Episode 3190

I’d never realized trumpets could be so… *loud*.

I grimaced at the brassy sound. “I think that’s our cue.”

Greyson took my hand. “Shall we?”

I gestured to Xavier to follow us and then let Greyson lead me in the direction of the dance floor. Xavier, Mikah, and Gabriel were hot on our heels. As soon as we were within sight of the band, my gaze zeroed in on the musicians. I tried not to stare, but I couldn’t help doing a double take when I saw the saxophone player.

*That’s Albin?* That’s *the vampire Harlow is so afraid of?*

He didn’t look anything like I’d imagined. Albin was wearing a suit two sizes too big and reminded me more of a member of a high school marching band than of a vicious, bloodthirsty vampire powerful enough to scare the hell out of a formidable witch.

But I’d learned the hard way not to judge a book by its cover. Albin might’ve looked like a wimpy nerd, in a way, but he was still very much a vampire. And if what Harlow had said was true, then there was a chance he could turn on a dime and hurt a lot of people before we managed to get him under control.

More guests crowded around us, wanting to hear the band play.

*That makes sense. This is a jazz cruise, right?*

The other guests were dressed to the nines like we were, and I felt like I was in an old movie. Like I was on the rich people’s deck in *Titanic*, only with a distinctly Southern flavor. I felt more and more impressed as I looked around the room.

The decor on the walls felt classy and old-timey, and the hardwood floors were polished to a shine. Back at the boutique, I’d worried that we might end up looking out of place, overdressed. But everyone looked fancy. Even my two mates had gone all in, and they both looked handsome in their own way; Greyson with his more understated, elegant look, and Xavier with his pop of color.

Xavier sidled up to me, his brows rising as he took in the band. “*That’s* Albin? I think bringing all five of us might have been overkill. Cali, you could probably take this guy even without your magic.”

I wrinkled my nose. “That doesn’t sound half as flattering as you might think. Besides, you shouldn’t underestimate him. If he’s got a witch scared to face him, that means he’s definitely *some* amount of trouble.”

“Let’s try to get a closer look,” Mikah suggested as Albin broke into a saxophone solo.

*Huh*. *He doesn’t sound half bad. Better than the trumpet, anyway.*

If we got a chance to talk to him after we got him off Harlow’s case, my first question was going to be why a powerful undead being was employed as a musician on a jazz cruise.

The dance floor was already filling up.

“How do we get close to him?” I asked.

Gabriel grabbed Mikah’s hand. “We’ve done this before. We dance our way over.”

He led Mikah out onto the dance floor, stopping near the band but not right in front of them, and the two of them began to move together with an effortlessness I admired.

“They look happy together.” I sighed dreamily. “And I had no idea they were both such good dancers!”

“Mikah must have made Gabe take lessons,” Xavier said. “The guy was born with two left feet.”

“We’re going to need to get a closer look, too,” Greyson said, looking at me. He held out his hand to me just as Xavier did the same thing. They asked in unison, “May I have this dance?”

I blinked, and heat rushed into my cheeks.

*They couldn’t have done that any more perfectly if they’d practiced it.*

Still, the idea that two powerful, handsome werewolves wanted me never failed to make me swoon. Just a little.

Before I could really process the dual request, Greyson stepped back. “You two can have the first round.”

Xavier didn’t hesitate. He took my hand and spun me onto the dance floor. We half-danced, half-elbowed our way through the congested area until we had Albin in our sights. Then Xavier pulled me close as we moved in time with the other dancers.

“You really do look stunning,” he murmured.

“So do you.” I smiled, heat rising in my cheeks again. I knew I was supposed to be watching Albin, but all I wanted to do was look at Xavier and enjoy this rare, fleeting moment we had together.

With his lavender lapels bringing out his eyes, I was absolutely mesmerized by my mate. So much so that, for a moment, I almost forgot why we were here. For a moment, there was no Albin, no curse, no coven of witches, no kidnapped Tabitha.

For a moment, it was just Xavier and me, dancing together, enjoying this date, and nothing else mattered.

“Maybe we should come back to New Orleans sometime,” he mused. “Just the two of us. No witches, no vampires—just a chance to enjoy everything the city has to offer… and each other.”

He grinned mischievously, and I blushed deeper. Hopefully my flapper dress went well with a tomato complexion.

I caught sight of Greyson over Xavier’s shoulder. He was making his way over to an older woman who was standing by herself, swaying to the music. He spoke to her and held out his hand, and the woman grinned and took it.

My heart melted a little bit as Greyson led the woman out onto the dance floor. *That was seriously so sweet. He didn’t have to do that. He could have scoped out Albin from the crowd if he wanted to.*

Xavier guided us toward the stage, allowing us a better view of our mark.

His voice slipped into my mind. *Try not to stare.*

I glanced at Albin over Xavier’s shoulder. I could have been staring for all the vampire would have noticed. His eyes were closed, and he was playing his saxophone like it was some kind of religious experience.

*Not a bad musician at all. Shame about the whole vengeful vampire thing.*

Jazz wasn’t usually my taste, but Albin and his band were clearly skilled. Then again, Albin was a vampire. He might’ve looked like he was in his twenties, but he could easily have been hundreds of years old. That was a lot of time to practice the saxophone.

Xavier had started to sweep us to another part of the dance floor to avoid being detected when Mikah tapped on his shoulder. “May I cut in?”

My eyes widened, and Xavier kept dancing. “You’re joking, right?”

“Actually, I’m not. Don’t worry, Xavier. You’ll have a partner too.” Mikah gestured to Gabriel, who was standing nearby, gesturing for Xavier to come dance with him.

Xavier rolled his eyes and then looked at me. “Do you mind?”

I shook my head. “Not at all.”

Mikah had helped me more times than I could count, and I thought of him as a good friend. Besides, I would’ve *killed* to see Xavier and Gabe dancing together.

*Xavier will never let him lead.*

I laughed a bit at the thought, and Xavier relinquished me to Mikah, who took my hands in his cool ones and effortlessly guided us around the dance floor. He was a better dancer than Xavier or Greyson.

*Speaking of having a lot of time to master something…*

“I can’t remember if I’ve ever had a chance to properly thank you for everything you’ve done for me,” I said. “No matter what I throw at you, you always seem to have an answer. You helped Lola when she was going through her vampire issues. You’ve literally saved my life. What would I do without you?”

Mikah shook his head. “There’s really no need to thank me. I’m happy to help.” He spun us around, and I caught sight of Xavier trying to do the same thing to Gabriel.

*Ha! I called it!*

“Tell me about Tabitha’s sister, Dani,” Mikah said. “Is she really living at the pack house? It’s just that Tabitha’s been looking for her for so long—I don’t want to get her hopes up if this is some kind of mistake.”

“Dani is living there,” I confirmed. “The last time I saw her was the day we left for New Orleans. She’s been with us for a few months and seems to be doing well there. In fact, she’s the reason I tried to call Tabitha. You called me back, remember? But we had all kinds of weird interference.”

Mikah frowned. “I’m not sure what that was all about, but at least we’re all together now. I’m sure we’ll be able to figure it out with time.”

I smiled. “I think so too.”

The song came to an end, and Mikah bowed to me. “Thank you for the dance.”

“It was my pleasure. Don’t tell Xavier or Greyson this, but you’re the best dancer I’ve ever encountered.”

He smiled as he headed off to rejoin Gabe. I looked around for my mates, but they were hard to spot in the crowd. I headed to the bar. After those two dances, I needed something cool to drink.

As I stepped up to the bar, someone grabbed my arm and pulled me into a corner.

A tall, beautiful woman leaned into me, her eyes sparkling. She licked her lips. “I just love Fae blood. Are you on the menu?”

# Episode 3191

**Artemis**

This bench might’ve been one of the least comfortable seats I’d ever had the displeasure of sitting on. Every bump and divot on the tourist-filled cobblestone street vibrated straight up my spine. And I was a hearty, tough Fae who’d spent most of her life living in less than satisfactory living arrangements. How the hell did the average human get through this godforsaken carriage tour?

*Trust New Orleans to monetize a torture device that would fit right into the Fae world.*

And to think, I’d been excited to come here at first. Now, I couldn’t wait to find Adair, help break Cali’s curse, and get the hell out of here.

I winced as the carriage hit a particularly deep pothole and the whole thing lurched for a moment.

Rishika patted my thigh and leaned in. “Kudos to the tour guide for keeping things authentic, but this might be the worst touristy thing I’ve ever done.”

“Gods, the tour guide’s still talking?” I glanced up to the front of the carriage where, indeed, the tour guide was droning on about some historic fire and how tourists could still see the scars on the surviving buildings if they knew where to look.

I sighed and slumped against my seat, then immediately sat upright because slouching only made it even more uncomfortable.

*I wonder how Cali is doing with her search.*

I wished we could’ve been searching for the same thing. It would’ve made this trip so much easier, not to be constantly splitting up to cover more ground. It certainly didn’t seem to be helping us accomplish our objectives any faster.

Rishika squeezed my thigh. “This’ll be over soon. And then we can hopefully regroup with the others.”

I still hadn’t told Rishika about agreeing to give Clementine some of my rare Fae blood. I knew I should—that it wasn’t doing either of us any favors, for me to keep things close to my chest. I didn’t *want* to keep secrets from her, but there also hadn’t been a convenient time to bring it up.

I turned to her, keeping my voice low. “Do you know much about Fae blood?”

She frowned. “I mean… you have it? I’m not sure what you’re asking here.”

*Right. I need to be clearer.*

“Did you know that some supernatural beings prize Fae blood because of its potential magic? Oh, and I guess it can taste pretty good to vampires too,” I added with a shrug. “I’ve heard vampires think of it as anything from candy to a fine vintage of wine.”

Rishika’s brows rose. “Sorry, where are you going with this?”

I looked down at my lap, suddenly uncomfortable. “It’s just that… Clementine—that witch Cali hired to help track Seluna’s ashes after magic is restored to the city—she requires payment for her services. And the currency she wanted was a vial of my blood. I don’t know what she wants to use it for, and I didn’t ask. But I did agree to give it to her.”

“Okay?” Rishika still looked confused. “I mean, it’s your blood, right? It’s your call.”

“I still don’t know if I’m comfortable with the whole thing,” I admitted, “but Cali’s my sister, and I’d do anything to help her. And right now, this is one of the only things I *can* do to help her.”

“Then that’s that. I’ll support you no matter what.” Rishika’s eyes narrowed as she focused on something on the street. “Isn’t that Nikkos?”

I turned and looked out the other side of the carriage. It was, indeed, Nikkos. He was walking with purpose down a side street.

I narrowed my gaze on his retreating form, still pissed off that he hadn’t bothered to prepare us for the Fae in the bayou. Alleged ally or not, he was on my shit list now.

“It is. I wonder what he’s up to,” I said.

Rishika grabbed my hand. “Let’s bail on this and find out.”

And with that, she pulled me up and we hopped off the carriage, much to the tour guide’s alarm. He called after us as we continued down the street in the opposite direction.

*Sorry, there’s no way in hell I’m getting back on that thing.*

We made our way across the street in pursuit of Nikkos. We kept our pace tight enough to keep him in our sights at all times, but not so fast that we actually caught up to him.

“You should feel right at home,” Rishika joked, nudging me with her shoulder as we stalked the Fae through the streets. “Isn’t this a lot like what you used to do in the Fae world? Tracking people?”

“It is. The only difference here is I was trying to capture them.”

“Well, depending on what the hell this guy’s up to, capturing him isn’t out of the realm of possibility. After last night, I really don’t know if we can trust this guy.”

“Glad we’re on the same page there. So, what’s the plan?”

Rishika shrugged. “We follow him, see who he’s visiting, and maybe ask a few questions.”

A grin tugged at my lips. “So, we’re winging it.”

Heat colored her cheeks. “Not at all—I’m merely being flexible, as the situation requires.”

I could tell she was trying not to smile.

I leaned in and kissed her cheek. “It’s okay. I like it. It’s better than bouncing along in a carriage, at any rate. At least now I feel like we’re actually doing something productive to find my uncle. Wait, hold on.”

I pulled Rishika back as we reached the corner of the side street. Around the corner and farther down the street, Nikkos had stopped in front of a shop. I peeked around the corner carefully. *He didn’t spot us, did he?*

But he didn’t go into the shop, nor did he turn back to confront us. He continued on his way and didn’t look back once.

I waited a few seconds, then gestured for Rishika to follow me around the corner.

“Have I ever told you how sexy you are when you’re hunting someone?” she whispered.

“You have, but don’t ever stop.”

Rishika grinned. “Oh, I won’t.”

Suddenly Nikkos turned off the side street and down an alley.

I put a hand on Rishika’s shoulder again. “Stay here.”

I walked along the street after Nikkos, pretending to be just another tourist looking at the various shop windows. But I wasn’t browsing.

I glanced across the street, scanning the storefronts until I could make out a reflection of Nikkos stopping and crouching down in front of something on the ground. I couldn’t see exactly what from here, not with his body blocking it, but whatever had caught his attention, it was in that alley.

We’d have to follow him in to find out what it was.

I turned back to Rishika, gesturing for her to follow my lead. She hurried over, and I pointed out the reflection, where Nikkos could still be seen kneeling down.

“What do you think he’s doing?” Rishika asked.

“I have no idea. At first, I thought he was doing this as a diversion, a way to make sure he wasn’t being followed. Now, I’m not so sure. Maybe we can get closer to get a better look.”

We crept forward and peered around the edge of the alley.

Nikkos was brushing some leaves off the ground in front of him. He placed his hand over the ground, and a large metal disc popped out, revealing a dark tunnel.

“It’s a manhole cover,” Rishika explained in a low whisper. “I’d bet you anything that the tunnel leads straight to the sewers. Have you ever heard of a sewer rat?”

I shook my head.

Rishika nodded at Nikkos. “You’re watching one in action.”

Nikkos stiffened and spun around to look behind him, and we ducked back around the edge of the alley just in time to avoid being detected.

Some scraping and shuffling noises sounded from the alley, and we peered around the edge just in time to see Nikkos disappear into the tunnel. The cover closed up behind him, making it look like he’d never been there at all.

Rishika blinked. “What the fuck.”

She started toward the manhole cover, but I pulled her back. “Wait. Let’s make sure he’s not laying a trap or coming back for some reason.”

We waited for a long string of seconds, and Rishika turned to me with a huff. “Has it been long enough yet?”

I shrugged. “Let’s find out.”

We entered the alley and stopped in front of the manhole cover.

“It’s strange,” Rishika said. “It doesn’t smell like sewage down there. It smells… sweet?”

*Weird.*

“Let’s go check it out,” I said.

Rishika crouched down and tried to heft the manhole cover open, but it wouldn’t budge. I knew how strong she was, and that meant this wasn’t any normal manhole cover.

“Maybe it’s magical,” I mused. “Let me try.” I placed my hand on the metal like I’d seen Nikkos do moments earlier. The manhole cover opened up, and we peered down the dark tunnel.

I looked up at Rishika. “Ready?”

She nodded. “Let’s go.”

I stepped into the tunnel with Rishika right behind me.

# Episode 3192

Horror slammed into me. *I’m definitely not on any menu!*

I tried to jerk away from the woman, but she had me in a vise grip.

“Nope!” I squeaked, still trying to wrench my arm away from her. “I’m not here to eat or be eaten! Thanks for the offer, but I’ve got to—”

*Thanks for the offer, Cali?* I winced. *Seriously?*

Before I could die on the inside any more, the vampire slammed me into the wall hard enough to make the breath stutter out of my lungs.

“It was one of those rhetorical questions,” she said with a sharp grin. “The Fae in this city can be so cagey. Half the time they’re impossible to find, and then here you are out in the open like this. Seems like it was meant to be, doesn’t it?”

I gulped down air and shook my head emphatically. “It seems like you’re an entitled vampire who thinks anyone walking past is a viable food source. Let me be clear: I’m not.”

I knew my magic was on the fritz because of what the New Orleans witches had done with Tabitha’s power, but I still tried to call on it. Even a small whisper of my usual power was better than nothing.

And I was going to use it to blast this vampire.

I opened my hand, my palm pointed out toward the vampire, and she tsked and pinned my hand to the wall, palm down.

“You’re going to be a good snack, aren’t you?”

Her gaze zeroed in on me, her eyes flashing, and I looked away. *No! I can’t allow her to command me!*

With one impossibly strong hand pinning me to the wall, she used her free hand to grab my jaw and turn my face to look at her. I couldn’t look away, and a horrifying sense of calm settled over me.

“You’re going to stand there and let me drink from you,” the vampire ordered. “No fuss, no mess.”

And then she let me go. And I stood there. I didn’t run. I didn’t scream. I didn’t so much as twitch.

*Stop! Why are you obeying her? You need to break free from this! You should be screaming for help!*

This felt different from the other times I’d been compelled. Then, I hadn’t *known* I was being compelled. I’d just mindlessly followed the vampire’s orders and had been content to do so. But now I knew exactly what was happening—I just couldn’t do anything to stop it.

This, I decided, was much, much worse.

*Just think, Cali. All this time you’ve been worried about losing your mind because of Seluna’s curse, or the* due destini*. But actually, none of that is going to kill you. You’re about to die because some random vampire thought you looked like a tasty treat on a fucking jazz cruise.*

The vampire leaned forward, her fangs flashing as she lowered her face to my neck. My heart broke into a sprint, banging against my ribs like a caged animal. I *was* caged now—inside my own body.

I couldn’t make my voice work. I couldn’t break free. *Can I mind link with Xavier or Greyson?*

It was, perhaps, my only shot at getting out of here alive.

*Xavier?* I tried to mind link with him, but I struggled to concentrate long enough to make the connection. The vampire’s eyes were still fixed on me, still weaving their spell. It was a lot like how Sabyr had been able to brainwash me to draw me to him. I was more awake this time around, but I still had very little control over the situation.

*I can’t let that happen. I have to look away.*

But the vampire’s eyes were so mesmerizing, and I could feel her will washing over me, whispering to me. Telling me to give up, to give in, to let this happen.

*Maybe I can let her have just a little taste.*

I turned to expose more of my neck, and an involuntary shudder rocked down my spine as her lips touched my skin.

I braced myself for the sting of her fangs sinking into my throat—

Suddenly, the vampire was ripped away. Suddenly, I could think. I could move.

I blinked rapidly as Greyson launched the woman away from me, his grip firm and unyielding on her arm.

“I don’t know who the fuck you are, you but you never mess with the mate of an Alpha werewolf. Got it?” He partially shifted, and his razor-tipped claws dug into the vampire’s skin.

She hissed. “All right, all right. My mistake!”

Greyson shoved her away so hard she stumbled. “Go snack on someone else, you fucking bloodsucker.”

The vampire did her best to walk away with what was left of her dignity intact. A not so small part of me wanted to break a leg off one of the many antique chairs on the boat and stake the bitch for trying to kill me.

Greyson immediately turned back to me and wrapped me in his arms. “Are you okay, love?”

“I am.” I nodded, giving him a weak smile. “But if you hadn’t come along, I might not have been. How did you know? I couldn’t mind link, and I couldn’t yell for help.”

“I always keep an eye on you. Just in case.”

He kissed me, and I threw my arms around him, kissing him back with everything I had. “Thank you.”

“You might want to stick with the group from now on,” he said gently. “This isn’t your typical jazz cruise—there are just as many supernaturals here as there are humans.”

Normally I might’ve seen this as a lack of faith in my ability to protect myself, but after the close call I’d just had with the vampire—and how completely incapable of protecting myself I’d been—I found I didn’t mind one bit.

Sticking with the group had never sounded better.

Greyson led me back toward the dance floor, and as we passed through the crowd I saw the woman he’d danced with earlier wink at him.

Greyson steered me toward Xavier, Gabriel, and Mikah, who were on the edge of the dance floor with a clear view of Albin.

“… need to lead your partner through the moves. It’s all about confidence,” Xavier was explaining to Gabriel. Apparently, their little dance session had lasted longer than just one dance.

Greyson cut in. “None of that matters. We’re not here to dance.”

“That’s not true,” Xavier said. He grabbed me around the waist and pulled me close. “We never did finish our last dance. Greyson will just have to wait until the band takes a break.”

“No, Xavier—”

But Xavier was already twirling me away, out of his brother’s reach.

I considered filling Xavier in on what had almost happened, but ultimately, I decided against it. Why stress him out? Greyson had already taken care of it. And I was pretty sure that if I told Xavier now, he’d drop everything to go eviscerate that vampire. I wouldn’t have *hated* to see that, but I was pretty sure the only reason Greyson hadn’t gone and done the same thing was so we could keep our low profile.

So I allowed myself to relax and enjoy the moment, dancing with Xavier.

After he’d twirled me around on the floor for a while, I glanced over at Albin, who was still rocking out on his saxophone. Again, it was so hard to imagine that guy being a genuine threat to Harlow, but I was just going to take her word for it.

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked.

“Greyson and I have it figured out. When the band breaks, we’ll follow Albin, threaten him, and that’s that. It couldn’t be simpler.”

It *did* sound easy enough. “But what if Albin isn’t so agreeable? He might not look tough, but he clearly poses enough of a threat to Harlow to make her worry.”

Xavier shrugged. “We have ways to be more persuasive if need be.”

There was a menace to his tone that put me on edge. I hoped Albin would be reasonable about this, for his own sake. I didn’t want to cause any more trouble than necessary.

The song changed, and Greyson appeared out of nowhere. “My turn. Gabriel’s ready for another round with you, Xavier.”

He eased me out of Xavier’s grip, and we began to move across the dance floor.

“You know, you’re the most breathtaking woman here,” Greyson told me.

My cheeks heated all over again. There was something magical about being on this old riverboat, with jazz music playing. It would’ve been so much more romantic if we weren’t here chasing down a vampire. Or if I hadn’t almost been one’s lunch.

Still, it was always nice to dance with my mates, regardless of the situation. We didn’t get a lot of opportunities for stuff like this at home.

All too soon, the song ended and the pianist announced they would be taking a short break.

My heart pounded as Greyson led me back to Xavier, and nodded at his brother. “Let’s go.”

I fell in behind Xavier as Greyson took the lead. Mikah and Gabriel followed behind Xavier and me. In the back of my mind, I wondered if we were coming on too strong, if we’d spook Albin, but there was no backing out now.

The saxophone player was chatting with the drummer, and he looked up when he saw us approaching.

Albin’s eyes widened, and he turned tail and dashed for the exterior hallway.

“Wait!” Greyson called after him, but it was too late. Albin was already leaping off the side of the boat.

# Episode 3193

**Artemis**

A ladder was attached to the interior of the tunnel, and I led the way down, down, down. I lost count of the rungs somewhere after fifty.

*How far down does this thing go? I thought this city was built at sea level? Shouldn’t we be hitting water if we’re truly going this deep?*

Then again, if this was truly some kind of Fae hidey hole—which I suspected, since Nikkos and I were both able to open the entrance—it wouldn’t have been unusual for it to ignore the laws of nature.

“Holy shit. This goes on forever,” Rishika whispered above me.

*I really, really hope I’m not leading my girlfriend into a trap.*

To be fair, I was about eighty percent sure that Nikkos had no idea we’d followed him, but it didn’t hurt to be prepared, just in case. I was sure he was far from the only threat down here, if I was right about this being a Fae hideout.

Finally, we reached the end of the ladder. Fae lights flickered and bobbed around in the tunnel ahead, lighting our way.

Rishika stiffened. “I can hear people. Why would anyone be down here?”

“I think we’re about to find out.”

I had a few ideas, but none of them boded well for us. Besides, until we knew a bit more about just what the hell was going on here, it probably wasn’t even worth speculating.

We moved slowly and cautiously toward the light and sounds until, quite abruptly, the tunnel opened up to reveal a large, underground cavern. Fae milled around the space, and several booths and stands had been set up by merchants selling magical wares.

“What is this place?” Rishika whispered, her eyes wide.

I was hit with a sudden sense of déjà vu. “It looks just like the markets I used to visit in the Fae world, usually when I was trying to find someone for the Kollector. But what is it doing here? In New Orleans? Underground?”

Nobody seemed to notice as I stepped out of the shadows. Almost immediately, Rishika yanked me back. “What the hell are you doing?”

“This is a Fae market,” I reminded her. “And I’m Fae. There’s nothing for us to worry about—as long as you stick with me.”

I didn’t know exactly what might happen to a lone werewolf in a Fae market like this one, but I couldn’t imagine it would be good.

I stepped out of the shadows again, this time with Rishika sticking close to my side. I recognized several of the wares being sold at the nearest booths. They were quintessential for any Fae market, anywhere: crystals, trinkets, herbs, potions, weapons, and clothing.

A small smile tugged at my lips. For the first time since I’d come to the human world, I felt right at home.

I turned to Rishika. “This is *just* like the places where I used to shop—and catch my marks.”

She looked around, her eyes wide with amazement. “I’ve never seen anything like this place. It’s pretty cool. But what is it doing here?” Her eyes narrowed. “And what happened to Nikkos?”

*Shit. That’s right. Where* did *he go?*

I looked around the market, but I couldn’t spot him among all the other Fae milling around the place.

“Let’s browse and blend in. Maybe we’ll spot him.”

I stopped short when a shimmering longbow caught my eye. I hadn’t been able to bring my bow with me to New Orleans—Cali had explained that it had something to do with a TSA decree, whatever that was—and I’d been feeling its absence acutely.

“Maybe I need a bow for our time here,” I said as I approached the booth. “If magic is off the table, it would be to my benefit to have additional weapons at my disposal.”

Rishika eyed the bow and frowned. “While it might be cool to walk around with a bow in the Fae world, it’s generally not accepted here. It tends to freak people out, you know?”

“But won’t that just prove to everyone that I’m a formidable fighter and not to be crossed?”

“Sure, but that’s usually the point where people start calling the police, and, long story short, it won’t help us accomplish our mission if you end up wanted for possession of a deadly weapon.”

I frowned. In general, the human world wasn’t too difficult to acclimate to, but every now and then I came across something so asinine I had to wonder how the human world had lasted this long. “How are people supposed to defend themselves if they’re attacked by a rogue witch? Or a vampire? Or any of the other supernatural creatures running amok in this city?”

She smiled. “Don’t worry. Your werewolf girlfriend will protect you.”

“Excuse me!” the weapons vendor called out to me. “Would the beautiful, powerful lady like a bow of equal beauty?”

I sighed. “Unfortunately, I think not.”

“Then may I interest you in one of my handcrafted daggers?” He gestured with a flourish at a display of wickedly sharp, gleaming daggers. “Forged in the volcanic pits of Mount Calidi, these daggers will never rust, nor break, nor lose their edge.”

“Ooh.” *I can conceal a set of daggers.*

But as soon as I reached out to touch one, the air around us flickered and the dagger lost its brilliant sheen.

The vendor cursed under his breath. “The gods damned magic is being disturbed again. It’s ruining my sales.” He looked up at me with a smile as fake as his daggers. “How about a two-for-one deal?”

I shook my head and kept walking with Rishika close to my side. “The magic shutdown that Cali was talking about is affecting the glamour spell that Fae use to beautify everything,” I explained.

“Makes sense. Though, for what it’s worth, you don’t need any of that. You’re beautiful without it.”

Before I could process the compliment, Rishika grabbed my hand and pulled me into a booth. She pointed out toward the marketplace. “It’s Nikkos!”

A woman greeted us as we ducked into the booth. “You two make such a beautiful couple. Are you here to have your palms read?”

I glanced around the booth in confusion, and then realization dawned. Rishika had pulled us into one of the fortune telling booths that were so common at marketplaces like this. I’d seen countless fortune telling vendors before, but I’d never had time to check them out.

Rishika looked at me. “What do you think? Should we?”

“Do you want to?” I asked.

“If this were a human fortune teller, it’d be a hard pass, but I’ve never been to a Fae fortune teller before. I’m intrigued.” She smiled.

I peeked out of the booth. Nikkos was talking to the same weapons vendor we’d just left. He was clearly interested in a set of shimmering spears.

*Poor Nikkos. He’s about to get scammed.*

Not that I felt all that bad for him.

“I can tell you’re busy,” the fortune teller said, “but I believe it would be foolish to leave without glimpsing at the fate that awaits you.” She took a seat at a table draped in a dark cloth and beckoned us forward. “Please, join me.”

I bit my lip. I had no idea what Nikkos was up to. He’d come to the market with such purpose—was he really here to buy a spear?

I let Rishika pull me into a seat opposite the fortune teller. From my place, I could keep an eye on Nikkos through the booth opening. He wouldn’t be able to spot us so easily, shrouded in the darkness of the fortune teller’s tent as we were.

“My name is Madrigal, and I’m pleased to be acting as a conduit to the greater mysteries for both of you today.” The woman smiled. “May I please see your palms?”

We each held out a hand, and she took them both in her own. Immediately, Madrigal started on Rishika, examining her palm and then looking up at her face. Then she did the same to mine.

I swallowed audibly, suddenly feeling shy. I’d seen these booths countless times before in the Fae world, and I’d always been curious about what went on inside. I’d wanted to visit, but I’d always been working, and even if I’d had time to duck into a booth, I’d never had anyone to go with.

Now, things were different. Now, I had Rishika.

Life was a lot better now.

“You have common lines on your hands,” Madrigal began, indicating the deep lines on each of our palms. “This means you’re in sync. You’re a strong match. You balance each other out, and thus you are stronger together than apart.”

I felt a smile tug at my lips. I’d known all of this already, of course, but it was nice to hear a stranger say so. I nudged Rishika with my shoulder, and she grinned at me.

“However,” Madrigal continued, trailing her fingertip down a line in my palm, “this line tells me that something may try to tear you apart.”

# Episode 3194

**Xavier**

I stopped short, watching in horror as Albin threw himself over the railing of the boat.

*What the everloving fuck?*

“Xavier, he’s getting away!” Greyson snapped, rushing toward the railing. I followed after him, reaching the railing just in time to see the vampire swing down and land on the boat’s second story.

*Shit!* I turned to Gabe, Mikah, and Cali. “He’s on the second floor!”

Gabe clapped his hands together. “Well, let’s go get this bloodsucker!” He glanced over at Mikah with a wince. “No offense.”

Mikah rolled his eyes. “None taken.”

Gabe followed Albin onto the second story by using the railing to swing down, and I joined him. There was probably no faster way to get from one story to another.

Gasps and cries echoed throughout the room, which seemed to be some kind of large dining area. Tons of people were already seated and eating, and our sudden appearance via the open sides of the boat seemed to cause quite a commotion.

I couldn’t bring myself to care. If I ruined the cruise for every goddamned person on this boat, but we achieved our mission, then I’d consider it a price worth paying.

I scanned the room, ignoring the chatter and the waitstaff who were heading our way, looking perturbed.

“There he is!” Gabe pointed across the room, where I could just make out Albin’s blond head bobbing through the sea of people coming into the dining area. We took off after him, weaving through the dining room and then through what looked like a mini onboard casino. Albin definitely knew the boat a hell of a lot better than we did, but we didn’t take our eyes off him, and we didn’t slow down, regardless of who we mowed down along the way.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I called to Albin. “We’re on a fucking boat! You have no exit strategy!”

“And we just want to talk to you!” Gabe added unconvincingly.

I scowled at him. “Really?”

“What? That’s what we’re here for, right? To talk?”

“We’re here to threaten him, dumbass.”

Gabe shrugged. “That’s a form of talking.” He raised his voice. “You hear that, Albin? We’re in agreement! We’re definitely here to talk!”

Albin responded by tossing an entire armchair from the lounge right in our path.

*Asshole.*

The vampire led us on a merry fucking chase across the boat. He looped us back around to the dining room, perhaps thinking it’d be easier for him to escape with all the people and furniture filling the room.

The people seemed to slow him down more than he’d anticipated, and he ended up vaulting over a table set for eight, then flipping it up and sending it flying at us. I was too close behind him to dodge, and I smacked into it and tumbled over it, ruining the food that hadn’t already been knocked off by Albin.

“You all right?” Gabe asked.

“Fucking peachy,” I said as I wiped mashed potatoes off my brand new suit.

“Come on then.”

And the chase continued.

Finally, we got lucky. A server pushing along a cart laden with food cut Albin off, and he mowed through the cart and smacked into the wall so hard the chandelier in the dining room shook with the force of it.

I didn’t give the little shit another chance to bolt. I grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and sucker punched him in the jaw. Gabe was right there behind me, alternately trying to hold Albin or trying to get a blow in.

“Excuse me, sirs! This is no place for a fight!”

I froze and turned around. Some kind of security guard was standing behind us, a stun gun raised in front of him.

I could’ve snapped the guy like a twig with half a thought, but the damage was already done. Albin took advantage of our distraction and managed to wriggle free and make a break for it.

“Are you shitting me?” I groaned, taking off after him and ignoring the guard. Gabe joined me.

I’d expected another chase around the boat, but Albin seemed to have reached the edge of his desperation. He bolted for the railing and then leapt over it and into the dark, murky water of the Mississippi River.

We stopped at the edge of the railing. “Is this guy fucking serious?” Gabe asked.

I watched Albin surface and start to swim away, toward the faraway riverbank. “I guess so.”

“He *really* doesn’t want to talk!”

“No shit.” I watched him swim, my stomach sinking. Getting in that water was easily the last thing I wanted to do, but we needed to get this guy off Harlow’s back if she was gonna help us. “This is gonna suck.”

Gabe frowned. “What is?”

At that moment, Mikah, Greyson, and Cali raced up to us.

“What the hell happened?” Greyson asked.

Gabe pointed at the river, where Albin was still visibly swimming away.

“What are we going to do?” Cali asked. “We’re supposed to uphold our end of the deal with Harlow!”

“I know.” I pulled in a deep breath. “And we still can.”

I slipped my mashed potato-stained suit jacket off and started unbuttoning my shirt.

Cali gasped. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to get him.”

I stripped down to my underwear and hopped up onto the railing.

“Xavier, no!”

I dove into the unsurprisingly cold water. Immediately, the current tried to pull me deep, toward the boat, but I was strong. I surfaced and started swimming toward Albin.

*He must have quite a lot of enemies if he’s a “run like a coward and ask questions later” kind of guy.*

I pushed myself to catch up to him. He had a head start, and as a vampire, he was certainly not a weak opponent, even in the water. Any normal human would have drowned by now.

But I was stronger than that, and besides, I was extremely motivated to nail this bloodsucker. I was doing it for Cali. We had to get the magic back to the city so we could find the ashes and I could finally put an end to that fucking vampire-witch.

With that motivation propelling me forward, I caught up to Albin in no time.

I popped out of the water next to him. “What up.”

Then I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and forced him beneath the surface of the water.

He thrashed around, his hands and arms groping at any part of me he could reach. He was a fast, wriggly little shithead, and before I knew it, he was practically on top of me and had me in a headlock.

He pushed my head under the water, and now it was my turn to thrash around. Fortunately, I had a trick up my sleeve that he didn’t. I partially shifted my hand and raked my razor-sharp claws down his arm. Bitter-tasting vampire blood filled the water, and I surged above the surface, gulping down one breath of air after another.

“You bastard,” Albin hissed, and the fight continued. He managed to pin my arms to my side and sink his teeth into my throat. The bite burned so badly my vision doubled, and I clawed at him with all my might, even as I felt him draining me, making me weaker.

*No, I have to fight this!*

Suddenly, something *big* slammed into us. I didn’t know what it was, but the look of pure fear on Albin’s face sure as shit didn’t bode well. He released me and tried to swim away. I grabbed onto his arm, and once again, I was hit by something huge.

I turned around in the water to see the cold eyes of the largest alligator I’d ever seen. He was heading right toward me, his toothy maw wide open.

“Fuck off!” I snarled. I swung and struck the gator hard on the nose with my free hand. The blow seemed to surprise it, but it didn’t do much damage. The water made things too difficult.

Albin kept struggling to break free from my grip as the gator lunged after us again. I dodged another bite, and Albin kicked the gator in the face. Soon, we were fighting the gator together.

As it lunged for Albin, I climbed onto its back, wrapping my arms around its thick neck. Maybe I could choke it to death.

Only, I’d never really realized just how strong alligators could be. It thrashed around and tossed me into the air. I collided with Albin as the gator came after us again.

I let out a cry as the gator’s jagged teeth tore into my leg.

“Enough of this bullshit!” I growled. I’d already been bitten by a vampire—I didn’t need another reason for today to suck.

I waited for the gator to swing back around, then I reared back and punched it in the nose with everything I had. A *crunch* sounded, and the gator hissed and jerked back, snapping its jaws and just missing my arm before it disappeared into the dark waters of the river.

I was half-tempted to go after the damn thing. *I could use a new pair of boots.* But I hadn’t come all this way to wrestle alligators.

I turned back to Albin, who, true to form, was once again swimming toward the shore. I started to pursue him, but my arms and legs suddenly felt heavy. The current was now so strong I could barely keep my head above water.

The vampire bite on my throat was bleeding, and my leg hurt from the gator bite. I blinked slowly, struggling to focus.

*I just need to rest for a minute. Catch my breath.*

I closed my eyes, and my body drooped forward.

“XAVIER!”

I looked up as the water sloshed against my chin.

*Ava?*

# Episode 3195

“Xavier! Come back!”

I couldn’t even see him anymore in the water. Or the gator we’d all just seen. *Shit.* Where was he? I was ready to lunge over the side of the boat, but Greyson’s arms slipped around me, holding me back.

“Let me go!” I thrashed in his arms. “There’s a gigantic alligator that wants to turn Xavier into its dinner!”

“That’s exactly why there is no way in hell I’m letting you jump in there!”

“But I have to save him!” I couldn’t believe Xavier had jumped in after Albin. Of all the impulsive, reckless things…

“Love, that water is cold and deep, and the current is too strong for you.”

“I’m half-Fae!” I reminded him.

“That won’t keep your head above the water.” His hold on me loosened just slightly, becoming more of a comforting embrace than a restraint, but I still wasn’t going anywhere. “Xavier’s strong. He’s an Alpha werewolf, remember? He can handle an alligator.”

I shook my head. “It’s too big! Someone has to jump in and help!”

I desperately looked at Mikah and Gabriel for backup.

Mikah looked down at the water and shook his head. “Sorry, Cali. I’m not getting in that water.”

“We have to do something!”

“Um, Greyson.” Gabriel tapped his shoulder. “I think we have another problem.”

I looked over Greyson’s shoulder, and my stomach plummeted. The entire jazz band—sans Albin, of course—was heading toward us, and they didn’t look happy. They’d even brought their instruments, and clutched in their hands and pointed toward us, they looked like weapons.

*Can you hurt someone with a trombone?*

My imagination went wild with that question, and I shook myself to avoid falling down that mental rabbit hole.

*Focus, Cali!*

“What’s their problem?” I asked, freeing myself from Greyson’s arms.

The drummer stopped right in front of us and jabbed the air with his drumstick.

“Where the hell is our sax player? We were supposed to start another set ten minutes ago, and suddenly he’s AWOL.”

I swallowed roughly and pointed at the water behind me. “He’s somewhere out there. He, um, he jumped ship. It wasn’t our fault.”

The last part tasted like a lie, but they didn’t need to know that.

The trumpet player glared. “Oh, we’re pretty sure it *is* your fault. You must’ve scared him off. How the hell are we supposed to perform without a saxophone?”

“Back off,” Greyson said, his tone low and imposing. “Nobody tried to scare your sax player, and nobody forced him to jump ship. You got a problem with your lineup? It sounds like you need to take it up with him.”

I spotted a member of the ship’s crew coming toward us. The look on his face told me that he knew about our connection with all the chaos that had descended on the boat.

*What was it that Xavier told me before we started this job? Something about how easy it would be? Something about how the plan “couldn’t be simpler”?*

Behind the crew, a group of passengers surged forward.

“Hey!” One of them, a middle-aged woman, rushed to the front. “What happened to our friend Albin?”

Gabriel turned to our group. “So, I think it’s time we make our escape.”

I looked around wildly. “Escape *where*? We’re on a boat in the middle of a river! There’s no exit strategy—unless you count swimming across the Mississippi. Which, by the way, has alligators and rogue vampires in it.”

Mikah pointed to a large white boat suspended from the side of the deck. “There’s a lifeboat. Everyone, get in!”

We scrambled toward the lifeboat and climbed in, and somewhere amidst all the running and climbing and trying to figure out how to lower the boat to the water, Greyson slapped a life jacket on me and fastened it tight.

“Just to be safe.” He smiled. “The current is really strong.”

In a horrifying turn of events, Albin’s “friends” turned out to be other vampires. Greyson had to duck a vampire bite as he climbed into the lifeboat.

“Get the fuck away!” he snarled, elbowing the vampire. Her nose shattered on impact, and she went sprawling across the deck with a cry.

“Remember when we were keeping a low profile?” I asked conversationally. “Those were the days.”

Mikah released the line, and the boat dropped into the water like a stone, with so much force I was tossed overboard.

*HOLY SHIT IT’S COLD!*

I surfaced, gasping and spitting out the rotten-tasting river water. *I hope we know someone with a healing spell, because I’m gonna need some antibiotics.*

“I’ve got you!” Greyson reached down and pulled me back in by my life jacket. Kudos to him for thinking of that.

He hauled me onto the bench while, across from us, Mikah and Gabriel bickered about which of them was going to use the oars.

“You should row,” Mikah was suggesting. “You’re stronger than I am, so we’ll get across the river faster.”

Gabriel scoffed. “You just don’t want to row. You only tell me I’m stronger when you want me to do manual labor that you’re perfectly capable of doing yourself.”

Greyson slipped out of his suit jacket and wrapped it tight around me, holding me in his arms. “Hopefully this will help you warm up.”

I shook my head. “I’m not cold. We have to save Xavier!”

I stood up. The boat immediately started pitching left and right in the current, and I nearly fell overboard again. Greyson pulled me back down just in time.

A splash sounded, and we all zeroed in on the sound, watching as one of our oars started drifting away.

“See, this wouldn’t have happened if you were holding onto the oars,” Mikah snapped.

“Why am I the default oar guy?”

A new wave of bickering started while the oar floated farther and farther away.

“Guys, shut it,” Greyson snapped. “We’ve got bigger—”

Suddenly the oar disappeared beneath the surface of the river with a wet *snap!* Moments later, half of the oar floated back to the surface, along with an alligator that was munching on the other half.

My heart skipped up into a new rhythm. *Oh my god. That could have been me.*

Without an oar, the current was pulling us back toward the ship, and the voices of the angry mob called down to us. Several of them hissed and bared their fangs.

*I don’t know which is worse—Albin’s friends, or the alligators.*

Greyson stood up, careful to keep his weight evenly distributed, and started stripping down.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m going to pull us to shore.”

“But can’t we—”

“We need to get moving. Now.”

I followed his gaze and immediately understood the urgency. Our little lifeboat was heading straight toward the giant paddles powering the ship.

“Watch out for the—”

He’d already dived beneath the surface of the water.

“—alligators,” I finished, my shoulders slumping.

I turned to watch as Greyson surfaced, swam around to the back of our lifeboat, grabbed the side, and began to kick with his powerful legs.

It took a moment, but the lifeboat slowly started to drift forward.

“Hot damn,” Gabriel said, his eyes wide.

“Great work, Greyson!” Mikah called out.

I frowned. *If you two lovebirds hadn’t argued, Greyson wouldn’t have to be doing this.* Was he going to freeze doing this?

My gaze shifted toward the shore. “Where’s Xavier? I can’t see him anywhere!”

Gabriel and Mikah peered out, scanning the water.

“He has to be out here. We saw him just moments ago,” Mikah said.

A hard knot of worry weighed down my stomach as I tried mind linking with Xavier. *Don’t worry, Xavier. We’re coming for you. We’re going to save you.*

My pulse ratcheted up when I got no response.

I turned toward the back of the lifeboat. “Hurry, Greyson! You can do it! We have to find Xavier!”

“I’m kicking as hard as I can!” he panted.

I could only imagine the feat of strength it was taking to push our lifeboat through the water—and against the current, no less. But he was doing it.

Then, the water behind Greyson rippled as something surfaced right behind him.

“Oh my god,” I gasped.

It was the huge alligator, and this time it was coming for Greyson.

“GREYSON!” I shrieked. “WATCH OUT!”

My mate looked over his shoulder as the alligator bore down on him, but still he kept kicking. Kept pushing our boat through the water.

“Forget about moving the boat!” I cried. “Just get in here and get out of the water!”

If he got eaten by an alligator while trying to save my life, I’d never forgive myself. *I’d blast that gator to kingdom come!*

But Greyson kicked even harder. The gator was closing in, its huge jaws opening and revealing disgusting rows of jagged teeth. I called to what I had of my magic, trying to be ready if—

The boat lurched, hitting something hard.

We all tumbled into the water.

# Episode 3196

**Artemis**

I looked down at my palm in shock, as if I could somehow remove what the fortune teller had told me from my very skin.

“That’s not possible.” I tried to jerk my hand back, but the fortune teller held on tight. “I’ll never allow anything to tear Rishika and me apart. What the hell are you talking about?”

The fortune teller tightened her grip on my hand, using her thumb to unclench my fist so that my palm faced up once more. “Nothing is set in stone, my dear. Our lives move through currents, and we must be prepared to adjust. If your relationship is meant to be, you will both have to endure many trials to remain together. Such is the way of life—the waters may be smooth at times, but one cannot escape them forever.”

I grimaced. I’d already had more than enough trials, thank you very much. I’d spent almost my entire life separated from my family, thinking I was an orphan, knowing less than nothing about my birthright or who I truly was. And even in the time since I’d found Cali and come to the human world, I’d been through some serious shit. Being possessed by Letifer and his orb, having my magic taken away… And this trip to New Orleans hadn’t exactly been a vacation.

*When do I get my smooth waters? Because I’m pretty sure I’ve already had my fair share of trials.*

I swallowed roughly and forced myself to ask, “What kind of trials are you talking about here?”

The fortune teller ran a rough finger down my palm, tracing my lifeline. “I can see you’ve already fought many battles, both inside and out. You have the spirit of a warrior, but there are still many battles yet to be won.”

My whole gods damned *life* had been a battle so far, and I didn’t relish the idea of being forced to fight any more of them.

“But I’ll win them, right? One day, I’ll find lasting peace?”

The fortune teller shot me a look that made my fragile hope begin to fade, but before she could say anything, Rishika stood, heading for the doorway.

“Artemis, we’ve got to go.”

“What? Why?” I looked helplessly from Rishika to the fortune teller. Whatever it was, couldn’t it wait?

“He’s on the move.”

I froze. There could be no doubting who *he* was. I stood, pulling my arm out of the woman’s grip.

“You mustn't leave yet,” the fortune teller said. “I’m not finished. There’s much left to learn about your futures.”

“I’m sorry, we can’t stay,” I said. Though her ominous words echoed in the back of my mind, I couldn’t afford to be distracted from the task at hand. Namely, finding out what the hell Nikkos was up to.

We rushed out of the booth and darted in the direction Nikkos had gone. It didn’t take long to catch up, and we did our best to blend in with the rest of the crowd and avoid being spotted.

We moved from stall to stall, tracking Nikkos as he made his way into a busier part of the market. Suddenly, someone stepped right in front of us, and a crisp, fruity scent washed over me.

“How about some fresh fruit wine?” the vendor said, holding out a tray of sample mugs.

“No, thank you,” I said brusquely. I leaned around him, trying to spot Nikkos, but he’d vanished.

“Are you sure?” the vendor pressed. “I have some other vintages in the booth that I’d be more than happy to allow you to try.”

“Get out of our way!” Rishika growled.

The vendor backed off in a huff.

I looked around the market. “Shit. Where did he go?”

Rishika groaned. “I’ve lost him.”

“Why don’t we move to the center of the market?” I nodded toward the central plaza, which had been set up with a few tables and chairs and a modest selection of statuary surrounded by potted plants that were no doubt being kept alive through magical means. There was no sunlight down here. Several of the plants, I noticed, were drooping, their leaves shriveling.

“It’ll make it a lot easier for Nikkos to spot us if we head out there,” Rishika said.

“I know. But it’s not like he’s expecting us to be here. He can’t possibly be looking for us. And it’ll make it that much easier to find *him*.”

“Fair enough.”

We headed toward the center of the market, looking left and right for any sign of Nikkos.

Rishika sighed. “If there weren’t so many Fae around, I’d be able to sniff him out.”

Unfortunately, we were stuck with our basic senses—and my tracking skills. I pulled in a deep breath and kept searching. I’d done a hell of a lot more with less. Finding Nikkos here couldn’t be *that* hard, could it?

All around us, the market bustled with shoppers. I’d already realized I was far from the only Fae in New Orleans, but it was still startling to see so many of my kind in one place in the human world—and underground, no less. Judging by the sheer number of Fae milling around the market, the tunnel we’d entered through was likely not the only way into the market, which meant there were multiple exit routes as well.

*Ugh. Nikkos could be anywhere.*

“Do you think he left the market?” I asked Rishika.

Suddenly, a familiar face crossed into my line of sight, and my heart kicked up into a new rhythm.

*Nikkos.*

He was coming right toward us.

“Rishika,” I whispered. “He’s coming this way. What do we do?”

Suddenly, Rishika grabbed my face and kissed me. I froze, but only for a second. Oddly enough, in a market filled with strangers, it was easy to lose myself in a kiss with my girlfriend. Everything melted away as I savored the sensation of her lips moving against mine.

Maybe it was being here in this market that reminded me so much of home, but I couldn’t help wondering what my life would have been like if Rishika had been with me when I’d lived in the Fae world.

My life could have been so different if I’d had her by my side earlier. Someone to love. Someone to love me in return. And, more pragmatically, someone to watch my back. Sure, I’d managed on my own, but with Rishika by my side, who knows what we could have accomplished?

Even just last night, when we’d been at the card game and things had been looking sketchy, I’d known we’d be okay, because we’d had each other.

Rishika pulled back just far enough to whisper, “Maybe we should do this more often.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” I peered out toward the crowd. “Is he still heading this way?”

“No, he stopped at a booth. But I don’t care,” she said. And then she pulled me in for another mind-melting kiss. Gods, she was such a good kisser. She knew just how to pull my lips into a rhythm with hers. Knew how to make my heart race and get my blood pumping.

The magic of the moment wrapped around me—the magic of being here at the Fae market, with Rishika and her fabulous lips.

When we came back up for air, I glanced over toward Nikkos, who was talking to the wine vendor with a serious expression.

*Wait. Is he truly only shopping? We followed him all the way here for nothing.*

It wasn’t exactly how I’d been planning to spend my time in New Orleans. I’d hoped that following him here would lead to something useful—like a lead on my uncle. But instead, we’d spent hours watching him pick out fruit wine and a sketchy spear?

*No, thank you.*

I sighed. “Well, I think this is a bust.”

Rishika nodded. “It’s disappointing. I was sure he was up to something shady.”

“We should probably head back. I could stay here and kiss you all day, but Cali did ask us to try to stay in touch, and I’m pretty sure cell phones aren’t going to work down here.”

Rishika grinned. “Maybe we can try more of that kissing thing later.”

A warm glow sparked in my chest as our hands entwined, and we started back toward the tunnel we’d entered through. But as we passed by the weapon shop and that beautiful shimmering bow, Rishika’s grip on my hand tightened.

“We’re being followed,” she whispered.

I didn’t look back. With a crowd this thick, we could lose whoever was following us with barely any effort. I steered Rishika away from the tunnel, and instead we headed down a row of stalls. We stopped to pretend to admire some pottery—and to get a chance to glance behind us.

“It’s the one with the blue and green eyes and the black jacket,” Rishika murmured.

I spotted the Fae in a heartbeat. She was pretending to look at something, but I could sense that she was more interested in Rishika and me.

I pulled Rishika down another row that led to an intersection.

“Did we lose her?” I asked, glancing behind us.

Although judging by the group of Fae that blocked our intersection, I already knew the answer to that question. I braced for an inevitable fight.

One of them stepped toward us, a club in his hand. “Tell us everything you know about Adair, and we won’t have to kill you.”

# Episode 3197

**Xavier**

At some point, I’d sunk beneath the surface of the water. I wasn’t sure when it had happened, or how long I’d been submerged. I was pretty sure I could feel my lungs burning, but everything was muted by the exhaustion pressing in on me.

I kicked my legs, ignoring the slight flare of pain as I did so. My neck and my leg didn’t hurt quite so much anymore, though that didn’t seem to help me swim any faster. I was still beneath the surface, still desperately trying to break through.

Suddenly, Ava’s arms wrapped around me, pulling me into her embrace.

Confusion lanced through me as I struggled to swim. None of this was making sense. How was it even possible for Ava to be here, in the river with me, right now?

“What are you doing here?” I asked. It should have been strange to hear my own voice under the water, and yet…

She brushed a barely-there kiss over my lips. “I’m here to save you. You need my help, don’t you? Don’t be afraid to accept it from me.”

Then, she pulled me even closer, her arms tightening around me as her lips descended on mine.

She was so warm, so soft, and I wrapped my arms around her as we floated together. She tasted fucking amazing, nothing like the dank river water I’d practically been guzzling, and I felt my body responding to her touch, to her kiss.

Her fingers combed through my hair, and I let out a sigh as I nipped at her full bottom lip. In this moment, I’d never been more at peace. Suddenly, I couldn’t remember what I’d been so worried about. As long as we were together, as long as I was here with her, my mate, I had everything I could possibly need.

Tension wrapped around my chest, tightening with each passing second. I stiffened and broke away from her mouth.

“My lungs.” I gasped at the bone-deep burn that blazed in my chest.

Ava pulled away from me, her brow furrowing. “You’re not letting me save you. I suppose you’ll just have to try and save yourself.”

She let go of me completely, her fingers slipping out of my grasp, and disappeared into the murky water.

I reached for her, calling her name with my spent lungs—and barely a bubble came out.

It was then that I realized what was happening.

I was drowning.

I needed to breathe!

The surface was just above me, lit by the waning sunset. I could close that gap. I could make it.

I tensed my muscles and surged upward, using the very last of my strength to break through the surface of the water.

Cold air rushed into my lungs, along with a generous serving of water, and I gasped and choked and heaved up water and gulped down air while fighting to keep my head above the surface. Good god, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so tired.

A feminine scream rippled across the surface of the water, and a chill ran down my spine. I knew that voice.

“Cali?” I rasped.

I looked around wildly, still trying to catch my breath. Had I imagined her scream? And Ava… Had she just been a hallucination? Was Cali one, too?

Other voices made their way to me. Greyson and… Was that Gabe?

I kicked around, just floating for a little while, until my feet finally made contact with the riverbed and I stood on shaky legs, my head barely above the water. I steadied myself as everyone came splashing toward me.

A little ways away, some kind of lifeboat was tipped over, its front edge stuck on a rock. Something moved in the water behind the boat—

And then everything came into focus.

I was standing on the bank of the river, and Cali, Greyson, and the others were coming toward me, that huge asshole of an alligator hot on their heels.

At that point, I honestly wasn’t sure if I had the strength to stop the gigantic beast, but I had to try. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I stood there while someone I cared about—even Greyson—got gobbled up by an alligator.

I reached for the boat and tried to heft it off the rock. I was at the very end of my strength, but when Cali’s scream echoed again, I found a new surge of desperate power.

I couldn’t let anything happen to her.

The boat finally shifted off the rock, just as the alligator opened its massive jaws to snap at Cali. With a groan, I shoved the boat toward the gator. Its massive jaws snapped shut on the boat, splintering the wood into toothpicks as the reptile dragged the broken pieces of the lifeboat beneath the surface.

“Fuck you, you fucking dinosaur!” I snarled.

Then my strength failed. The world turned sideways, and I slumped face-first back into the water.

I thought I might have heard Cali screaming again, but it was hard to tell. She sounded very far away now.

A pair of strong hands grabbed my shoulders and lifted me out of the water.

“Gr-son,” I mumbled. The world tipped again as I was thrown over someone’s shoulder.

My brother’s voice slipped through my ears. “I’ve got you, Xavier.”

I was only half-conscious as he carried me to the bank. The group didn’t stop until they were several feet away from the bank, no doubt mindful of becoming an easy target for that asshole alligator again.

The world tipped a third time as I was gently lowered to the ground.

I blearily blinked river water from my eyes, and a familiar face came into my line of vision.

“Someone volunteer to give him mouth-to-mouth quickly, or I will,” Gabe said.

Cali pushed him aside, kneeling next to me. Her hands were warm on my face. “Are you okay?” She gently kissed me, then eased my head into her lap.

*This is all I need. My mate, right here. Taking care of me.*

“That’s a nasty wound you’ve got,” Mikah mused. At first I assumed he was talking about the chunk of my leg the gator had tried to take, but his eyes were on my neck.

I blinked slowly, trying to will my mind to remember. Oh. “Fucking Albin. He bit me.”

I clumsily reached for my neck, but Cali caught my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “It’s okay. Let me help you.”

I smiled. “Just seeing you is helping me.”

She held up her wrist to Mikah. “Can you help?”

He shifted a little, glancing uneasily at Greyson. *What’s going on?*

Gabe smacked Mikah’s shoulder. “Bite the girl already so we can get on with this.”

My eyes widened. “No…”

I tried to stop Mikah, but I couldn’t even lift my arm. I could barely speak. My leg throbbed from the gator bite, but the vampire bite burned like someone was pressing a box of matches to it.

I watched helplessly as Mikah’s teeth sank into Cali’s wrist. The little wince on her face went straight to my heart. I wished I could absorb her pain—take it away permanently.

Mikah’s eyes widened when Cali’s blood hit his tongue, but he pulled away quickly. There was literally no other vampire in the world that I would have trusted with that move. Not even Lola.

Cali held her wrist out to let some of the blood drip into the wound on my neck, and a warm sensation spread out from the bite and then through my whole body. Her Fae blood was healing me—and fast.

My breathing evened out, my vision sharpened, my mind no longer felt like it was moving through a fog. And, most importantly, the pain in both my neck and my leg began to ebb. Cali’s blood was healing me, as well as kickstarting my own healing abilities.

“Can you sit up?” Cali asked.

I nodded, and she helped me into a sitting position. I reached up to touch my neck. The wound was nearly closed.

“You’re amazing,” I breathed.

She just threw her arms around my neck. “I was so worried about you! When I didn’t see you surface—you could have drowned!”

I glanced back at the river. *What happened to me? Was it seeing Ava or hearing Cali’s voice that saved me?*

A wet rasp of a cough caught everyone’s attention, and a few yards away, a ragged-looking Albin clawed his way onto the riverbank. His clothes were shredded, and his shoulder was bleeding.

I lunged to my feet, rage mingling with the Fae blood in my veins. That asshole was the reason I’d almost drowned. The reason I’d almost become gator chum!

I grabbed Albin and spun him around, my hand tightening on his throat.

He glared up at me. “What do you want?”

“You shouldn’t have run, you fucking idiot. None of this would have happened if you’d just listened.”

But it was too late now. Fortunately, there was one way to guarantee this asshole wouldn’t bother Harlow again.

I should have done it from the start.

I tightened my grip on the vampire’s neck, and this time I wasn’t going to let go.

# Episode 3198

**Artemis**

I narrowed my gaze and took a slow look around, sizing up the group of Fae that had us surrounded. As much as I wanted to scoff at their threat, I could tell by the looks in their eyes that they meant what they’d said—they would kill us if we didn’t give them information about Adair. I’d had a feeling that searching for Adair would be dangerous, but I’d had no idea that things would spiral out of control so fast.

“What do you want to do?” Rishika whispered.

“Follow my lead,” I whispered. “Hey, you,” I said, my eyes on the Fae with the club in his hand. “I think it would be better if you turned around and took all your little friends with you before you got hurt.”

The Fae smiled and slapped the club against his open palm. “Not happening.” He snorted. “We want to know about Adair, and you’re going to tell us what you know.”

He gave his club an impressive swing before slapping it against his palm once again.

It occurred to me right then that these Fae were probably from the Fae court.Nikkos had warned me that the court was trying to find Adair so they could bring him back to the Fae world against his wishes. There was no way I was going to sell Adair out to these bastards.

I thought back to the market, wishing that I’d bought some of the weapons I’d seen at the booth—namely that killer bow. Having a little hardware on my side really would have made this a fight worth remembering. But even so, I still had faith in Rishika’s and my skills, even without my bow.

Rishika tugged at my hand and gestured to her left, toward a narrow path between two rows of booths. I gave her a slight nod, and slowly, we began to back toward it.

“Why do you even want information about Adair?” I asked, trying to stall. *Rishika and I can make a run for it any second now, we just need to get a little bit closer…*

“That’s none of your business,” hissed the Fae. “Now, tell us what we want to know, or we’ll be forced to beat it out of you.” He held up the club and jabbed it toward me, as if to demonstrate how he’d use it on me.

I gritted my teeth. A big part of me wanted to stand my ground and face off against him and his minions. I’d handled far more menacing threats than him in my lifetime, and probably would again. I took another quick look around, really sizing up our competition.

*Shit. We’re outnumbered for sure.*

The last thing I wanted was to drag Rishika into a Fae fight. Things could escalate quickly, and I would never forgive myself if something happened to her because I couldn’t swallow my pride and take the safer choice—running.

*Maybe I can blast them with my magic*,I thought before dismissing the idea right away. I still wasn’t sure how much control I had. Even Cali’s magic wasn’t at one hundred percent, given whatever the witches had done to suppress everyone’s magical abilities. Using my magic could make matters worse, and things were already bad enough without adding a magical misfire to the fray.

The Fae were closing in, their eyes shining with menace as Rishika and I kept edging closer and closer to the path behind us. Without a second thought, I decided to take the risk and sent a blast of magic careening toward the nearest booth, causing it to partially collapse. The Fae all jumped in surprise, and Rishika and I turned and took off down the path. Rishika was fast, and she took the lead as we wove through the narrow passageway, avoiding surprised shoppers and the doors that flew open onto the alleyway as people came in and out of the shops.

“Shit, they’re on our tail!” I called out as I took a quick glance behind me at the advancing Fae.

*How fair a fight would it be if we just turned around and faced them? Rishika could shift, which might be enough to scare them off—or provoke them.* Fae and werewolves didn’t generally make the best of friends, after all, and Fae didn’t scare easily.

“Do you remember which way the tunnel is?” Rishika asked as we approached a three-way split. “Maybe we can make a break for it?”

I turned around and looked beyond the approaching Fae, trying to get my bearings. We’d run off so fast that I wasn’t exactly sure which way we should turn.

“We have to keep moving, Artemis! Which way?” Rishika pressed. I could hear the panic in her voice, and I hated that I’d put her in this position.

I eyed all three paths. “Let’s go straight!”

Without wasting another second, we took off straight ahead down the center path. After zigzagging around a few sharp turns, we finally slowed to a stop.

I took a quick look behind us. “Did we lose them?”

“Over here,” Rishika said, pulling me behind a cluttered display tower in one of the open-air shops. We peeked out from behind the display, scanning for any sign of the Fae. The market was still bustling like nothing was going on, which was reassuring. If there were a crew of weapon-wielding Fae bearing down on us, I was sure that there would’ve been more commotion.

I looked around, immediately spotting the fortune teller’s booth. “Look over there! The fortune teller. We’re not that far from the tunnel.”

“I have an idea,” Rishika said. She reached out and grabbed a couple of scarves from a nearby display and wrapped one of them around my face, briefly pausing to kiss me before she wrapped one around her face, too. Rishika shoved some money at the bewildered shopkeeper, and then we emerged from our hiding place hand in hand.

I steered Rishika toward the tunnel, hoping like hell that our disguises would provide enough cover for us to get away. I took another quick glance back as we hurried off. Nobody seemed to be paying attention to us, thankfully. We slipped into the tunnel, discarding our scarves as we went.

“Looks like we might have finally given them the slip,” Rishika said gleefully. We rushed through the tunnel without incident until we came to the entrance below the manhole cover. “Shit. The ladder’s gone!”

A throaty laugh echoed through the tunnel. “Thought you could outsmart us that easily?”

Rishika and I spun around, just as the Fae stepped out from the shadows with his trusty club. I spotted the ladder, propped up against the wall behind him. More Fae materialized, leering at us in the darkness.

“I warned you,” said the leader. “Now, it’s time to play rough.”

*Now we have no choice but to fight.* I swallowed, weighing our odds. We were just as outnumbered as before, but I didn’t see any other way out of this. We would have to fight, or there was no way we would make it out of this tunnel alive.

As if sensing my thoughts, Rishika squeezed my hand. “We can do this.”

Seconds later, she shifted, startling a Fae and giving me just enough time to make my move.

“Hell yeah, we can,” I said as I lunged at the club-wielding Fae.

He took a swing just as I threw a hard punch that glanced off the side of his face. I ducked another swing from his club as another Fae came running at me. I dropped low and evaded her attack and another swing of the club, then came up and blasted the other Fae with a kick to her knee. She went down just as the other Fae swung his club again, narrowly missing my head.

I turned just in time to see one of the Fae running at Rishika with a spear, ready to pierce her straight through. I launched myself at him and tackled him to the ground. We struggled for a few moments before I was able to wrestle the spear away from him. I used the blunt end to knock him out cold, just as Rishika took down another Fae who was sneaking up behind me.

With the spear, I was at least able to keep most of the Fae from getting too close, and Rishika was tackling and tearing into any Fae who managed to slip past my guard. Things were looking up—for a moment.

“I’m impressed,” said the leader, swinging his club lightning fast and knocking the spear from my hands before I could evade him. “But this is still the end of the road.”

“Fuck you!” I spat. The worst part was that he was right. We’d put up a valiant effort, but there were just too many of them for just the two of us to go up against. We’d managed to completely immobilize one of them, but the rest had regrouped and looked like they had a lot more fight in them.

Rishika and I huddled together as they backed us up against a wall.

“I’m sorry, Rishika,” I said. “I never meant for any of this to happen. This is all my fault.”

“At least you’re smart enough to realize when playtime is over,” said one of the Fae, her eyes flashing in the darkness.

I put my hand on Rishika’s back and closed my eyes, bracing myself for what was coming.

A voice cried out from the darkness. “Stop!”

I opened my eyes to see Nikkos materializing from the shadows. Maybe we would have an unexpected ally in this fight, but my hopes were dashed when I saw him reach for the spear, a smile on his face. “If you’re going to kill them, why don’t you let me do it?”

# Episode 3199

Albin’s veins were starting to bulge out of his skin. He gasped for breath as Xavier tightened his grip around his neck and lifted him until his feet were dangling about a foot off the ground.

“What are you doing?” I called out to Xavier. “Harlow didn’t ask you to kill Albin, just to get him to stop harassing her!”

It was true enough that Albin had nearly gotten us killed, and had done a number on Xavier, but there was no way I wanted to stand there and watch Xavier murder him. I didn’t think I’d be able to handle that—or ever get the imagery out of my head.

Xavier shot a glance at me. “This is the best way to make him stop. He won’t be harassing anyone once I’m done with him.” Xavier tightened his grip even more, lifting Albin even higher.

Greyson put a hand on Xavier’s shoulder. “Take it easy, brother.”

Xavier shot Greyson a glare but finally released the vampire, who fell to his knees, clutching his neck and gasping for air.

I sighed with relief and let out a breath. Not only did I not want Xavier to kill Albin just because he was angry, but New Orleans was crawling with vampires. The last thing we needed was for other vampires to come after us because Xavier had dared to kill one of their own. This place had no chill, and I just wanted to do what we had to do and get back home as soon as possible. We already had one enemy breathing down our necks—we didn’t need a whole gaggle of vengeful vampires on top of that.

I was surprised when Greyson jerked Albin up by the collar of his soaked shirt and yanked him close so that Albin’s face was only a few inches away from his own.

“Greyson!” I cried out. *Now my other mate is about to kill him, too?*

Greyson bared his teeth at Albin as he spoke in a tone so menacing that it sent a chill down my spine. “Give us your word that you won’t be bothering Harlow anymore, and we’ll let you go. I’d think twice before thinking about lying. We’ll know. And if you are, I’ll let my brother do whatever he wants with you. Understood?”

Albin nodded his head, his face crumpled with terror.

“Good.” Greyson released Albin with a shove. “If you ever come near Harlow again, I will get every Alpha of every pack to hunt you down.” Greyson gestured at the river. “If you thought alligators were bad, wait until a pack of angry Alphas gets their hands on you. There’ll be nothing left of you once they’re done, I promise you that, vampire.”

Albin kept nodding, all the while backing away. Finally, he turned and ran, disappearing into the thick brush that bordered the river.

“Thank you, Greyson,” I said, relief coursing through me. “Now hopefully Harlow will be true to her word and we’ll be able to find Tabitha.”

Xavier blew out a sigh. “You know I wasn’t *actually* going to killhim, right? I just wanted to make it seem that way.” He flashed me a crooked grin, his eyes shining.

I nodded, but I didn’t know if I really believed him. I’d seen that look in his eye before. There was no question in my mind that Albin might have met his end if the old Xavier, the pre-Cali Xavier, had managed to get ahold of him.

I looked around at our muddy, soaked-to-the-bone, entirely bedraggled group. We looked like we’d been to hell and back. I took a long look out at the murky water and shuddered. I couldn’t believe we’d been swimming in that. There were alligators lurking in the depths, and there was still a chance that Albin’s buddies—or anyone else, for that matter—could happen upon us at any moment and start asking questions. We weren’t safe right now, that much I knew.

“Maybe we should get out of here. How far is it to the city?” I asked.

Gabriel took a tired look around. “That depends on where the hell we are right now.” He took off one of his shoes and poured water out of it, shaking his head in disgust.

“I can hear traffic,” Greyson said. “There must be a road not too far from here.”

“I know where we are,” Mikah piped up. “I can get us back to the safe house.”

Without another word, we all trudged back to the safe house. We were silent for most of the walk, and by the time we got there, my feet were throbbing. My wet, muddy clothes had dried on the walk and were chafing at my skin. We all looked pretty pathetic, which was funny since not that long ago, we’d all looked like we’d walked straight out of *The Great Gatsby*.

*Now we look like we walked straight out of a swamp.* Which was exactly what we’d done, more or less.

Inside the safe house, I slipped away for a little privacy in one of the bedrooms. I was massaging the balls of my feet when Xavier poked his head in. “Hey, Cali. Just wanted to make sure you were okay.” He cleared his throat and looked down at the ground. “I’m sorry that I—kind of—lost my temper back there.”

I sighed and looked up at him. “I can’t really blame you. Albin put us through hell. Do you think it worked? Do you think that he’ll really stop harassing Harlow?”

I didn’t even want to imagine a universe where we’d gone through all of that for nothing. Albin had seemed genuinely terrified, so I hoped that was enough to keep him in line.

Xavier shrugged. “I almost hope that he doesn’t—I wouldn’t mind meeting up with him again.”

“Xavier, stop! Remember, you said you weren’t going to kill him!”

He grinned. “Did I say anything about killing?” He laughed. “I’m pretty sure Albin got the message. I’m just sorry that things got as crazy as they did. But I wanted to thank you for sacrificing some of your blood to heal me.” He stepped close and kissed me.

“I would give every drop of blood I have to save you, Xavier,” I said. We stared at each other for a few beats, electricity and heat passing between us before Xavier finally broke away.

“I’m gross,” he said with a wince. “I’m going to go get cleaned up. You sure you’re good?”

“I am, and I’ll be even better after a hot shower,” I said.

He nodded his agreement and left.

I couldn’t wait to get out of my mud-caked dress. I could smell the river all over me, and it reminded me of creepy, swampy things—like alligators.

I went to the bathroom and started the shower, thinking about how glad I was that we’d come out of that whole incident alive—and that I’d been able to heal Xavier. I couldn’t wait to tell Torin about what I’d done for Xavier. I was sure I’d made him proud.

I was still having a hard time wrapping my head around how crazy everything had gotten.I’d had a feeling we might run into a little bit of trouble in New Orleans, but I hadn’t had a clue that it would involve steamboats, jazz bands, vampires, and alligators.

I stepped into the shower and sighed as the hot water ran down my skin. The water rinsed dark brown down the drain, and I soaped up my entire body and shampooed my hair multiple times until the water ran clear. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so filthy.

I finished up and dried off, then studied myself in the mirror. For a while, I avoided looking at my shoulder, afraid of what state I would find the handprint in, but in the end I couldn’t resist. I twisted around to look at it. Seluna’s handprint was faded, though still visible. It kind of felt like a mixed blessing, since it being faded meant that the magic in New Orleans was still under the strange magic suppression spell.

There was a knock on the door.

“Cali?” Greyson stepped inside. He was showered and dressed in something that he’d obviously borrowed from the house—it fit well enough, but it definitely wasn’t Greyson’s usual style. “Just wanted to come check on you. How are you feeling? You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said as he gathered me into a tight hug. I breathed him in, happy to have a calm moment with him.

“Good.” He kissed me on the top of the head and pulled away a little so that he could look at me. “I hope that we’ll be able to rescue Tabitha now that we have Harlow’s cooperation. Everyone’s planning to meet in a few minutes to discuss what’s next.”

“Sounds good,” I said around a yawn. I suddenly felt so tired that I didn’t know how I was even going to keep my eyes open for another second. *No time for sleep yet. We still have a lot to do.* “Let me just finish drying my hair, then I’ll join you all.”

“Cool,” he said before giving me a quick kiss and leaving.

I went back into the bathroom, and not too long after, I heard Greyson enter again.

“Hey, did you forget something?” I called out. I peeked out of the bathroom and was surprised to see Harlow standing there, her eyes flashing with fury.

“I thought we had a deal,” she snapped. “Why didn’t you kill Albin?”

# Episode 3200

**Xavier**

I couldn’t make the shower hot enough to cut through the dirt and grime of the day. No matter how much I scrubbed, it was like I couldn’t get the film of river water off my skin.

*I’m going to smell like this forever, aren’t I?* I closed my eyes and stepped all the way under the shower jets. *All because of some fucking sax-playing vampire.*

If he’d just stayed put and listened to reason, none of this would have happened, but no, the guy had to up and freak out and jump into the river. *Who does that?* I’d imagined a lot of ways our little tangle with Albin might go, but I’d never in a million years imagined that we’d have to give chase through alligator-infested waters.

I looked down at my leg where the alligator had bitten me, unable to stop a flashback of tangling with the huge monster. *Thank god for Cali. She definitely accelerated my healing.* The wound had been pretty nasty, and while I would’ve healed up on my own, her Fae blood mixed with our mate bond was a great accelerator—and time to lay up and heal was the one thing I definitely didn’t have.

I was just happy that Cali was safe. I remembered the look of fear in her eyes as I’d dangled Albin in the air, barely containing my anger. I could admit that I hadn’t been completely honest with her when I’d said that I had no plans to kill Albin. If Greyson hadn’t stepped in, I probably would have done just that and not batted an eye. He’d attacked me, bitten me, and it would’ve been justified.

*But Cali was there, and I don’t want to do anything to hurt her, or to keep her from trusting me.*

I lifted my face to the scalding water—and suddenly I was back in the river. Drowning. Fighting for my life. Ava was the one who’d come to me when I was on the brink of death. *Why wasn’t it Cali? Why did I imagine Ava?*

Guilt welled up inside me. I hadn’t meant to, but it felt like I’d betrayed Cali. I’d already tried to blame it all on my wolf, but this time, I couldn’t use it as a scapegoat, since I hadn’t been thinking about my wolf when I’d seen Ava. *Or when we kissed.* It was all an illusion, sure, but she’d felt so real—and it pissed me off that I hadn’t hated it.

*I should have fought Ava off, just like I fought off that alligator. Why didn’t I? Was it because I was drowning? It should have been Cali. She’s the reason for everything I do.* *She’s my mate; she’s the woman I love.*

*Why can’t Ava just leave me the hell alone? Why can’t I get her out of my fucking head, no matter how hard I try?*

The last time I’d laid eyes on Ava, she’d kissed me and said goodbye. Had she meant it? Of course not. Ava didn’t always mean what she said, especially when it came to the two of us.

“Shit!” I pounded my fist against the wall, wishing I could turn the water even hotter. I needed to feel the pain as punishment for my head conjuring up Ava instead of Cali when I’d been on my last breath. It was like my mind was hell-bent on betraying me, no matter how much I tried to do the right thing—the thing I wanted. There was no one I wanted more than Cali, so why did it seem like Ava kept encroaching on that?

I turned at the sound of Cali’s yelp. I quickly shut off the shower and listened. *Did I imagine that?* Thoughts of an angry Albin coming to seek his revenge raced through my head. We’d given him a scare, but I didn’t know the guy—he could’ve been capable of just about anything.

Not willing to take any chances, I raced out of the bathroom and burst into Cali’s room to see Harlow staring angrily at Cali.

I grabbed the witch and spun her around to face me. “What the hell are you doing here? How did you find us?”

“Mikah told me about this place.” She jerked out of my hold and straightened her clothes. “Besides, that’s not even the point. I thought we had a deal! Why did you let Albin get away?”

I glanced at Cali. She looked unharmed but a little shaken up—and beautiful. With no small amount of difficulty, I tore my gaze away from Cali to look at Harlow once more. “The deal was to keep Albin from coming after you, and I’m pretty sure that after the scare we gave him, he’s packed up to go play his little horn in some other city.”

Greyson came running in, his gaze sweeping from Cali, to me, to Harlow. “What’s going on here? Is everything okay?”

Harlow sighed and seemed to relax—a little. She clasped her hands in front of her, wringing them a bit as she started pacing the room. “I wanted to make sure that Albin had been taken care of.”

“And he has,” Greyson said.

“We did what you wanted.”

Mikah came in, Gabe right by his side. “What’s this all about?”

“We’re figuring that out right now,” I said stiffly.

Harlow glanced at me. “Can you go put some clothes on? This is starting to get a bit awkward. Then I’ll tell you all about the greenhouse.”

I looked down, only then realizing that I was stark naked and still dripping wet from my shower. I didn’t really care, though. The only thing that mattered was that Cali was okay, and now that I was sure of that, I could focus on other things.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked Cali.

“Yeah,” Cali said. “I’m fine. Go get dressed.”

Only then did I go to my room and throw on some clothes. Before I returned to join the others, I glanced back at the shower. *That had better be the last time I think about Ava.*

“The guy is old news, now, I promise,” Greyson was telling Harlow as I walked into the living room. “You should have seen him. He looked like he was about to faint from fear. He got our message.”

“Greyson’s right. But next time, if you want the guy dead, say so,” I added.

“Noted,” Harlow said quickly.

Gabe and Mikah were seated on the couch on either side of Cali. I wedged myself in between her and Mikah and put an arm around her shoulders as Harlow began to tell us about the greenhouse.

“The greenhouse is an important place for New Orleans elder witches. It’s their unofficial meeting place,” Harlow explained.

“Great, so what are we waiting for? Let’s go take them out,” Greyson said. “I want to get this thing over with.”

“Sounds tempting, but last time we went up against them, I got blasted to shit and we had to retreat. We shouldn’t underestimate them,” I said begrudgingly. It was hard for me to admit that those witches had gotten the better of me, but they wouldn’t get another chance to get the drop on me, that much was for sure.

Harlow nodded. “Xavier’s right. It was stupid for you all to even try—especially since the elders have made it so that no one *but* the elders can even access their own magic.”

“That’s not totally true,” Cali said. “It is for witches, but I’ve been able to use mine. Not always at full strength, but it’s there.”

I sighed, starting to get annoyed with Harlow’s attitude. I hated when people brought more problems than solutions to the table, and that was exactly what Harlow was doing.

“So, Harlow, you’re the resident witch expert. What do you suggest we do?” I asked. “Just walk up and knock on the door?”

Harlow scoffed. “Of course not—unless you want to get blasted to smithereens again. Besides, there’s no guarantee that the witches will even be there.”

“But what about Tabitha?” Cali asked.

“Exactly. What more reason do we need to storm the castle?” Gabe huffed.

“You’d be walking right into a trap. I don’t think you all understand what you’re dealing with, here. The elders wouldn’t leave Tabitha without some sort of magic protection. They know that they’re shaking things up by suppressing everyone’s magic, so you can bet that they have safeguards and protections in place,” Harlow said.

“So, what, then?” I asked, not bothering to hide the impatience in my voice. All Harlow had done since showing up unannounced was tell us what we couldn’t do. I needed her to come through on her end of the bargain and tell us what we *could* do. Cali’s life depended on it.

Harlow trained her gaze right on me. “It’s simple. You need to find each elder witch and take them out, one by one.”

# Episode 3201

**Artemis**

*I can’t believe I fell for it. Nikkos set us up, and I led Rishika right into it.*

Nikkos stepped toward us, spear in hand. “You were following me.” He looked back and forth between me and Rishika, his gaze hard.

“Yes, because I didn’t trust you! And clearly, I was right. You’re a traitor!” I spat.

Rishika growled and pawed at the ground. I ran a hand over her back, trying to calm her. I didn’t want her jumping on Nikkos and getting in over her head. The other Fae were looking at us with smug expressions, waiting for us to make even one misstep.

Nikko aimed the sharp end of his spear at us and curled his top lip. “Just so you know, this tip is silver—not exactly a healthy element for werewolves.”

Rishika growled again and took a step forward, and I reached out to calm her once again. Everything was already sliding into chaos—I didn’t need my girlfriend getting silver poisoning on top of everything else. My weird Light and Dark Fae blood wouldn’t heal her. And it wasn’t like we had Cali on hand to use hers. Rishika’s growl was still rolling low in her throat, but she took a couple of steps back at my urging. With her calm—for the moment—I shifted my thoughts to figuring out a way to buy some time and get us out of this. I’d been in stickier situations than this before, and quick thinking would be the key to getting out of it.

“You told me you were trying to help Adair,” I said to Nikkos. “You’re both Fae. How can you just set another Fae up like this? Don’t you have any loyalty?”

Nikkos smiled slowly. “You’re right.”

And then, without warning, he thrust the blunt end of the spear backward, striking one of the Fae in the stomach. With impressive ease, he lunged toward another of the Fae and used the spear to sweep his feet out from under him. The other two advanced on Nikkos, wary and with their eyes narrowed to slits.

“I’ll dismember each one of you piece by piece if you take another step,” Nikkos hissed, causing the two Fae to pause.

I watched it all, stunned. I considered joining the fight, but I still wasn’t sure that I could trust Nikkos. *This guy is unpredictable as hell. Whose side is he really on?* Besides, if I jumped in, Rishika wouldn’t think twice about following me, and we were too close to getting out of this thing unscathed to make a wrong move now.

Rishika’s growling had reached a fever pitch. She was clearly thirsty to jump in and tear the Fae to pieces, and I didn’t know how long I’d be able to keep her from doing just that.

*I don’t blame you, Rishika. I want to get these assholes, too, but let’s just see how this is going to play out.*

I ran my hand up and down her back, hoping that she would wait and get a better read on the situation before leaping into the fray. Sometimes standing by and staying out of things was a better move than fighting—which had been a hard lesson for me to learn.

Nikkos jabbed his spear toward another one of the Fae, who leapt back and held up his hands.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” the Fae said. Without casting me or Rishika another look, they gathered up their wounded comrades and scrambled into the darkness of the tunnel.

“Yeah, that’s right!” Nikkos called after them. “Keep running like the cowards you are! Run back to your Fae court and tell them that Nikkos will never let them get their hands on Adair!” Nikkos let out a throaty, taunting laugh that bounced off the walls of the tunnel.

I thought again about what Nikkos had told us, about the Fae court wanting to bring Adair back to the Fae world.

“Was that the Fae court?” I asked. “They didn’t take the time to identify themselves—they were too busy trying to kill us.”

Nikkos chuckled and shook his head. “Of course not. The court would never do their own dirty work. They don’t have the stomach for it. Those were just a couple of goons they hired. And it’s a good thing I came along when I did.”

Nikkos gave his spear an expert spin, then stuck the point into the ground so that it stood straight up.

Rishika shifted back to human. “We could’ve handled it,” she said. “We didn’t need your help.”

“Apologies for interfering, then… Though you certainly *looked* like you needed my help.” Nikkos flashed a smile. “So, did you two enjoy watching me shop? I do love the markets here. There’s something so quaint about them.”

I handed Rishika my coat to wear before I answered.

“Not nearly as much as I enjoyed watching you run off those Fae,” I said. There was no question that I would’ve preferred taking them out myself—and I didn’t like being indebted to strangers—but I wasn’t above acknowledging that he’d made quick work of them. “How did the Fae court know we were here, anyway?”

“Easy. They have eyes and ears everywhere. That’s why I warned you both to be careful.”

I took this in and mulled it over. “I really thought you were working with them. That you’d betrayed us at the first opportunity.”

This was yet another case where things weren’t exactly as they seemed—though I was glad that things had worked out in our favor. I would never admit it to Nikkos—or Rishika, for that matter—but for a moment there, I hadn’t been sure if we were going to survive. Rishika and I could hold our own, but being outnumbered was a bad thing for even the best fighters.

“It might have looked that way, sure, but I assure you, my allegiance is to Adair—which is why I’ve trusted you to help me locate him before the Fae court,” Nikkos said.

“Maybe, but I wonder if we’re any closer to finding him than we were before.” I took a quick look around the dank tunnel, wanting to get out of there.

“I choose to believe that we’re making progress,” Nikkos said. “Which is why we should probably leave the market. Who knows how many court spies spotted you? I spotted you two immediately, and the court spares no expense in hiring the best trackers money can buy.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Rishika said begrudgingly.

“Great, glad you’re on board. Why don’t you wait here while Artemis picks up some clothes for you? New Orleans is pretty wild, but it’s probably not a good idea for you to be walking around like that. We’re trying to be inconspicuous, after all.”

Nikkos and I went back up to the market, where I quickly purchased an outfit for Rishika. She grumbled about it being too much as she put it on, but she gave me a quick kiss and thanked me, anyway. Finally, the three of us climbed up the ladder and left the tunnel behind.

“Wow, I’m surprised no one noticed us coming out of there,” I said once we were back on the street. No one had even given us a second look—and I sure would’ve if I’d seen three people who obviously weren’t workers climbing out of a manhole.

“The manhole cover is magically masked so that it always appears undisturbed to humans and non-Fae,” Nikkos explained, dusting himself off.

“It’s also a wonder that they aren’t staring at me in this outfit,” Rishika grumbled. “Thanks for coming through in a pinch, Artemis, but I definitely would have preferred something a little less… dramatic.”

“Well, I think you look hot,” I said, giving Rishika a kiss. “And stop complaining—it was the best I could do.”

Rishika blushed a little and flashed me a heated look. “I know you did your best.” She turned to Nikkos. “Thanks for saving our asses down there.” I could tell that it pained her to admit it, but like me, Rishika could admit when someone had done good work. “I guess you don’t completely suck.”

“Of course—but it wasn’t an entirely selfless act. I desperately need to find Adair before the court does, and I’m counting on your help to do that. The fact that the court is resorting to violent extremes shows that they’re desperate, too. They’re not going to let anything stop them,” Adair said as he ushered us into a shadowy corner out of the view of the street.

“Clearly. So what’s our next move?” Rishika asked.

I couldn’t help but think about Cali. She’d wanted us to stay in touch, and I wondered if she’d made any progress on her end. Hopefully they hadn’t run into as much interference as Rishika and me. New Orleans was shaping up to be a pretty prickly place.

“We should go back to meet up with Cali and the others,” I said. “I’m sure they’re wondering where we are.”

Nikkos gasped and grabbed me by the arm. “Absolutely not. You can’t.”

# Episode 3202

“Take them out?” I needed clarification. “You mean kill them?”

No matter which way we turned, we always seemed to come back to the same place: death.

Mikah spoke. “The elders don’t seem the type to just hand Tabitha over to us. If you have a better idea, Cali, let’s hear it.”

“I just think there must be some way to convince them to release Tabitha without resorting to murder.” I looked at Greyson and Xavier, wondering what they thought of this newest twist. “What do you two think? You know how I feel about killing—only when absolutely necessary. There has to be another way.”

I could tell that Mikah and Gabriel were a little skeptical about an alternative by the way they averted their gazes when I looked at them.

“Come on, we’re a smart bunch. We can figure out how to fix this without getting blood on our hands.” I looked at Greyson. “Can’t we?”

Greyson cleared his throat. “Before we cross that bridge, how are we supposed to find all these elder witches? This is a big city, with lots of dark corners to hide in. Finding each elder seems like something we might not be able to do.”

“You’re right—I doubt that you’ll be able to. Witches are very good at remaining hidden if they don’t want to be found, not to mention that these witches still have their magic,” Harlow said. “That alone gives them a big advantage.”

“Great,” Xavier hissed. “Yet another roadblock.”

“You *are* a former mercenary, Xavier,” Mikah said. “Give it a shot. Might be easier than you think. Dust off those skills of yours and put them to use.”

Trying to keep thoughts of committing multiple murders out of my mind, I was starting to get frustrated. “Harlow, you said that you would help us, and now you’re pretty much telling us it’s impossible. What did we even threaten Albin for if you couldn’t hold up your part of the deal?”

Harlow held up her hand. “I disagree. I didn’t say that it was impossible, only that it would be impossible for *you* to track down each elder witch. But it’s not impossible for me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked with a sigh.

“What it means is that I’ll more than uphold my end of the deal and help you locate the elders,” Harlow said. “You didn’t kill Albin like I wanted,” she said with an eyeroll, “but from the sounds of it, you scared him off. I always keep my word, so I’ll help you find them.”

“What, do you have some kind of magic spell that will track them? Thought you couldn’t use your magic right now? And if you can, why don’t you just use it to help us break into the greenhouse and rescue Tabitha?”

I’d already been annoyed about Harlow just showing up, but on top of that, she seemed to be overcomplicating things and being the exact opposite of helpful. *Why did we have to show up in NOLA just as all of this was going on? Thanks a lot, Seluna.*

Harlow shook her head. “No, my magic is being affected, just like everyone else’s. And even if I were able to conjure up a little to help you break in, chances are it would backfire. I’m not taking those types of risks right now—and I imagine none of you would want to take that risk, either.”

“But you can still track down the elders somehow?” Xavier asked.

“Yes, and magic has nothing to do with it. I know the city better than you, and I know where the elders go—their stomping grounds, so to speak. It’ll take a bit of legwork, but I can lead you to each of the elders.”

I thought about that. “If this is the only way, then fine. But we still haven’t decided what we’re going to do when we find them.”

I’d been wracking my brain this entire time, trying to think of alternatives that wouldn’t get immediately dismissed, but I hadn’t come up with anything. All I knew was that I didn’t want to be part of killing multiple powerful witches, and I didn’t want my mates to have any part of that, either.

Harlow shrugged. “I’ll leave that up to you—I can’t be involved in killing an elder, if it does end up coming to that. It would mark me, and then I’d have to face a trial before the witch council. Chances are, I would be sentenced to death. I’m not interested in that, for obvious reasons.”

I shuddered. “Why is everything in the supernatural world so damn extreme?” I shook my head, looking around at the others. “It might all be business as usual for all of you, but it’ll never be that way for me. And I don’t ever want it to be.”

I thought about Lola and Mrs. Smith and my parents. We were all supernaturals, but at least we seemed to have a better grip on our humanity that the others. I couldn’t even imagine my mother or my dad discussing murdering a bunch of witches, no matter the stakes.

Greyson came up to me and put a hand on my arm. “Listen, I know you’re upset, but I haven’t committed to anything. I’m open to all options. But you had to know that with Seluna’s ashes causing so much trouble in the world, killing will always be a possibility.”

I nodded at Greyson, then hung my head. “I know that. But that doesn’t mean don’t hate the idea—especially now that it’s starting to look like the reality.” I looked up into Greyson’s eyes. “Promise me that you’ll try not to. That’s all I ask.”

Greyson smiled at me and said, “Always.”

“I hate to interrupt, but what is the plan, exactly?” Mikah asked. “Are we just going to scour the city, hoping to locate these elders? When I’m working a missing person’s case, I always find that it’s better to start with a plan. Otherwise we could just end up spinning our wheels and wasting time—and we don’t have time to waste.”

“He’s right. If we don’t have a plan, it could put us in danger. These aren’t a bunch of green witches we’re dealing with. These are the most powerful witches in New Orleans. A plan is key,” Greyson said.

Harlow sighed. “The plan is that I’ll take you all around the city to where the elders are most likely to be. You subdue them whatever way you have to. Simple.” She crossed her arms and gave us all a hard look.

“That sounds like a quarter of a plan,” Mikah huffed, returning her stare head-on. “And a quarter is just as good as no plan at all.”

“Then what do you suggest, master gumshoe?” Harlow shot back. “If you don’t want my help, fine. Do your own thing. Good luck!”

“Hold on, let’s not get into an argument over this,” I said quickly. “Like Mikah said, we don’t have much time, so let’s not waste it by bickering.” I turned to Harlow. “Take us to the first place, then we’ll go from there. That sound good to everyone?”

There were a few slight nods. I could tell that everyone was conflicted—especially my mates. I knew how much they wanted to fix this, and I couldn’t wait to let Dani know that we’d saved her sister. It just seemed like there were so many obstacles stacked in front of us.

“Fine, but I have to warn you, if the elders learn of what we’re up to, things will go south very quickly. New Orleans is a city overflowing with supernaturals—and a good number of them are angry witches who might resort to anything to get their magic back. These are desperate times, and people aren’t thinking straight. But on the upside, we might have allies we don’t know about yet.”

“And that’s a good thing,” I said, happy to hear at least one positive thing in all this darkness. “We can use all the help we can get.”

“Sure… But the elders have a lot of allies, too. Their allies are fiercely loyal, and they’ll do whatever the elders say without questioning it for even a second. Even if they don’t have magic… Well, we all know that you don’t really need magic to cause a shit ton of trouble.”

“That’s true,” I said thoughtfully, taking in Harlow’s warnings. “Though these days, a lot of my problems are caused by magic.”

“Join the club,” Harlow said. “And being without magic is the biggest one yet.”

“So, where are we going to start?” Greyson asked. I could hear a hint of impatience in his voice, and I felt the same. We needed to get going. I couldn’t wait to pull my life out of Seluna’s clutches. There was a lot working against us, but we’d been up against tough times before and come out on top. There was no reason this couldn’t work out the same.

“The first elder witch isn’t very far,” Harlow said. “We can even walk there.” She turned and gestured toward the door. “Shall we?”

# Episode 3203

**Artemis**

I slapped Nikkos’s hand away from my arm. “What are you talking about? I’m going to see my sister, and no one is going to tell me otherwise—especially not *you*.”

Nikkos shook his head. “Then you’ll be making a grave mistake—unless you don’t value the lives of your sister and her friends.” Nikkos’s lips were pressed into a straight line, his expression serious.

Rishika stepped between us and turned her eyes on Nikkos. “You’d better start making some sense.”

Nikkos held up his hands. “Believe me, I have good reasons to be against this idea. Since you’ve arrived in New Orleans, you’ve gone around town asking a lot of questions. When people ask questions, others take notice. New Orleans is the type of place where people talk and news spreads fast, so if you think two inquisitive strangers have gone unnoticed, you’re wrong.”

“What’s your point? What does any of that have to do with seeing Cali?”

“You should know that the Fae court has likely already marked both of you. How do you think those Fae thugs the court sent were able to corner you in the market?”

I thought about that. It could have been a coincidence, but what Nikkos was saying made more sense than the court thugs just being in the right place at the right time. They’d seemed very sure of themselves when they’d cornered us—not to mention that they must have known where were going before we even got there, which was a chilling thought all on its own.

“If you go to see your sister—your friends, anyone—you could expose them to the same group that attacked you. You’d be leading them right to them. I can’t stop you from going, but I hope that you understand why it’s a bad idea. I’m only trying to protect you.”

I went quiet, considering his words.

“I need to talk this over with Rishika.” This was a lot to think about, and I was happy that I didn’t have to figure out the right move all on my own. Rishika was here with me for a reason, and it felt good not to be a lone wolf for once, and to have someone to bounce ideas off of.

Nikkos nodded, his softened gaze bouncing between me and Rishika. “Fine. I’ll give you two some space, but be quick about it. We shouldn’t stay here much longer. Word about what happened here is going to get out, and soon the entire city will be looking for you. You can count on that.”

“Come on,” Rishika said, grabbing my arm and pulling me into a doorway to talk. “Do you think he’s being honest?”

Rishika was a good judge of character, so I took it as a good thing that she even needed to ask the question. If she’d really gotten a bad vibe, I knew that she already would have been taking steps to get us away from him rather than asking any questions.

I glanced at Nikkos. “I don’t know. I can’t shake the feeling that he’s holding something back.”

It was just a feeling I had. On the surface, he really seemed to be genuine, but I knew from experience that people weren’t always what they seemed—and Nikkos had already shown himself to be unpredictable.

Rishika followed my gaze. “I feel the same way… But he *did* help us. He didn’t have to do that. As much as I hate to admit it, that does count for something.”

“It definitely does. And if he’s telling the truth, I think he might be right about not going to see Cali. I don’t want to put her and the others in danger.” I’d already gotten Rishika into a tough situation before, one that we’d been lucky to escape. I didn’t want to do the same to Cali and the others. My sister had a lot on her plate already, and I didn’t want to bring her any additional trouble.

“I don’t want to endanger them either, but I don’t really think we have to stay away from Cali and the others. But it’s up to you. I’ll follow your lead,” Rishika said.

I really valued Rishika’s input. It was true that I was a bounty hunter and had plenty of experience dealing with nefarious types, but Rishika was a warrior. I’d seen her come through for the pack, for her friends, and for me. Not to mention that she was someone Greyson, the Alpha, trusted, and I knew it was a big thing to win that sort of trust from a werewolf Alpha. Above all, I really respected her.

“How about we both make the decision?” I suggested.

Rishika smiled, her cheeks coloring just a little. “Okay, sounds good.”

*She’s so cute when she’s flattered.* “So, if we went to Cali and the Fae goons followed us and attacked again, do you think that with Cali and Xavier and Greyson and the others on our side, we could defend ourselves?”

I was leaning toward yes—together we’d taken on some pretty nasty folks—but I wanted to see what Rishika thought.

Rishika smiled. “Piece of cake. As it was, the two of us nearly defeated them.” Pride shone in Rishika’s eyes.

“True. And I don’t want to let Nikkos dictate what we should or shouldn’t do. He seems cool, but we just met the guy. We came to New Orleans to look for Adair—we never planned on having Nikkos along for the ride. This is our mission, and we’re the ones calling the shots.”

“Exactly, and it’s not like we can’t find Adair *without* Nikkos,” Rishika added.

“You’re right. I know what we’re going to do, now.”

I returned to Nikkos, who was looking over his shoulder nervously.

“I really wish you two would hurry up. We need to get going. It’s not safe here,” he said. “Someone could be watching us this very second.”

“I know, and we will, I just wanted to let you know that we’ve thought it over and we’re going to take our chances.”

Nikkos was obviously taken aback. “What does that mean?”

“It means that I’m going to go see my sister.” As I said the words, I felt even more confident about our decision.

“I’m sorry, but that’s absolutely ridiculous! I don’t think you two are thinking straight at all! What about their safety? You saw what the Fae court is capable of. You’re willing to bring that right to your sister?”

I held up a hand to quiet him down. “Our minds are made up. If you’re so worried about the Fae court, then you should go run and hide, but that’s not why Rishika and I came to New Orleans.”

Nikkos shook his head slowly. “You’re making a big mistake. Wow. You two are like an unmovable brick wall.”

I didn’t dislike that image—the idea that Rishika and I were strong and powerful sat very well with me. I turned to go back to Rishika’s side.

“I beg you to reconsider, Artemis!” Nikkos called after me, right on my heels.

“There’s nothing to reconsider. We’re going to see my sister, and that’s that. Our minds are made up,” I said.

Nikkos gasped and quickly pulled Rishika and me back into the shadowy recesses of the doorway. “Shh! Keep quiet, and don’t move!”

I started to protest, but I stopped myself. Something had gotten Nikkos even more worked up, and I wanted to know what it was. Not a moment later, two Fae came walking by.

As soon as they passed us and continued down the alley, Nikkos let out a breath.

“Those two were spies for the court,” Nikkos whispered. “Just like I thought. It’s not safe here.”

“Thank you—and I promise we’ll be cautious,” I said.

Rishika and I started to walk away.

“Wait,” Nikkos said. “I can’t in good conscience leave you two on your own. There are too many dangers—I’ll come along.”

“You really don’t have to,” Rishika said dryly.

“I know, but I agreed to help you find Adair, and I have the same goal. It’s better to work together. I know you two are more than capable, but let’s not forget that I found you outnumbered in that tunnel. I helped you then, and I might be able to help you again.”

*Ugh. He’s right. Maybe it is better to have him along with us.*

I gestured to him. “Then come on. Let’s go.”

We headed off toward the address that Cali had texted earlier, and before long, we’d arrived at the safe house. I let out a sigh of relief, excited to see Cali and catch her up on what had happened. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer.

Rishika went to peer through one of the darkened windows. “Are you sure this is the right place? It doesn’t look like anyone’s here.”

I double-checked the address against the numbers mounted beside the front door. “Yup, this is it, I’m sure of it.”

I was just about to text Cali when Nikkos spoke up. “Something’s wrong here. We have to go, right now.”

# Episode 3204

**Greyson**

I was eager to get things going. I knew that Cali was stressing over the idea of having to kill anyone, and I didn’t want her to have to suffer any longer than she had to. The sooner we could free Tabitha, the better.

We left the safe house with little else but a destination in mind, and made our way to the first elder location.

Harlow gave us a bit more information as we went. “Each of the four most powerful elders possess a key. I’ve always heard that they unlock a restricted area. That could be where they’re holding Tabitha.”

“And where is it?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, but we need the keys first regardless.”

Of course. Of course we didn’t know where the restricted area was. Fucking hell.

“I can’t imagine any of the elders are going to be keen about handing over their keys,” I said. It didn’t help matters that they still had command of their magic—which would make going up against them even more of a struggle. I hated that there was even a chance that I might have to disappoint Cali and kill one of the elders, but we needed to find those ashes. If killing an elder got us closer to that goal, I didn’t know if we’d have much of a choice.

*I wish I could promise Cali that we’d spare the elders’ lives, but I can’t do that. If the pack has to defend itself, it will. That’s the way it’s always been, and that’s how it has to be.*

“Where are we going?” Xavier asked. “Feels like we’ve been walking forever.”

Harlow slowed to a stop and pointed to a mansion set back from the sidewalk and surrounded by a wrought iron fence. “Right over there. That’s elder witch Constance’s home.”

It looked like the exact type of place that an elder witch would call home. It was large and ancient-looking, protected by the iron fence. It was probably there to keep Fae at bay.

“Be careful here, love,” I said to Cali. “I know Fae and iron aren’t a good mix, and there’s a lot of it standing between you and that house.”

“It looks abandoned,” Gabriel said, clearly unimpressed. “Maybe it’s haunted.” He chuckled a little.

I was finding it hard to find the humor in Gabriel’s statement. We’d all had enough dealings with malignant spirits to take that possibility seriously. It was enough that we’d potentially find a witch inside—I didn’t even want to think about the possibility of dealing with a poltergeist as well.

I turned to Harlow. “So, what’s the plan?”

“The plan is to lead you to the elders. I’ve done that. This is as far as my plan goes. I told you, I can’t be involved with any of what happens next. I’d be putting my life at risk, and I’m very much looking forward to living—especially now that I finally have Albin off my back.”

“That’s fine,” Gabriel said, facing our group. “We don’t need you for this part anyway. Why don’t Xavier and I just break in and drag her out?” Gabriel rubbed his hands together like he was contemplating how satisfying that course of action might be.

“Sounds good to me,” Xavier said, cracking his knuckles. “I could use a little excitement, especially when it’s for a good cause.”

He gave Cali a look that damn near turned my stomach. I didn’t think I’d ever get used to seeing my brother look at our—*my*—mate that way.

I couldn’t deny that I shared my brother’s enthusiasm, but if he thought that just barging into a powerful witch’s house was the right move, he wasn’t thinking straight. “No, hold on. We can’t just break in there. From what Harlow was telling us, this is no ordinary witch. Rushing in would be too risky, and we’d lose the element of surprise.” I gave Xavier a pointed look. “Don’t forget, the elders still have use of their magic, and we’ve already seen how they can use it against us.”

“Fair enough. So what’s the move, then?” Xavier asked.

“Harlow. The key, what is it? How will we know when we’ve found it?” Cali asked.

“It’s large, brass, old-fashioned. Most likely, she’s got it somewhere on her body. Something that important, she’s definitely keeping it close.” Harlow said.

“Got it. Where should we meet you afterward?” I asked Harlow. I wanted to get in, get out, and get to the next elder’s house as quickly as possible.

“Call me. I won’t be far.”

“Okay,” I said, my eyes on the mansion again. “We’ll see you soon.”

“Good luck,” Harlow said, wasting no time in getting the hell away from there.

Mikah came up beside me. “Maybe one of us should try to get in and scout it out. That might be the only chance we have of taking advantage of that element of surprise you mentioned.”

I liked the way Mikah was thinking. He wasn’t impulsive like Gabriel—or Xavier.

I turned to face the group. “I’ll go in and check things out. Stay here and watch the street for anything suspicious. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“No, Greyson, it should be me. I’m the reason why we’re here in the first place,” Cali said. “My magic will probably come through if push comes to shove. I’m the best option.”

“No, that’s not true—and there’s no way we’re sending you in there on your own. The vampire-witch is after me, so I should be the one,” Xavier argued. “It’s only right that I take care of this once and for all.”

“I would volunteer, but being a vampire and all, I can’t enter without being invited. Somehow, I doubt the witch is going to lay down the welcome mat for me,” Mikah said.

“I appreciate all of this, but I’m the one who’s going.” I turned to my brother. “Stay here with Cali and Gabriel and keep a lookout. Mikah, you come with me. Help me scout from the outside. If we’re smart about this, we can get the key and be out of there before Harlow ditches us.”

“Be careful,” Cali said. “And give us a shout if you get into any trouble. I’ll be there in a heartbeat.”

My heart warmed at Cali’s words, and it took everything in me not to grab her and kiss her right there in front of everyone. I just wanted to make her feel better, to let her know that I would do anything to protect her, and this was no exception. Her beautiful face was twisted with concern, and it pained me to see her in such turmoil. I had to get in there and get that key—it was an important step on our journey to getting Seluna’s ashes back, and I wasn’t going to let anything get in my way. “I will, Cali. Mikah, let’s do this.”

Mikah and I crossed the street and approached the house with caution.

*I wish it wasn’t the middle of the day. It would be so much easier to do this at night, under the cover of darkness.*

It seemed wrong to be breaking into a witch’s house while the sun was shining, but we advanced nonetheless.

I felt exposed and tense as we went over the gate, and I braced myself for the sound of approaching footsteps—something that would signal that we’d been spotted. When none came, I let out a breath and fell into step beside Mikah. We stuck close to the house as we walked the perimeter, making sure to stay low and pausing every so often to check a window while one of us kept watch. Thankfully, a good portion of the house was shielded from view by the thick bushes that bordered the fence, so there wasn’t much to worry about when it came to being spotted from the street.

“Bingo,” I said to Mikah. One of the windows in the back was slightly ajar.

Mikah peered in. “Looks empty in there—and haunted, like Gabe said.”

Wordlessly, I pulled myself up onto the ledge and pushed the window open just enough to slip through. I stepped down onto the floor as quietly as I could manage, testing the floorboards for squeaks and moans with each step before putting down my full weight. I paused to listen. It was silent.

*Maybe Constance, the elder witch, isn’t even here.*

Either way, I had to make sure. I made my way toward a doorway and crept out into a hallway that led to a large winding staircase.

*Maybe I should check out the ground floor first… Or should I try the upper floors? Where would an elder witch spend her downtime?*

I scanned the foyer. There were large, ornately framed portraits on the walls. *Creepy as hell.*

I turned at a noise and instantly felt something envelop my body. I gasped and tried to take a step, but I couldn’t. My feet wouldn’t budge—nothing would. I was frozen.

From behind me, a woman’s disdainful voice filled my ears. “Just what has come crawling into my house, now?”

# Episode 3205

**Xavier**

I was more than happy to stay at Cali’s side, but I was starting to wonder what was taking Greyson and Mikah so long.

*They were supposed to be in and out of there.* *This job is simple: find a weak spot, infiltrate, locate the target, and subdue. Gabe and I should’ve just rushed in and taken Constance out like we planned. Quick and to the point.*

But of course, Greyson had felt the need to flex his Alpha muscles and block that idea.

Cali was standing close beside me, her eyes glued to the mansion as she wrung her hands. I knew that she was worrying about Greyson, which seemed reasonable enough under the circumstances. Even so, it still bugged me to see her so focused and concerned about him. I couldn’t help it. It was just how I felt, and I didn’t think that would ever change.

*Who could ever get used to sharing their mate with their brother—a brother they can’t stand more than half the time?*

“It’s been almost five minutes. I want to go inside and see what’s going on,” Cali said. “What if something went wrong? What if Greyson needs me but he can’t let me know? What if the witch got Mikah, too?”

Cali’s voice was laced with panic, and I hated that she was this stressed out.

I wanted to tell her all the reasons why her going inside wasn’t a good idea, but I knew that it would be futile. Once Cali had her mind set on something, it was near impossible to turn her away from it—especially when it concerned me or Greyson. Besides, I wanted to see what was going on myself. I glanced at Gabe, who looked like he was itching to get in on the action, too, so there was no way he was going to stay back and wait with Cali if I asked him.

“Fine, but you’re not going alone. We’ll all go,” I said. “Strength in numbers, right?”

“About time,” Gabe said. “Let’s go get what we came for.”

We made our way across the street and into the yard. I spotted Mikah stooped beneath an open window near the rear of the mansion. He looked surprised to see us. “Hey. Greyson went in a couple minutes ago, but I haven’t heard anything since. I took a peek inside, but I couldn’t see anything, either.”

“Should we go in after him?” Gabe asked. “Teach that witch a lesson or two?”

“Maybe. You sure you haven’t heard a thing since he went in?” I asked Mikah. “Because that can’t be good.”

“I know, but I don’t think all of us going rushing inside is the answer, and I can’t, anyway,” Mikah said. “It’s only been a few minutes, so maybe—”

Mikah’s words were cut short as we all watched Cali hop up onto the ledge and start climbing through the window.

I grabbed her leg. “Cali, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to look for Greyson. Mikah said it himself—he hasn’t heard anything at all. That doesn’t seem right to me. We have to get in there and save him.”

“Yes, Cali, I get it, but you can’t just go rushing in there! We don’t know what might be waiting inside! Let Gabe or me go in first.”

Cali shook her head at me. “No, I think I’m the better option. Like I said before, my magic might not be operating at one hundred percent, but I can probably still conjure enough to defend myself if need be.” With that, she slipped inside.

“Shit!” I hissed under my breath. *She’s so damn stubborn!* Despite my fears about her going into the mansion, I couldn’t help but feel a little proud of how brave Cali was.

I wasted no time scrambling in after her. Cali was brave, all right, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t worried that she would find herself in some kind of Cali-trouble in no time.

I practically landed on top of her as I came through the window, and she stifled a yelp.

“Sorry,” I said quickly.

I paused at the sound of a voice drifting to us through the doorway. Cali and I gave each other a look, then moved toward the sound. We stopped before going all the way out in the hallway, and I peered out to get a better look. Immediately, I spotted a woman talking to someone that I couldn’t quite see.

“Is that Greyson? And the elder?” I whispered.

Cali leaned out further to see and lost her footing. She was just about to hit the ground when I caught her and pulled her to me. I saw the look of concern on her beautiful face, and my heart skipped a beat in my chest.

*Don’t worry. We’re in this together*,I mind linked to her. *Everything’s going to be okay, I promise.*

She smiled at me, and I released her when I heard a noise behind us. It was Gabe, coming through the window. He landed near-silently on the floor and grinned. “I’m not about to let you three have all the fun,” he said. “You see anything yet? Is Greyson—”

I motioned at him to shut his mouth and turned my attention back to the hallway. The woman wasn’t speaking anymore. I took a cautious step forward and finally saw that it was indeed Greyson facing the older woman. Constance. She was holding something in her hand that was attached to a cord around her neck, and she was dangling it in front of Greyson’s face like a carrot.

“Is this what you came for?” she asked him. “Is this why you’re trespassing in my house?!”

Cali gasped. “It’s the key!”

*Well, looks like Greyson found Constance—or she found him.* Just then, the woman looked past Greyson and locked eyes with me. *It’s go time!* I leapt up from my crouch and rushed toward her, hoping I’d be able to shield Cali from whatever magic she might throw at me. In an instant, my entire body seized up and I couldn’t move a muscle. I was completely frozen in place. I could still hear and see, but I couldn’t even move a finger or make a sound. It was like the air itself had turned into a prison.

*Fuck.*

My only thoughts were of Cali. I attempted to reach out to her via mind link so that I could tell her to be careful, tell her to get out of there, but not even my mind link was working. It was frozen, like the rest of me. Apparently rushing the witch hadn’t been the right idea after all.

Constance walked toward me slowly, a cold smile on her lips. “Well now, what do we have here? Why do I have not one, but two werewolves in my home? Am I missing something? It’s not Halloween, is it?” The witch looked past me in Cali’s direction. “I wonder… Have you two brought any other friends along?” She leaned to the side to stare down the hallway behind me, her eyes moving like searchlights.

I felt the smallest shred of relief when the witch returned her gaze to me. Cali had obviously pulled back out of view, thankfully. The witch looked over her shoulder at Greyson, then turned back to me. “Say, you two wouldn’t happen to be brothers, would you? You share a certain familiarity around the eyes and along the lines of your jaws.”

She reached out and brushed a hardened finger along my chin. It was enough to make my skin crawl and my stomach turn all at the same time. If I hadn’t been completely frozen by her magic, I would have bitten her finger clean off.

I could see the key dangling from her wrinkled neck.

*I’m so damn close! If I could just break out of this hold…* I rolled my eyes from side to side, looking around. *How the hell am I going to get out of this? I’m stuck here like some sort of statue.*

It was starting to feel too much like when Seluna had encased us in stone, and I had no desire to wait here like a sitting duck while the witch found Cali. All we needed was the key, and then we could be on our way. It wasn’t looking good, though, I had to admit.

*Please, Cali. I hope you have enough sense to get the hell out of here before this witch spots you!*

Suddenly, Gabe appeared behind the witch in wolf form, a deep growl rolling out of his throat and his long sharp teeth bared.

Constance spun around to face him. “Three werewolves! Looks like I need to make a call to animal control!”

I strained and struggled, trying to warn Gabe about the immobilization spell, but of course, no sound came out. I was utterly useless, and that realization hit me harder than if the witch had thrown a bolt of lightning at me.

I felt something brush past me and realized too late that it was Cali, and she was running straight for the witch.

# Episode 3206

I would’ve preferred to just blast the witch with my magic, but there was a big chance it wouldn’t be reliable because of Tabitha’s suppression magic. Not to mention that if it misfired and went wild, it could hit the guys. I was happy to have it in my back pocket if I needed it, but that didn’t mean I was going to use it unless it was absolutely necessary. It wasn’t worth the risk, given how high the stakes were right now.

*Still, I only have one chance to take this witch out!* Charging at Constance like a bull might not have been the cleverest move, but I was banking on the element of surprise. She had no idea I was there, and I needed to use that to my advantage.

Constance had her hands up and was just about to blast Gabriel when I slammed into her. We both crashed to the floor, me on top.

“Get off of me, scum!” the witch snarled.

She was twisting and kicking and clawing and trying her best to break free of me, but I held her down with all my might. I felt powerful and like I was in total control, my strength no doubt fueled by anger at the danger she’d put my mates in. There was no way I was going to let her go—and I was certain that my and everyone else’s safety depended on me keeping her right where she was.

“I’m Fae!” I yelled. “My magic is just as powerful as yours. If you don’t chill, I’m going to blast you through these floorboards!”

Gabriel stalked over, growling, and pinned the witch down with his massive paws. The witch began to shake with fear, her gaze no longer on me, but riveted to Gabriel’s massive wolf.

“I—I hate werewolves! Don’t let it hurt me!” Constance cried. “Please! Get him off me!”

“No one wants to hurt anyone, but if you don’t break the spell you put on my mates, I won’t be held responsible for what happens to you.”

Gabriel growled for emphasis.

“So what’s it going to be?”

“Fine. Anything to get you lot out of my house!” the witch grumbled before mumbling a few harsh incantations under her breath.

I turned around to look, and neither of my mates were moving. *Did she cast some other spell against us instead?*

“Try again!” I snapped at Constance, surprised by the venom in my own voice.

As soon as I’d realized that she’d frozen Xavier and Greyson in place, I’d had a terrible flashback to when my mates had been turned into statues in Seluna’s chamber of horrors. I had no doubt that Xavier and Greyson had flashed back to that moment as well. *At least they aren’t made of marble this time.*

Constance muttered the incantation again. I watched her, on edge. Was she really trying to break the spell? Or was she doing something else to them?

Then another fear gripped me. What if she didn’t break the spell? What the hell were we going to do then? I couldn’t live in a world where Xavier and Greyson were just… *frozen.* I wished that Harlow were here; maybe she would’ve had an idea about what to do. I looked at Gabriel. “Hold her right here, don’t even let her blink.”

Gabriel nodded.

I got up and went over to Greyson, whose eyes followed me as I moved. “Don’t worry, I’m going to get you out of this.” I turned to Xavier. “I’m not going to leave either of you like this.”

I hoped I sounded confident and calm to them, but inside my mind was racing. *Should I try to contact Big Mac? Maybe I can FaceTime her for help? But what if she can’t do anything through FaceTime? Maybe if I call her and Kira gets on, too…*

I was starting to panic, but I was doing my best to hide it. I didn’t want Xavier and Greyson to feel hopeless about their current state. I could only imagine how freaked out they were at the prospect of being stuck that way for good.I turned back to Constance and was about to demand that she try again when I heard Greyson gasp.

“It worked,” he said as he shook his head and moved his hands, opening and closing his fists and smiling. “It’s wearing off.”

He took a few tentative steps forward as Xavier gasped and started moving as well.

“Thank god!” I said, relief and pure joy washing over me. I couldn’t help but feel a little proud that I had helped save them. It would go a long way the next time they tried to keep me from joining in a battle or doing something they deemed dangerous—though I knew that they would never completely stop trying to keep me out of harm’s way.

As soon as Xavier had gained full mobility, he lunged at the witch, but I blocked him.

“I know you’re upset, Xavier, but I’m hoping that we can resolve this without…” I couldn’t even bring myself to say the words. I hugged Xavier and then Greyson, realizing how amazing it was to feel them, touch them, and see them moving freely. “Let me try to explain the situation to Constance first.”

“Fine, but if she makes one wrong move—” Xavier began.

“I’ve got this,” I said quickly.

I turned to Constance, who was still lying pinned under Gabriel’s paws, her face scrunched up in terror. Gabriel was looming over her with a hungry look in his eyes, all but licking his chops.

*I’d better resolve this quickly. I might have sway over my mates, but there’s no telling what Gabriel might do.*

I knelt beside the witch and looked her in the eye. “I came here—we came here—to get the key so we can free the girl you and your elder witch friends kidnaped. If you turn over your key with no argument, then I can guarantee your safety. We won’t make any more fuss, and we’ll take the key and go. But if you refuse…”

Right on cue, Gabriel let out a loud howl, his fearsome mouth aimed at the high ceiling. He was clearly enjoying the upper hand he had over the witch. I had more experience than I would’ve liked with being on a werewolf’s bad side, so I could imagine how the witch felt, being on the business end of Gabriel’s teeth and claws.

“Then I can’t guarantee that he won’t do with you as he pleases,” I finished. I hadn’t a single doubt in my mind that if I turned my back for a moment, Gabriel would rip the witch to shreds, and from the look on the witch’s face, she knew it, too.

Constance scowled at me as she spoke. “You can have the key.”

“Take it, Cali,” Greyson said. “Take it so we can get the hell out of this place. We don’t have much time.”

As I reached for it, the witch recoiled. “Don’t touch it. If you do, you’ll be injured.”

It was clear that she wouldn’t mind that much if the key outright killed me, but she had Gabriel to think about, and so right now, my safety was of utmost importance to her—at least that was what I gathered.

*Is she telling the truth? Or is she just trying to stall?* Maybe she was trying to throw us all off so that she could get the upper hand again.

“In order for you—or anyone—to possess the key, it must be given freely. You can’t just take it,” the witch said breathlessly. “Trust me on this.”

I hesitated, wondering if she was bluffing. I certainly didn’t want to get blasted, or whatever else might happen if I touched the key, but I also didn’t want to fall for any delaying tactics. Witches were crafty, and her telling me to trust her wasn’t exactly helping matters.

“Tell your pet here to back off, and I’ll hand the key to you,” Constance said, glaring daggers at Gabriel. She was clearly still afraid, but that didn’t mean she was happy about how things were going for her.

“Fine, but if you try anything, you’ll have two more werewolves to deal with,” Greyson hissed.

“I assure you, I won’t try anything. I don’t want any trouble.” She looked back and forth between me and Gabriel, and she was all but quaking from head to toe.

Greyson gestured to Gabriel, who hesitated for the slightest moment before finally backing off. The witch slowly sat up, lifted the key from around her neck, and handed it to me.

I let out a deep sigh of relief. *I can’t believe it. We have the first key. And no one had to get hurt… Much.*

“Now, can you go? You got what you came for.”

Relief washed through me, and we all turned to go.

I suddenly realized Xavier wasn’t next to me. I looked around and spotted him, and before I could stop him, he shifted and lunged at the witch.

# Episode 3207

**Xavier**

I lunged at the witch, ignoring Cali’s screams, Greyson’s shouts, and the hands that were reaching out and clawing at me, trying to pull me back. There was no way they’d seen what I’d seen. If they had, they would’ve understood why I was doing this. In my peripheral vision, I’d seen her. I’d seen Constance raise her hand just as we were all letting our guards down, our backs to her. I’d seen the look in her eyes, the magic sparking at her fingertips. She was going to attack us, and I’d been forced to act first.

Constance stepped back and tried to cover her face in self-defense, but I was far too quick. I pounced on her, pinning her to the floor, growling as ferociously as I could so that she knew I meant business. She was going to die if she thought she could attack my mate, my brother, and my friends.

*I’ll teach her how it feels to be frozen and helpless.*

I could see the fear in the witch’s eyes, but there was something else there, too, the thing that had made her attack us. I growled at her, my bared teeth only inches from her face. I needed her to know that she couldn’t get away with trying to attack anyone I cared about. As a wolf with Alpha blood coursing through my veins, there was no way I could let her touch a hair on the head of anyone in my pack.

I’d die before I let her hurt Cali.

Constance was spluttering something, but I wasn’t listening. I didn’t care what she had to say. She’d lost all right to speak to me when she’d tried to lash out at us.

*What the fuck are you waiting for?* Gabe mind linked. *Kill her!*

“Stop it, Xavier!” Greyson shouted, slowly edging closer. “Back off. You don’t need to do this!”

I wasn’t interested in what either of them thought or wanted. The only thing I knew was that if I killed the witch right now with Cali standing by watching, she would never forgive me. *But she was going to attack, and obviously none of the others saw it.*

I growled one last time, making myself clear, and then I stepped off the witch and shifted back.

I looked right into the witch’s eyes so she wouldn’t miss a word of what I was about to say. “I saw what you were about to do. The next time you feel like attacking someone while their back’s turned, you’d better think twice.”

Constance was visibly trembling, but she nodded. She looked shocked that she hadn’t been ripped in half.

*If she only knew. If she’d met me even a year ago, I might not have spared her life.*

Cali rushed to my side, too overcome with emotion to speak. I quickly wrapped her in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” I said into her ear. “I’m sorry that I had to put you through that.”

Gabe shifted back, already shaking his head in disappointment. “Wow, Xavier. My old buddy has gone soft. Hate to see it.”

I rounded on him. “No, I’m just smarter than I used to be. If she’s smart, she’ll send the other witches a message about what happened here, and that’ll make getting the other keys a lot easier.”

I could hear Mikah calling out to us from outside the open window. “What the hell is happening in there? Are you all okay?”

Gabe shot me a look of disapproval before going to fill Mikah in.

I knelt down beside Constance, who was still too shaken to stand. “You realize that I could’ve killed you, right?”

The witch nodded.

“Good, glad we’re on the same page. Now, down to business. We need all of the keys. Every single one. We understand that there are three more elders who possess them. We’ll go after each and every one just the same way, hunting them down like prey, killing them if we have to. We’ll do whatever it takes to get them, do you understand?”

I shifted my eyes to send the point home and underscore my threat.

The witch nodded again.

“However, there is another option—one that will spare your elder friends from what you just went through. If you agree to help us obtain the remaining keys—peacefully—nobody will get hurt.” I certainly hadn’t wanted any of us to be hurt by the witch’s attempt, but at least now we had a bit more leverage than before. *And I’m going to cash in on it.*

Constance gasped. “I can’t do that.”

*She can’t, or she won’t?* “Isn’t it worth trying?”

“The other witches—they won’t listen. They’ll probably resist.”

Cali laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. I leaned into her touch, liking it, needing it. I wished that I could just take her away from here and forget all of this bullshit, but that wasn’t an option. I had to get this vampire-witch off my back—and the handprint off Cali’s.

I shifted my full attention back to the witch. “Listen, if they don’t do it our way, we’ll do things the hard way. I’m sure they like living, right? Is protecting their keys more important than their lives? If they’re really your friends, your comrades, wouldn’t you want to help them avoid what you just went through? Tell them to cooperate with us. You’ll be doing them a favor. Hell, they might even owe you one, and I know how much witches like to have other people indebted to them.”

“Fine!” she hissed. “I’ll help you. I’m close with one of the other elders… I’ll speak with her, but the others you’ll have to deal with on your own.”

“Music to my ears. Works for me.” I stood up, glad that my unorthodox method had worked. Greyson gave me a nod, but it was Cali I wanted to talk to. *But first things first…* “Me and my buddy Gabe here are going to need some clothes before we head back out there. Do you have anything we might be able to wear? We want to be respectable when we go to visit your friends.” I gave her a pseudo sweet smile.

“Go upstairs. There should be something you can use in one of the bedrooms,” the witch said, not bothering to look at me.

“Come with me,” I said to Cali, holding out my hand. She took it, and we made our way up the spiral staircase.

Now that we had the first key and a plan for getting the other three, my mind began to wander a bit. Even after everything that had happened, I still felt lingering guilt over what had happened when I was drowning: Ava appearing as my savior, of sorts, instead of Cali. I still didn’t understand why that had happened. I couldn’t think too much about that now, though. I had to stay focused.

Cali was quiet as we walked up the stairs, and she stopped me when we got to the top. She was clearly struggling to keep her voice calm. “I’m glad that you didn’t kill her, and I understand why you wanted to. The thing is, I keep thinking about how I saw you almost kill Albin earlier, and now I’m starting to worry that that’s your default.”

“Cali, that’s not fair. I didn’t kill either of them, so what exactly are you even mad about? The witch was about to attack us—you get that, right? Albin would’ve done the same—and he damn near *did* get us all killed. Ultimately, my threats are getting the job done, and in this case, they got the witch to help us, so they did what I needed them to do.”

“You’re right, but just the thought of you being in a battle with all these witches that we don’t know anything about… It scares me. I just don’t want anything to happen to you! I don’t know what I would do—”

I pulled Cali into a hug, cutting her sentence short. “I never got the chance to thank you for what you did down there—helping me. I still can’t believe you tackled a witch!”

Cali laughed and shook her head. “I can’t believe it, either, but I had to do something. I just couldn’t let her hurt you—or Greyson.”

*I could’ve done without the Greyson part.*

We tried a few locked doors before we found a bedroom with a large dresser. Cali wasted no time rooting through it and finding Gabe and me something suitable to put on. The clothes were old, stiff, and had a musty smell to them, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“I’m not sure we’re going to be able to convince Gabe to put these on,” I said, holding up a faded pair of pants.

I slipped into my clothes, then turned around to see what I looked like in a dusty mirror in the corner.

“The clothes are a little old-fashioned, but what the heck, vintage is in, right?” Cali said with a giggle.

We started downstairs, but I stopped Cali halfway down and kissed her softly on the lips. Cali leaned into me, nuzzling her face into the crook of my shoulder.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” she said softly.

“I am, thanks to you.” I kissed the top of her head. “Now come on. One witch down, three to go.”

# Episode 3208

**Artemis**

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“I sense that Dark Fae have been here,” Nikkos said. “We need to leave now, in case they come back.”

I squinted at the man, then turned to Rishika. She seemed suspicious. And hot, but that was the usual.

“Do you sense anything?” she asked me.

I shook my head—I wasn’t about to explain out loud that with my powers on the fritz I wasn’t certain of my ability to sense anything right now. That would’ve been giving away too much information to Nikkos, whom I still didn’t trust. There was just something about him that jarred me, but I wasn’t sure what. He was my only link to Adair, though, so I tolerated him.

“We need to get out of here now,” Nikkos said, looking between us sharply.

I sighed. “Fine, lead the way.”

We moved quietly away from the house. I glanced over my shoulder, feeling my stomach throb with unease. At least Cali wasn’t in the house.

As if he could read my thoughts, Nikkos said, “Don’t worry, your sister will be okay with all those Alphas.”

“How do you know who Cali’s travel companions are?” I asked carefully.

“You mentioned them, remember? When we were first sharing information,” he said.

I stared at the man. I just didn’t trust him.

As we made our way through the city again, I asked him, “Where are you taking us?”

“I was about to ask the same thing.” Rishika shot me a look, and I was certain that she didn’t like the idea of following Nikkos to a random location either. It could’ve been an ambush for all we knew.

“I have a safe house of my own,” Nikkos said. “I’ve taken specific precautions there to hide from the other Dark Fae.”

“Really,” Rishika said flatly.

He shot her an annoyed look, clearly not appreciating her tone, and checked his watch. “You can go grab your things from your Airbnb and meet up with me at the dock in two hours.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “What do you need two hours for?”

Nikkos huffed, glaring between us. “Look—the energy you two are exuding is extremely accosting. You either trust me, or you don’t. If you don’t show up, then I’ll just assume you’ve decided not to trust me.”

Thrusting out his chin, he stalked away without another word.

Rishika rolled eyes. “That man acts like a snooty LA mom, I swear to god.”

“What’s an LA?” I asked.

“Los Angeles.” That sounded more familiar. “A place where everything at the flea market is expensive, and you get stuck in your car in traffic for hours.”

I was intrigued, wondering if my driving skills would be good enough for there. Perhaps that was a conversation for another time.

“What do you want to do now?” I asked.

Rishika shrugged. “Well, let’s go to the Airbnb and at least shower and change. I feel really gross.”

I took her hand, and off we went.

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We walked the perimeter first, at Rishika’s insistence.

“What is it with werewolves and patrolling?” I asked.

“Cali told us not to come back here the other night, Artemis,” Rishika said with her usual intensity. “We have to make sure it’s safe.”

After we’d roamed around a bit and Rishika had sniffed the air enough to convince herself there was no imminent danger, we went inside. The house was quaint and cute and so nicely decorated. It would have been a great place to stay for a normal vacation. Too bad this location was too vulnerable to all our weird New Orleans-stationed enemies.

“I’m hopping in the shower,” Rishika said, heading toward the bathroom.

“I need to figure out what to wear next—these human clothes aren’t always comfortable,” I called over my shoulder, looking through my suitcase. The fabric of a garment mattered to me a lot—I knew that the trousers that Cali called sweatpants were easy to wear, but sometimes they got torn up easily. What I needed was something that was sturdy, but still let me move quickly.

This adventure was never-ending, and while it didn’t feel like we were any closer to finding Adair, the fact that we were fighting our way through it and putting ourselves in danger didn’t change. Rishika had been so supportive that it was almost unbelievable.

I’d never had anyone in my entire life, *ever*, stick by me like this.

The lump in my throat was sudden, same as the searing emotion that throbbed inside my chest. I dropped the sweatpants in the luggage, peeling my clothes off as I headed to the bathroom.

When I pulled the shower curtain back, Rishika let out a little squeak of surprise.

“Shit, how the hell are you so quiet?” she exclaimed with a laugh. Then her eyes drifted down my naked body. “Wait, what are you doing?”

“Helping you shower.” My heart was pounding. I wanted to feel close to her—to take care of her, like she took care of me. I closed the shower curtain and stepped inside, turning her around so I could pour water over her soapy hair.

Rishika snorted. “We have to get ready if we’re going to actually meet up with Nikkos.”

“He said two hours,” I muttered in her ear. “We have enough time.”

I kissed her nape, then the firm skin of her shoulder, licking the droplets of water there. The heat of her body overwhelmed me. I’d wanted people before, but this was so much more than that.

I loved Rishika.

She turned to face me, her dark eyes liquid. When she smiled, she was the most beautiful person I’d ever seen. “If you put it that way…”

I leaned in for a kiss that started soft, but then I remembered all the other times I’d wanted to kiss her tonight and shoved it down. I didn’t like being denied, and I hated being worried. The only cure to both was to kiss Rishika like I meant it, deeper and with intent. She shivered against me, and I couldn’t get enough of her. I slid my hands over her gorgeous, slippery body, then nibbled my way down and got on my knees before her.

“*Artemis*.” She rasped my name when I raised her leg over my shoulder and started kissing between her legs. She moaned, stroked my hair and cheeks, her gaze burning while she stared down at me, her chest heaving. The sight and feel of her made me want to touch myself, but I wanted—no, *needed*—to focus on her. She was shaking just a brief moment later, because I knew every inch of her body, and I adored it too.

We kissed again, after, and then she soaped up my body and touched me until I was quivering, neither of us letting go.

“Let’s do that again,” I whispered in her ear. The sound of her throaty laughter made me feel invincible.

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We got dressed, and then it was time to make a decision.

“Should we even go meet Nikkos, though?” I asked Rishika.

“I agree that something weird is going on with him,” she said, “but he’s our only solid lead right now. I think we can use him as long as we need him. We just have to remain on guard.”

Her words matched my usual method of operation, which included always being on the offensive.

“That’s true. We have to wring every drop of information we can out of that man,” I told her, nodding in agreement.

She grinned devilishly, pulling me in for another kiss.

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When we got to the dock, Nikkos was sitting in a small motorboat. He grinned when he saw us. “Happy to know you trust me.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Rishika told him with arched eyebrows.

“Where are your things?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. We left everything after changing. This was temporary anyway. “Where are we going?”

“Hop on in, and you’ll see,” he said.

Rishika and I settled down in the boat a moment later. She was on high alert as she took in her surroundings. I stared at Nikkos, completely focused on him as he turned the engine on and we took off down the river. Passing by the city was actually very pretty, and I wished again that I could’ve just been here with Rishika for a vacation—

I scowled when Nikkos turned into the bayou. Again.

“Why the hell are we going back into the bayou?” I demanded.

“It’s not the same place we went last time,” Nikkos said, reassuring. “The bayou is really big, and a good place to hide.”

I shared a look with Rishika. She squeezed my hand, and silent communication passed between us. We would both make sure to be on alert.

The rest of the ride was quiet, with Rishika fixated on our surroundings and me focusing on shady Nikkos.

When we finally approached a worn-down dock, he slowed down. I eyed him through narrowed eyes as he tied up the boat and jumped onto the dock. It rocked a bit at the impact of his weight.

“That looks safe,” Rishika muttered.

She was ready to climb out next. Nikkos held out a hand to her, but she completely ignored it and pulled herself up. I stood, ready to climb out as well, but then I stepped on something that felt like… paper? Frowning, I looked down.

I picked the thing up, and I realized it was an old faded photograph of two boys, maybe in their teens, staring seriously at the photographer. I flipped it, and my eyes widened when I saw the words “Adair and Nikkos”. So he wasn’t lying. He really did know Adair.

The dock was swaying when I stepped onto it.

I strode past Rishika, reached Nikkos, and grabbed his arm to spin him around. I held out the photograph. “All right, I think it’s about time you tell us what you *really* know about Adair.”

# Episode 3209

“Where do we go next?” I asked Harlow.

She cleared her throat. “The witch elders are pretty famous in the city… Any sighting of them usually makes waves.”

“Don’t get cold feet on us after one witch. You started this, so finish it,” Xavier said. “Where are they staying right now?”

Harlow shook her head. “They might have scattered—right now, they’re the only witches in the city with magic, so they must know people could come looking for them.”

“We should at least look into where the final three elders were last seen,” Greyson said.

Both my mates were peering at Harlow, and she seemed uncomfortable. I wanted to tell her that she had nothing to fear when they were around, but she was a witch, and they were werewolves. And they didn’t really know each other.

“You were the one who said that none of this is going to work if we don’t have all four keys from all four elders,” Greyson continued, still pinning Harlow with his gaze. “You said it was the only way to unlock the prison where they’re holding Tabitha, so—”

“*Fuck*,” Gabriel interrupted, groaning under his breath. “Collecting all these damn keys is taking too long! Tabby is probably alone and scared, and the longer this takes, the more time there is for her to be terrified! She doesn’t deserve this—it’s fucking horrible!”

Mikah reached for Gabriel’s arm to settle him down. The two of them locked eyes, and even though Mikah’s face was as calm as ever, the sadness in his gaze was obvious.

“I know what you mean,” he told Gabriel quietly.

My heart ached at the unfairness of it all. I turned to Harlow. “Where was the next witch last seen?”

“She runs a casino,” Harlow muttered. “It’s guarded like a palace, so she has to be here.”

“A *casino*?” Xavier’s face lit up. The only time I’d ever seen him this enthusiastic was when I was naked.

“Xavier, we’re not going there for fun,” I warned.

He frowned. “Maybe a little bit of fun?”

“This isn’t the time to waste money at a casino,” I said. “This is work, not pleasure.”

Xavier offered a long-suffering sigh. He looked extremely goddamn hot even when he acted petulant, but I wasn’t going to budge.

With a huff, he said, “*Fine*. This is just work.”

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With Xavier in the driver’s seat, we all headed to the casino.

*Tabitha, here we come. This is all just an adventure, I swear!*

I had to add a smidge of lighthearted excitement in my thoughts, just to help with my morale. So many things depended on this mission—including my future and freedom—that I could feel the pressure. The car was quiet, and Greyson held my hand the entire time, thankfully. I looked out the window and frowned when I realized that we’d left the city limits.

“Where exactly is this casino?” I asked Harlow. She was in the passenger seat, giving Xavier directions.

“Right there,” she said, pointing. The building was massive—like a huge hotel lit up all over, very imposing and luxurious, built along the river.

*We can do this*, Greyson mind linked, bumping his shoulder against mine. I nodded in agreement, but I still felt a little nervous when we parked and got out of the car.

*What the hell are we going to find in there?* I thought to myself. *Apart from a super powerful witch, that is.*

“This place looks normal,” Gabriel was telling Mikah, who said something in response, but I wasn’t listening. I reached out and gripped Greyson’s arm again, seeking his steadiness. He faced me and squeezed my hand.

“We can do this,” I repeated his earlier words, staring up at him. “It will probably be just as hard as getting the first key, but we can do it.”

“Of course,” he said gently.

And then I got all riled up and brave. “We can do this!” I loudly declared.

I made a move to march toward the entrance, but Greyson pulled me back by the collar of my jacket. “Perhaps let’s touch base with the others first.”

“Right,” I said matter-of-factly, happy with my newfound courage.

Greyson stared at me fondly, and also like he wanted to laugh. I’d have been offended if he weren’t so beautiful.

Harlow spoke up, nervously putting her hands in her pockets. “I’m going to stay with the car.”

Xavier scowled, moving closer to her. To the average eye, he looked terrifying. “Why do I think there’s a bigger reason for you not coming with us to face these witches? Is there something you’re not telling us?”

Harlow swallowed audibly. She looked back and forth between Xavier, Greyson, Mikah, and Gabriel. “I don’t—um, I…”

Gabriel’s voice was low. “That *does* seem suspicious, Harlow. My friend has a point.”

Greyson’s silver eyes flashed. “I hate to admit it, but he does.”

And then, Mikah, his teeth gleaming in the night, sharply said, “It feels like you’re hiding something from us, witch, and I don’t think we appreciate it.”

Harlow squeaked in fear under their glares. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said, stepping forward. I’d effectively blocked all the suspicious angry stares from the guys, and now I took Harlow’s hand. “You can tell us. I promise we’ll help if we can.”

Harlow glanced over my shoulder, at the men.

I shook my head. “I know the boys better than you do. They’ll listen. You can tell us the truth.”

She paused, then nodded with a sigh. “Y’all don’t have to stick around after this and try to make a living. But this is my home. This is where my family is from. My magic is rooted here with my ancestors. I can’t leave. And if these elder witches see my face before we’ve gotten the keys and know that I’m helping you all steal from them… There’s a possibility they might do something to me or my family if we aren’t successful first.”

She let out a shuddering breath, and I could just feel her fear.

It was horrible.

“It’s okay, you can stay out here. I understand,” I told her quietly.

Her expression was so thankful that I felt a pang of sympathy for her.

I turned back to the guys. “We need to protect Harlow’s anonymity while we get the keys. At all costs. Okay?”

My mates immediately nodded. It was good to see that they’d realized that there was no way to change my mind after I’d decided to protect someone. Gabriel and Mikah, on the other hand…

“Guys?” I gave the two of them a hard stare.

Gabriel pressed his lips together. Mikah nudged him. And then they both nodded.

“Good,” I said, straightening my jacket.

“Thank you, Cali,” Harlow whispered.

I told her not to worry, and she shared the elder’s name with us.

“Azalea,” Harlow said. “That’s the next witch you’re looking for.”

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We walked toward the casino’s entrance, Xavier and Greyson on either side of me. I saw movement from the corner of my eye, and when I looked at the river, I realized there was a lot of fucking splashing going on…

*Because there are AT LEAST a dozen alligators in there! Holy shit.*

Thank the lord this casino wasn’t a boat. I was done with alligators. Shuddering at the thought, I scooted further from the river. The parking lot was raised, and I didn’t think the gators could climb up, but who the hell knew with them? They had a whole lot of determination and seemed to choose violence on the regular, so better safe than sorry.

“Good evening.” The attendant at the door welcomed us, and I shook my head to clear it, refocusing on the mission at hand.

With Xavier and Greyson still on either side of me, we entered the casino. It was very fancy, just like in the movies. Bright lights at the machines, dealers in black tie, waitresses in sparkling cocktail dresses…

“Where do you think a witch would hide in all of this?” I whispered to the boys.

Greyson pointed to the windows that looked over the entire floor. “That’s where the manager of the casino would normally sit,” he said. “If I were hiding here, I’d stay up there so I could watch the entire space.”

Xavier huffed. “That’s too obvious. I’d hide in the crowd.”

Mikah frowned. “I wouldn’t hide in the casino at all. I would leave this place and just let people run around, tiring themselves out looking for me.”

I turned to Gabriel. He shrugged. “Azalea’s one of the very few people in the city who still has magic, so she knows she could be a target for angry coven witches. Plus, she may have already heard what happened to the other witch—maybe she’s expecting us by now. If I were her, I’d probably arrange an ambush and disembowel my enemies.”

I blinked. “All these lines of action sound pretty logical…”

Hopefully without the disemboweling part.

“But where do we start?” I asked in a low voice, looking at all four of the men. “I really don’t want to split up—the last witch was hard to overpower, even with all of us fighting. She still had her magic, and that means—”

A severe-looking man in a tuxedo stopped right in front of me, narrowing his eyes at me suspiciously. “Excuse me, ma’am. Have you registered your powers with management?”

# Episode 3210

*Have I registered my powers? Huh? What is he talking about?*

I was shocked by his question. I considered lying about having powers, but the man must’ve realized I was Fae, to ask such a thing. He’d probably sniffed me out or something. Was he a vampire? New Orleans really was overwrought with them…

I suppressed a shudder.

“Not yet,” I replied. “I haven’t registered anywhere.”

*We didn’t even know we had to, but anyway!*

The man, still looking serious, said, “The area for *your* kind of betting is back there.” He pointed to what looked like a closed-off VIP section.

*The guy standing in front of that area is a vampire*, Xavier mind linked.

*Figures.* I realized that the casino probably required all supernaturals to go somewhere else to play, perhaps to better monitor their use of powers during the games. It would’ve been much less awkward if this man had told us that directly instead of being cryptic, but that was obviously asking for too much.

I wanted this interaction to be over, like, yesterday.

“That’s actually where we were heading,” I told the man with a polite nod, and then I hurried toward the VIP section.

“I don’t like the idea that we have to register to play,” Greyson said, his voice low. I could feel both his presence and Xavier’s right behind me. “It’s like they’re keeping tabs on us.”

“That’s exactly what’s happening.” Xavier scoffed. “We should stay on alert.”

This was just *great*.

“Hi,” I said to the scowling vampire bouncer once I reached the VIP entrance. “We’re—”

“One Fae, three wolves, and a vampire?” he asked, tapping away on his tablet.

First of all, would it hurt any of these guys to be more polite? Did customer service come here to die? Second, this guy had realized what we were way too easily. I hated being sniffed out.

“That’s us,” I said awkwardly.

The vampire lifted the tablet and snapped a picture of us without warning. I flinched in shock. I was pretty sure that I’d had my eyes closed during the shot, which was just unfair! I bet all four of the men behind me had struck a pose just in time. Should I ask the bouncer to take another picture?

*I doubt he’ll agree*, I thought grumpily. It would’ve been such a nice picture to have, though, right? Like a souvenir of all five of us, on a potentially deadly adventure.

“You may proceed,” the bouncer said, unclipping the velvet rope. “Be sure to read the rules before playing.”

I walked past him first, entering the area. It looked as fancy as the rest of this place, so no surprise there. Should I start looking around for the witch? This seemed like a prime opportunity to explore and—

Suddenly, I felt Greyson’s gentle grip on my elbow.

“Stay close,” he murmured.

Okay, perhaps staying close was the smartest thing to do, despite my exploring tendencies. I nodded.

“We should do some reconnaissance and find out more about this witch, Azalea,” Mikah said.

“I don’t think splitting up is a good idea,” Greyson said seriously.

“We’ll keep in view of each other,” Gabriel said. “This area isn’t that big—I doubt we’ll lose each other.”

“We should still be careful,” Xavier said, his eyes fixed on me, as if he too was thinking about my exploring tendencies. “There are so many supernaturals here that we have no way of knowing which ones are friendly and which would use any excuse to bite our heads off.”

That also made sense. Obviously. I just had to remind myself to be careful here.

“Xavier, you’re with me,” Gabriel said with a wink, gripping his friend’s wrist and pulling him away.

*I’ll stick with Greyson*, I mind linked to Xavier, who offered a nod in response.

“Shall we?” Greyson said, extending his arm to me.

I took it and whispered, “What’s next?”

“We find a place with good visibility so we can scan the area,” he whispered back. “We should act natural.”

I looked up at him excitedly. *I like all this undercover stuff!*

He smirked, nodding. *Look at you, pretty little spy.*

I blushed and swatted his arm, making him laugh. We passed by a few tables, then Greyson picked one where he said they were playing blackjack.

*This is a prime location to camp out and watch everyone*, Greyson informed me after taking a seat at the table. It seemed that I, as Greyson’s partner, had to hover by his side like an enthusiastic groupie. Or at least that was what other players’ friends/significant others were doing.

*Sounds good to me!*

A few moments later, I realized that Greyson was really skilled at blackjack. His chip pile started to grow, and I was pretty impressed.

“I feel like a parrot perched on your shoulder right now,” I teased, leaning against Greyson’s back with my chin and arms resting on his shoulders. “You’re really good at this.”

“I hoped you’d notice and give me a kiss as a reward,” Greyson murmured in a light tone, his eyes still fixed on the cards before him.

*Cali, you’re on a mission!* I reminded myself. *No kissing!*

But then again, wouldn’t it look natural for me to kiss him? I was already plastered all over him. What? I couldn’t help it! Maybe a small one on the cheek.

I did just that and stroked his shoulder. “So, is this another way you made all your money? Professional gambler?”

He laughed. “Definitely not.”

Before I could ask anything else, the seat next to him opened up.

“You want to play with me?” Greyson asked. I looked around—I didn’t feel watched, but that didn’t mean that I *wasn’t* being watched. We weren’t here to gamble anyway, and I was kind of worried about trying my luck and wasting money for no reason.

“Well?” Greyson asked casually. On the inside, he mind linked, *Want to give it a shot, love?*

“I guess, but I don’t know what I’m doing,” I grumbled and took a seat.

He nudged me playfully. “Don’t worry, I’ll teach you.”

I distinctly remembered telling Xavier that we weren’t at the casino to have fun. But Xavier wasn’t here, and what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

“Okay, let’s do this,” I told Greyson with a grin.

Smirking, he pushed half of his giant pile toward me. That much money felt like a whole lot of responsibility, and my eyes widened. The dealer started to hand out the cards, and I eyed him carefully. We’d been here long enough for me to do some spy work, so I focused on him and asked, “So have you been working here long?”

The dealer gave me a blank look. “Three years.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Is being a dealer fun?”

The dealer nodded, but he gave me a glare. Would it kill people around here to be polite? *Annoying!* The dealer handed out a second card for each player, and I wrinkled my nose, just so he knew I wasn’t happy with him either. Then I looked at the new player next to me… whose vibe screamed vampire.

“Okay then,” I muttered, and scooted closer to Greyson. I hadn’t had a lot of luck making new vampire acquaintances lately, so I decided it was better not to strike up a conversation.

Greyson explained the game to me, and we started playing.

*You’re allowed to stare at the other players as much as you want, now that you’re playing too*, he told me. *It won’t look suspicious.*

I considered his words and eyed the other two players. One of them was blatantly half-shifted, so his claws were showing. Was he trying to intimidate us? But Greyson had said that blackjack was a game played against the dealer only, so I wasn’t sure how that would make any sense. Then again, being half-shifted added an air of power, and I supposed that plenty of wolves liked to think of themselves as badasses.

Cue internal eye roll.

The final player was a quiet, unassuming man that I couldn’t place. I felt like it was usually the silent ones who showed off the least who were the most dangerous. I wondered if he could be Fae.

“Ahem.” The dealer—who I felt was probably also a vampire, and secretly wanted to eat me—cleared his throat in the most obnoxious way possible.

I turned to him and realized that he was waiting for me to decide if I wanted to hit or stay.

I looked at my cards, and then at my mate. Greyson tapped his finger on the table.

“Aha!” I said. “I can do a secret code.” And then I tapped my finger on the table as well.

The dealer gave me another card, and I busted out at twenty-three. Twenty-*three*. That was two over twenty-one—math had betrayed me!

“Greyson!” I pouted, elbowing him. “You made me lose!”

He chuckled. “I’m sorry—I promise that was the textbook move for that hand. We’ll do better next time.”

I sighed dejectedly. “I don’t think I’m good at this game.”

Greyson snorted. “But you only played one hand.”

I was still pouting. “I don’t care—I hate losing.”

Greyson laughed now, resting his hand on my thigh and squeezing reassuringly. I got immediately flustered, like an idiot, and—

“You’re in my seat!” a voice behind me declared.

# Episode 3211

**Greyson**

“Calm down,” I told the hulking man. “She didn’t steal your seat. Someone else—who wasn’t you—left and it freed up.”

The asshole pointed at Cali accusingly and roared, “She’s IN MY SEAT!”

“Why are you *shouting*?” I demanded, standing up to place myself between the man and my mate.

“There’s no reason to freak out!” Cali squeaked from behind me. “I didn’t realize you were sitting here, Mr.—I mean, sir, I mean—whatever your name is, I—”

“That’s Frank,” the dealer said dryly. “That *is* his lucky seat. He’s a regular of mine.”

I eyed the huge, frazzled man. Superstition was one hell of a drug.

“It’s fine!” Cali blurted. “Frank can take the seat—I don’t think this is my game anyway.” She started to stand, and dear old Frank looked pleased.

Before Cali could step back for him to sit, though, I made her stay put, still keeping myself between her and Frank. I knew getting into a fight was a bad idea, but if I let this slide, every other werewolf in the house would think they were allowed to mess with us.

Not on my fucking watch.

“You just shouted at my date, Frank,” I told him in an even tone. “You realize I can’t let you take that seat before you apologize and thank her for graciously stepping away. Right?”

There was absolute silence at the table. Frank huffed. Puffed up. We glared at each other, and I was pretty sure that the phrase *“Try me, motherfucker”* was written all over my face.

Finally, Frank broke eye contact first and turned to Cali. Through gritted teeth, he grumbled, “I’m sorry for yelling. And thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Cali said awkwardly.

*I can’t believe you just did that!* she mind linked.

She’d better goddamn believe it.

“That was nice, Frank, I appreciate it,” I said—perhaps a *smidge* condescendingly—and started gathering my chips. “I’m coming with you,” I told my mate, but she shook her head.

“No, it’s okay,” she said. “You stay here—you’re doing so well.”

“Where are you going, though?” I looked around for Xavier, Mikah, and Gabriel. Xavier was with Gabriel at the craps table, and Mikah was by the bar.

Instead of telling me that she’d go hang out with the others, though, Cali said, “I’m just going to try out the slot machines.”

Did she seriously think I’d let her go off on her own? In *here*? She was a fucking walking vampire chocolate cake. I scanned the area and found my solution when I saw that the closest bank of slots was within my line of sight. I nodded toward it. “You wanna go over there?”

It felt like Cali had actually heard my train of thought, because she smirked, rested her hand on my arm, and murmured, “But of course. I have to keep an eye on you at all times, just to make sure you stay out of trouble.”

I pressed my lips together to hide a smile.

*I’m just as overprotective as you are, Greyson. Never forget that*, she mind linked, with arched eyebrows. I actually loved the sound of that.

“Talk to you later,” she said in my ear, then she squeezed my arm and sauntered off.

I organized my chips, watching as Cali sat at the small slot machine closest to me. She read the rules on the machine. She seemed okay and as cute as ever, so something in me eased.

The hulking, screaming man from earlier—Frank—had sat down without another word. Good. The dealer started to deal the cards again. The person on my other side leaned in closer to me, which—what the fuck? I was about to tell the dude that staying out of my personal space was a must if he didn’t want to lose a limb, but then he spoke up.

“You came here with that Fae, huh?” he asked.

I stared at him, keeping my expression blank. “What’s it to you?”

“You down for a side bet?” he asked. A little too eagerly.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “For what?”

“If I get a better hand, then I get some of your girl’s Fae blood,” he said.

Internally, I baulked. What the actual fuck? Shoving down my urge to throttle the bloodsucker, I sharply said, “I don’t bet with that kind of stuff.”

The guy shrugged. “Fine, but with all those questions your girl asked the dealer earlier, it seemed like you two wanted some information.”

Cali had literally just made small talk with the dealer. But apparently in a place where nobody was fucking nice to anyone, even small talk was suspicious.

Peering at the guy with a scowl, I asked, “What kind of information do you have?”

The guy’s voice dropped. “I come here all the time; what kind of stuff you wanna know?”

My jaw clenched. “I’m not betting her blood for info.”

The guy sighed. “Fine. I’ll wager one honest question, and you can wager your Alpha blood.”

If Cali’s blood was chocolate cake for supernaturals, mine seemed to be the next best thing. Red velvet cake, perhaps? Either way, this was fucking gross, and I hated how vampires and witches kept asking for my blood. But I couldn’t exactly pass on this chance for some insider information, so I nodded.

We shook on it.

Meanwhile, Cali grinned up at the flickering pretty pictures on her slot machine, so at least one of us was having a good time.

The dealer handed out the cards, and I refocused on the game. I stared at my face card and a seven. This was a tricky hand. The dealer had a seven showing, so odds were that he had a seventeen. He would probably stay, and we’d draw at seventeen each. The neighbor’s face card was the one that worried me, though—the guy hadn’t taken a card. That could mean he had a twenty, which meant I needed a four to beat him.

The odds were really tricky.

Nevertheless, I was here to get information, so when it was my turn again, I tapped on the table to get another card. I let out a sharp exhale when two showed up. *Not* a four. Dammit, so close.

I was at nineteen now, and telling the dealer to hit me with another card was a huge risk.

“Look at that,” my blood-enthusiast neighbor murmured, his expression smug. He probably thought he would win now—probably with a twenty. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

The silence at the table was deafening.

I stared at the dealer. The dealer stared at me.

I was at nineteen. But I tapped the table again to get another card.

The dealer flipped the card…

It was another two.

*Twenty-one!*

I grinned widely, turning to the vampire. “Lucky draw.”

He huffed, glaring at me. “If you were anything but a werewolf, I’d accuse you of using magic to cheat.”

“But I won fair and square, so now I have a question to ask,” I said with a shrug.

The man rolled his eyes but nodded. Dropping my tone to the quietest it could get, I asked, “Do you know how I can find the witch Azalea here?”

The vampire lifted his brows in shock. “What are you trying to get from Azalea?”

“That’s my business,” I said. “And I’m the one who won the chance to ask a question, not you.”

The vampire scowled, but then nodded again. “She owns this place. She’s one of the most powerful witches in New Orleans. I wouldn’t mess with her if I could avoid it.”

“I didn’t ask you *who* Azalea was—I already knew all that,” I said. “My question was about her location.”

“Most days you can find her in the owner’s suite.” The man lifted his chin toward the glass-enclosed eagle eye suite. That had been my guess, so I felt validated.

“Does she have any special powers?” I asked.

The vampire scoffed. “Nope, you only won one question. And I answered. But if you want to go again…” His eyes gleamed. “I want that Fae blood this time.”

I shook my head. There was no way I’d take that risk.

“We’re done here,” I said, getting up and gathering my chips. I had to try another table. We knew practically nothing about Azalea, but I was pretty sure that Gabriel was right, and she knew that we were coming after the first witch had lived to tell the tale. But Azalea wouldn’t make a scene in her own casino if she could help it. Most witches preferred to operate discretely for as long as it suited them.

With these thoughts twisting in my head, I stared to walk away, but the dealer blocked my way. The scent of death coming from him was obvious. Vampire.

“You’re in dangerous territory, asking questions about my boss,” he told me gravely.

My tone was even but sharp. “What I’m doing is none of your business.”

The dealer took a step closer to me, as if measuring me up. “Fine,” he said. His voice dropped to an ominous whisper. “But if you know what’s good for you, you’d better stay away from the water.”

# Episode 3212

I was randomly pushing buttons on the slot machine, and I had no idea what half of them did. The flashing lights and nice pictures were no longer entertaining, because I was unfortunately not a toddler. Not to mention the fact that it was very clear that I was losing my money, and that put a damper on my mood.

*This is decidedly NOT fun!*

“Hi,” a melodic voice said. I turned to see one of the cocktail waitresses smiling at me. She was wearing a little blue dress with some beaded sparkly details, along with a headband that looked great on her. “Would you like something to drink?”

I didn’t want anything, but I felt like this could be a prime opportunity to build some rapport with her and ask her questions. “Maybe a water?”

The waitress’s face fell immediately. Did she think I wouldn’t tip her because of my measly order? Probably. Also, what was wrong with me—a *water*? Spies didn’t just drink water! James Bond always ordered martinis!

I had to fix this.

“Actually,” I said, “could you bring me a Shirley Temple?”

The waitress nodded, happy now, and sauntered off to get my spy drink. As I kept losing on the slot machine, the waitress returned.

“This is really good,” I said after taking a sip of the mocktail.

“I’m glad! Let me know if you need anything else,” the waitress chirped, folding the tray under her arm like she was about to leave.

I saw the window of opportunity closing, so I blurted, “So, do you like working here?”

The waitress paused, squinting at me. “Why do you ask?”

What on earth did people in this establishment have against small talk? I was a paying customer, dammit—the least they could do was entertain me with some information!

“Just wondering,” I said with a shrug, gesturing around. “It’s a nice place.”

The waitress continued to frown and look at me suspiciously. “I guess it is. It pays the bills, at least.”

“I bet drunk supernaturals tip well,” I commented.

She crossed her arms over her chest, giving me the once-over. “Okay, let’s stop beating around the bush. Are you looking for a job here, or are you hitting on me?”

I choked on my drink. “What? That’s—*no!* I mean, I just—I was just curious, because I’ve heard, I mean—what’s your boss like?”

It was hard, trying to make a smooth conversational transition when this girl had no idea how social cues worked. Why was everybody in here so blunt? I’d just tipped her thirty percent, dammit!

“My boss is my boss,” the waitress said flatly.

“Do you like them, then?” I insisted.

The waitress shrugged. “Sure, I guess. But my boss won’t like me avoiding my job.” She gave me another suspicious look, then said, “You’ll have to excuse me now—I really have to go serve the other patrons.”

She sauntered off. I scowled, taking another gulp of my drink. First the dealer, now the waitress—neither of them had given me any new details about who ran this place. My friendliness and small talk skills were wasted on this crowd. Which was such a shame, because I’d done so well at the speakeasy.

*I didn’t even want a spy drink*, I thought, glaring at my half-finished Shirley Temple. *But I still bought it!*

I was wasting my money here for no reason—that was the cold, hard truth. The slot machine was eating it all up, and when I looked around, I saw that there wasn’t anyone else nearby to question about Azalea. I could go back to the tables with the grumpy dealers and hope to find someone who wasn’t socially constipated, but I had no idea how to play the table games.

“To hell with it,” I grumbled, and pushed the slot machine button again.

The cherries and stars and treasure chests started spinning once more before me. I hadn’t won a single round so far, but I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the symbols in front of me. They spun and spun and spun, until the cherries and stars and chests…

Changed shapes?

I blinked slowly, feeling dazed all of a sudden. The reds and yellows blurred into dark colors before forming something else, something new, something familiar…

*Three wolves with swords through them.*

I gasped, grabbing at my throat. My body felt stuck in slow motion, my eyelids felt heavy, and a wave of a panic hit me as the wolf symbols in the slots seemed to float out of the machine. Right before me, they shifted from cartoon wolves to real ones.

Giant wolves that I knew all too well, with fur and claws and teeth—with real swords shoved through them, marred with blood. Xavier, Greyson, and Rishika.

*This isn’t real… This can’t be real!*

I was still grasping my throat, but that didn’t stop a cry from escaping.

*No no no! My mates, my friend! They’re hurt! NO!*

I fought to stand, to reach out to them, but I was immobile, frozen to the spot. Their lifeless, bloody bodies floated above me. This couldn’t be real—this *wasn’t* real. But the pain was still there, and the fear made my whole body vibrate.

*What’s happening? WHY is this happening to me?*

I choked out a sob and blinked, and then…

My eyelids were no longer heavy.

“What the fuck,” I rasped under my breath, panting, looking around wildly. The sound of people shouting brought me back to the present. The images of the bloody, dead wolves had disappeared. There was a metallic taste in my mouth, and my chest was heaving as I looked around. People behind me, at the craps table, were yelling in enthusiasm. I could see Gabriel’s and Xavier’s backs, and they were playing.

*This was just a hallucination*, I thought, realizing. *Who the hell asked for YET ANOTHER problem right now?*

Was gambling really that mesmerizing, or was this Seluna? I shuddered, gulping down the rest of my drink before I reached for my shoulder. The handprint wasn’t throbbing or burning, like it usually did during a Seluna hallucination. There was no pain. The only thing I felt right now was the pounding of my heart and a pang of fear.

The handprint still felt dormant, so that made what had just happened even more fucking weird. No, gambling wasn’t mesmerizing, not like that. *Unless* this had something to do with the place being a witch’s casino.

My suspicions about something being seriously wrong here were confirmed when I saw that I’d lost nearly all my money. What the hell? I’d had at least a hundred dollars the last time I’d checked the amount. Had I kept playing during that horrific hallucination? I looked around—the area had a few more players in it now, and I realized that some of them had dazed, slack-jawed expressions.

*What. The. Fuck?*

It finally made sense. The owner of this casino, Azalea—she somehow used magic to bewitch these machines and force people into fucked-up hallucinations. And then, as they fell into an almost zombie-like state, they kept pushing buttons and losing all their money.

*This is thievery! Plain and simple!*

I was so pissed off that I almost stormed off to go tell Greyson, but I still had two dollars left in my machine. Chasing that in wasn’t even worth it, so I furiously slammed my hand down on the button. Sparks flared from my fingertips. I knew I had to control my magic, but that was really hard right now.

*I can’t fucking believe this! I KNEW casinos weren’t fun!*

I balled both hands into fists to settle myself down. The cherries and stars and treasure chests started to spin, but I ignored them. I was ready to abandon this thing before I blew it the fuck up just because it had eaten my last two dollars. This whole place was a scam of epic proportions, and I had to tell everybody that—

*DING!*

The noise scared the shit out of me. I jumped in surprise and fell back in my seat when the machine made a jumble of it, the lights flashing as if—I’d won a jackpot? I gaped at the thing, stunned, while the numbers in front of me started climbing.

*$100*

Okay, at least I got my money back.

*$500*

Oh wow, that was a nice upward surge.

*$5,000*

Oh my god!

*$50,000*

It stopped there, but I wasn’t about to complain. This was outrageous—I couldn’t believe my eyes! I let out a squeal and flailed in triumph. I didn’t even care that I was probably making an ass out of myself. Casinos were so much fun!

*BECAUSE I WON!*

I turned around to call for my mates, wearing a grin so wide it hurt my face. It faded when I found myself surrounded, though. Three men in dark suits approached me before anyone else, each of them holding a pair of handcuffs and a gun.

*Oh fuck… What is it this time?*

One of the men cleared his throat. “Miss, we’re going to need you to come with us.”

# Episode 3213

**Xavier**

I was having a pretty great time playing craps with Gabriel. I knew I’d told Cali that I wasn’t going to have fun, but it was hard not to when Gabe was bouncing around with excitement. Not to get sentimental—I would never—but I’d missed this dickhead. This whole thing reminded me of a job that we’d done together in Vegas, a long time ago.

There were some differences, though.

For one, the tables here were weird. There were distinct squares for each player to stand on. Could this be because they wanted us all to stay in our places and make us easier to monitor as supernaturals? The craps table could get chaotic, so that felt like something a Type A kind of witch would do. I glanced up at the security cameras—all the players were probably perfectly angled for the guards to eye everyone as they stood in their places.

Just for the hell of it, I tried scooting over to Gabe to see what would happen.

Right on cue, the dealer glared up at me. “Sir, you need to stand on your spot if you’re still betting.”

“My bad,” I said, raising my hands coolly. I was channeling my inner Greyson, acting all casual. When my eyes locked with Gabe’s, he arched an eyebrow, glancing down at the square I stood on.

“You know this is some weird shit, right?” he whispered.

I shrugged. “Seen weirder. This is a witch’s casino after all.”

Gabe snorted. “Good point.”

“Let’s just play for a bit,” I continued. “At least we’re winning.”

“Yeah, baby!” Gabe said with a wink, clapping his hands as the next person in the circle tossed the dice. He seemed to be having a lot of fun, which reminded me that I’d promised Cali that we were here for work, not fun.

Perhaps I could do some work. Get information and all that.

Glancing at the werewolf beside me, I asked, “So, what pack are you a part of?”

The dude, a big guy in a leather jacket, shook his head. “None. There are no wolf packs in New Orleans.”

I frowned. What the hell was that supposed to mean? I definitely hadn’t expected to hear that. I decided to take a chance. “The witches are being hardasses about it, huh?”

The wolf laughed and nodded. “One hundred percent. They like to keep their territory tight.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, rolling my eyes. “They’re so dramatic.”

The wolf’s amused expression darkened all of a sudden, turning into a scowl. “Plus, there’s that other pack…”

I squinted at him. “What other—”

The table roared in defeat as the hot roller finally lost. If we, as players, hadn’t had these neat little squares under us, we would’ve been moving around or shoving each other right now, and that was a fact. Perhaps that was why the squares existed, just to keep people in order.

It was still really weird.

Just like the leather jacket-clad werewolf’s comment.

“What other pack?” I asked him in a louder voice, but the guy was distracted by the chaos of people talking all around us.

“You gonna roll?” he asked, gesturing at the dice.

I realized that technically it was my turn to roll, but I didn’t want to lose focus right now. We were, after all, working. I shook my head, and the guy gave me a nod and took the dice, rolling them. The table fell silent when he shook his head and took a step back, away from his square.

“I’m not betting this time,” he said.

Everybody started talking again, and I stepped back as well and turned to Gabe.

“Did you hear what that guy said?” I asked.

Gabe glanced at me, leaning against the table, his eyes glued to the roll. “Nah, what?”

“He mentioned another pack. The way he said it made me think it’s not a wolf pack. Like maybe another kind of shifter.”

Gabe, his gaze still pinned to the dice like he couldn’t get enough, scoffed. “Sounds like some shit waiting to happen. Remember when we ran into a bunch of coyote shifters in the desert once? It was definitely NOT fun.”

Gabe was right about that. I’d heard about all types of shifters all across the continent, actually. Just not in our area. The Redwoods were so dominant that the presence of any other kind of shifter—wolves excluded—would fuck with the balance in our territory.

As I pondered those things, Gabe was clapping his hands again, laughing, and really getting into the game. He’d been so worried about Tabitha earlier that I started to wonder if this was him trying to escape from reality. Or if he was just that good at pretending he was here to play. Admittedly, both could’ve been happening at the same time.

“Have you gotten any info out of anyone?” I asked.

“No,” he replied instantly. “Everybody here is really tight-lipped.”

“Should we just move on?”

Gabe looked down at his chips, raising his eyebrows. “*After* my roll, man.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Okay, fine. But remember why we’re here, yeah?”

Gabe rolled his eyes but nodded. I looked around to mark where the rest of our party was. Greyson was playing at a card table, and just beyond his shoulder, Cali was sitting at a slot machine. I let out a breath—I hadn’t been able to see her from where I’d been standing before. I’d known she was with my brother, though, and that meant she’d be safe. I had to give Greyson that, at least.

I noticed Mikah then, standing by the bar. He was talking to some of the patrons. He seemed serious and professional. I realized he was probably the only one focused on the mission. His mate certainly wasn’t anymore.

“It’s my turn!” Gabe literally shoved me. “You gotta bet on me, man—it’s good luck!”

I laughed, shaking my head after returning to my spot on the square, just to make sure I wouldn’t get yelled at by the dealer. Meanwhile, Gabe was taking his sweet time selecting his dice from the ones that the dealer pushed toward him.

“Those aren’t engagement rings, you know. You don’t have to spend hours picking them out,” I told Gabe wryly, and the others cackled.

He shushed me. “Shut your trap—I gotta chose the right instruments here!”

I almost rolled my eyes at the theatrics. I’d forgotten how superstitious Gabe was about gambling.

After he finally selected his dice, he turned to me, his eyes wide. “Blow on them.”

I gave him a flat look. “Really?”

Gabe returned my look. “Yes, come on! You were my good luck charm when we were in Vegas a few years ago. I don’t want to take any chances.”

I scoffed. “Okay, but don’t blame me when you roll craps.”

Gabe, a massive manly man, actually goddamn *screeched*. “Why would you say that, you lawless maniac? You’ve probably jinxed me now!”

He dropped the dice and—again—took his sweet time selecting new ones. Everybody around the table was either entertained or annoyed, or both. At least Gabe was giving them a show.

“I don’t want to hear a word from you, Xavier,” Gabe declared after picking his new set. I opened my mouth, and he shot me a threatening glower. “Try me, motherfucker. Not. A. Single. Word.”

I pressed my lips together to stop the guffaw that threatened to escape. I’d missed this whack job so much.

Slowly, as if he were holding a grenade, he held out the dice for me, and I blew on them.

Nobody around the table was speaking now.

Slowly, Gabe leaned forward and threw the dice.

“Craps!” the dealer called a moment later.

Gabe let out a loud, drawn-out groan. “*No!*” He looked up at the sky, raising his fist. “Why, god, *why*? What did I EVER do to deserve this?”

I could’ve actually written a very long list of Gabe’s sins—and my own—but we weren’t going to have that particular conversation right now. I was laughing so hard my stomach hurt when suddenly a light started to flash over our table. No noise or anything, just the light. I was startled, my laughter dying in an instant as I spun around to scan the area—was this an attack?

Nothing seemed different, though.

Only a few patrons were staring out our table—some of them in what seemed to be gleeful anticipation. Gabe continued to mourn his loss while the rest of the table either laughed or nudged each other as if they shared a secret. They pointed up the ceiling, where the light flickered, but Gabe hadn’t even noticed.

I ignored the king of Greek tragedy and turned to the dealer. Glancing up over our table, I asked, “What the hell is going on with that light?”

The dealer arched a single eyebrow.

“—it’s so UNFAIR!” my friend was saying in the background. “It’s so—”

Suddenly, the square underneath him opened up into a hole, and Gabriel dropped into the darkness.

# Episode 3214

**Xavier**

“Gabe!” I ran to the hole and called out into the darkness. “Where are—”

I heard splashing, and then the floor closed up again with a sharp sound that made me flinch. My heart was beating so fast I could hear it, and before I could even speak, Mikah was there. He dropped to his knees and pounded on the square with all his might.

I had never, not once since I’d met him, seen Mikah so rattled.

“Can you hear him?” I asked, dropping to my knees next to him.

“We’re mind linking—he’s in some sort of pit. He can’t see anything, but there’s water up to his knees.” Panting, he looked at me, his expression torn between panic and… fear? “We have to get him.”

I turned to the dealer and grabbed him by the neck. “You’d better get my friend out right the fuck now,” I growled.

Everybody at the table had fallen into whispering, as if they’d seen this before and it was just a spectacle. The dealer gripped my wrists tightly to remove my hands. “These are the rules of craps here. You and your friend should have read them before playing,” he said coldly.

I was getting ready to bite the bastard’s head off when I saw Greyson running over. I thought he’d heard the commotion and was here to help, but instead he said, “Have you seen Cali?”

I was so fucking shocked, I let the dealer go. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Greyson, looking like he was fighting to keep his cool and barely managing, pointed behind him. “She was at that slot machine, but she’s gone now.”

I turned to the dealer and snarled, “The girl—where the hell is she? I know you know!”

“Don’t expect an answer to that,” he said with a snort.

I was getting ready to kill him, right in front of everyone, when I heard Cali’s voice.

*Xavier!* she mind linked. *These guys are taking me away!*

I gritted my teeth together. *What do you see right now?*

Cali’s voice cracked. *Some back corridor with a green carpet. There are no other customers here.*

I met my brother’s eyes. I wanted to blame him for this, for letting Cali out of his sight, but I’d been here as well—I had let this happen just as much as he had. Besides, she’d been sitting only a few feet away, like, a moment ago. What the *hell*?

“I saw the green carpet earlier. I think I know where she might be,” Greyson said. “Come on.”

I turned to Mikah, to ask if he could still mind link with Gabe, but the vampire was too busy gripping the asshole dealer in a chokehold. It didn’t look like that son of a bitch would survive the night. I trusted that Gabe’s mate would find a way to get to him.

First, I had to find my own mate.

Right the hell now.

Greyson and I broke into a sprint in the opposite direction of the crowd. We ran until we found the back area of the casino, and there it was. The green carpet Cali had mentioned. Along with a massive red door marked with a sign that read “NO ENTRY, EMPLOYEES ONLY”*.*

Without a word, Greyson and I rammed into the door.

I’d expected it to bend under our joined mass, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Both of you, stop!” a loud voice ordered.

Seething, Greyson and I turned to see a severe-looking security guard run over to us. I thought I’d have to tear the son of a bitch a new one, but Greyson stepped in front of me. I kept ramming my body into the door while Greyson glared at the guard and said, “Some of your guards took a girl. She’s Fae. We need to see her *now*.”

The security guard had the fucking *audacity* to chuckle. “That’s not how things work around here, son.”

Greyson reared back and punched him in the face, hard enough to knock him out. That gave me momentary satisfaction, but it didn’t change the fact that my shoulder was aching and the door wasn’t budging.

“We don’t know if she’s back there,” I told Greyson, pointing at the door. “We need to figure out where she is—that should be our priority.”

“She’s back there.” Greyson pointed at the door. “She has to be—why would it be locked up like this otherwise?” he asked as more guards appeared at the end of the corridor.

“Hey!” one of them barked, and started running toward us.

*Cali? Where are you?* I mind linked, staring at the door.

No reply. Where the fuck was she, that she couldn’t communicate with me?

“Can you mind link with her?” I asked Greyson.

He shook his head and eyed the five guards who were charging at us from the end of the long corridor.

“Stop!” they shouted. There were thirty feet between them and us now. “No customers are allowed here!”

“Where did you take the girl from the slot machine?” Greyson growled.

I gathered they hadn’t noticed the guard from earlier lying behind us, because these assholes didn’t even flinch. They only slowly approached us, as if we were trapped. And just as Greyson and I prepared to fight, a snarl came from behind them.

“*Where is my mate?*”

Mikah’s voice was a roar. He barreled through the security guards as if they were bowling pins, at full vampire speed. His hissing and growling was disturbing enough that the guards were distracted, forgetting all about us.

“Now,” Greyson muttered.

My brother and I attacked the guards from behind, half-shifted and slashing. The second they saw our claws, they half-shifted as well. *Shit*, these guys were werewolves too?

No.

Their claws grew long, way longer than what I’d expect from a werewolf.

Greyson growled and fought two at a time while I aimed for the biggest of the three, who had a devious glint in his eye, like he wanted to eat my fucking liver. I snarled and went for his jugular, but I hadn’t calculated the distance correctly, and his claws were long enough to get me in the side.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, did that *sting*!

The asshole raised his hand again to claw at me with those freakish nails, but Greyson was faster. He slammed into him and sliced through his throat. For a moment, there was quiet in the corridor, with Mikah standing a few feet away. He was panting, and his face and hands were drenched with blood.

He looked fucking *terrifying*.

And then, we heard the screams from the front of the casino.

People were shouting, and I heard a stampede of feet. I rushed to the edge of the corridor, past Mikah, and saw that the dealers were all trying to close down their tables and secure the chips.

It was chaos.

And then more guards arrived.

“Over there! Get them!” the one in the front shouted, pointing at me and Mikah. I didn’t even have the time to move. Mikah pushed forward, his rage making him look so unhinged that I was suddenly very glad he was on our side.

He held his own against three guards while Greyson and I fought another nine, slicing and punching our way back to that damn door that wouldn’t open.

“This isn’t your turf, wolf,” one of those long-clawed bastards snarled at me. He attacked, taking a couple of swings while I got ready to snap his neck—

An alarm blared through the speakers, loud enough that it hurt my ears.

In the blink of an eye, there were guards surrounding us on all sides and closing in.

At least two dozen guards.

“There are too fucking many,” Greyson rasped, and my heart raced with fury.

Mikah growled at the guards, obviously ready to attack again, but Greyson grabbed his arm. “This isn’t the way to help Gabriel. We can’t take them all—we have to be smart about this.”

Mikah was shaking. His eyes had this wild, otherworldly glow to them, and his hands and chin were dipped in blood. But Greyson’s words… They seemed to get through to him. He wiped his face with his sleeve, still panting as he finally stepped out of his battle stance.

One of those long-nailed bastards sneered, pointing at us with a freakishly sharp claw. “Cuff them!”

“None of this would’ve happened if you’d just listened,” Greyson told the largest of the guards in a cold tone. “We’re looking for our mate, who was at the slot machine, and our friend, who fell through the hole at the craps table. We need to speak with whoever’s in charge here.”

“You should’ve thought of that before fighting your way through my people,” the large guard snarled. He turned to his men. “I said, cuff them!”

The cuffs weren’t silver. That meant they were more symbolic than anything else. Without another word, all three of us were led away into a windowless room with a single door and no furniture.

The moment the door was locked behind us, I asked Greyson, “Can you mind link with her?”

He shook his head.

“Nothing from me either,” I said. I sounded strangled.

Where the fuck had she been taken?

I broke my cuffs. Greyson and Mikah did the same. We didn’t speak for a moment, just took in our surroundings. I noticed a small security camera, and I glared up at it while Mikah paced the room. His skin had a green hue to it, like he was sick.

I felt sick.

Greyson broke the silence. “Those guards—their scent is weird. They’re definitely not wolves.”

I scowled, recalling my conversation with Gabe. “Coyotes, then?”

Greyson shook his head. “No. They have to be something totally different.”

I peered at the door. There was an army of them behind it. Under my breath, I asked, “Just what the fuck kind of shifters are they?”

# Episode 3215

**Gabriel**

Well, this was definitely not good at all.

I poked the slimy wall next to me and gagged. I was standing in about three feet of water, and it smelled disgusting. What in Satan’s asshole was down here?

*Oy! Can you hear me?* I mind linked Mikah. *What good is our mate bond if you’re not going to answer me?*

Mikah’s annoyed voice sounded in my head. *I’m trying to find* you*. Where are you?*

*Fuck if I know*, I replied. *Somewhere below the casino? It’s dark, and I can’t really see anything, and the smell is rancid—I’m gonna need ten showers after this, if I survive it.*

*You* will *survive it*, Mikah replied sharply. *Don’t joke about stuff like that.*

*Oh, I forgot, I’m also standing in water!* I said, fighting my natural urge to splash around. This water didn’t seem sanitary to me.

*Water?* Mikah’s voice cracked. *Shit, Greyson said that one of the dealers told him to avoid the water. Can you get somewhere dry?*

*I mean, I can try, and hopefully not die*, I mind linked, starting to feel around again. I gagged once more when I felt the slimy walls. Honestly, give me a bloodbath and I was fine with the smell and everything, but whatever *this* was? Even I had my limits.

*Can you find a ladder?* Mikah asked impatiently.

*No ladders, just gross walls.* I paused and squinted upward when the wall disappeared under my fingertips*. Wait, I found the entrance to a tunnel. Should I walk down into it?*

I could just imagine Mikah’s eyelid twitching. *Are you asking* me*?*

*Hey, I know basically as much as you right now.*

*For the love of—* Mikah stopped talking. I could see him, clear as day in my head, taking a deep breath. He calmly added, *Try to keep in contact with the mind link. Tell me what you see or hear.*

I started walking down the tunnel, humming under my breath. *Tunnel, more tunnel, and… more tunnel. I’m sensing a theme here.*

*Any symbols or landmarks?* Mikah asked.

*I don’t know what kind of landmarks you have in mind, buddy*, I said sarcastically*. I ain’t seeing the Pyramids or the Acropolis down here.*

Mikah huffed. *The Acropolis is not a landmark; the landmark is the Parthenon temple, and the Acropolis is the area, so—*

Oh, I should have known better. This was like the time he’d spent fifteen minutes explaining to me that it was the doctor who was called Frankenstein and not the monster. Talk about bad timing.

*You know you are the world’s biggest ‘effin nerd—*

*Gabriel!* Mikah snapped, cutting me off. *Focus! Do you see anything?*

I nodded to myself, refocusing*. Right. No landmarks, no symbols or whatever. Nothing.*

And I still wanted to vomit. This was fucking bad, all jokes aside, and my eyes were watering from the stench. The only thing that would have made me feel better right now was to kill something. Or have Mikah with me.

*Are you still in the casino?* I asked him.

*I’m pretty sure we’re in the casino*, he replied*. But not on the casino floor.*

*The fuck’s that supposed to mean?* I asked dubiously. *Where are you guys, exactly?*

It was like I could feel him thinking it over. *Well… We got arrested by the casino security for attacking some of the guards.*

I rolled my eyes. *Oh, great. And I thought I was the hotheaded one.*

*Sorry for getting angry that they dropped my mate down a giant hole in the floor*, Mikah said with a humph of outrage.

I smirked at his words, then caught myself and scowled. There was no time for mushy mate feelings right now.

*What do you see?* Mikah asked.

*I’ve come to a fork in the tunnel, so it’s time to choose your own adventure again*, I replied and paused. *Left or right?*

*Do you see anything?* he asked. Oddly enough, he suddenly sounded super far away.

*Nope, they both look like the same kind of long, dark nothingness*, I replied.

Mikah sighed. *Then go right.*

I did, sloshing through the very questionable water. It was cold and horrible, and I was starting to shiver. The idea of staying in this water any longer was actually the worst.

Suddenly, I bumped into something, foot first. The thing floated before me but also wasn’t moving, as if it were caught at the bottom somehow, so that was weird.

*I think I found something*, I mind linked.

There was silence on Mikah’s end of the mate bond. My heart started racing. Dammit, I must have traveled too far away from wherever Mikah was being held.

I considered going back to speak with him, but I decided to check out whatever this thing was first. I reached down under the surface of the water, grabbed it, and pulled. It was definitely weighed down, caught on something below.

I wished my phone hadn’t been in my pocket—it was totally waterlogged, and I couldn’t turn it on to use as a flashlight or anything. I semi-shifted, hoping that my wolf sight would help me see better in the dark than my human eyes.

I pulled a little harder on the thing that had been floating, and I yelped when it came free.

It was a skull.

“Oh, hell no!” I burst out, my voice echoing in the dark as I jumped back in surprise. Of course there were dead bodies floating around in this muck with me.

A splash came from behind me.

Great.

I froze, the water sloshing around me. Then I snapped out of it, slowly turning around just in time to see the water moving, and a long scaly tail. *Gators!*

“Fuck!” I shouted, partially shifting my hands in case I got a chance to strike. Which I probably would have to do very soon. I stumbled and swam forward, away from the thing and *out of the goddamn water*.

I was certain that I’d need to get to solid ground to have the upper hand in a fight. Gators were fast swimmers and strong fighters, especially in the water.

I swam-ran away, seeing a bit better in the dark now with my wolf vision, but the water was still slowing me down. I heard a weird rushing noise ahead and raced toward. Maybe it was a kind of opening or something? I sure as fuck hoped so.

There was a hissing noise behind me. That was obviously a fucking gator, so I lunged to the left to get the hell out of its way. I was just in time, too—the beast lunged forward and snapped its powerful teeth where I’d just been.

I was starting to hate this city with all its freaking alligators. It wasn’t that I was scared of them (like, of course not, I was a fucking werewolf), but mostly it was their *vibes*, you know? Like, it felt as though they didn’t just want to fight me—more like they literally wanted to *eat me.* Eat me. Whole.

I kept swim-running toward the sound of rushing water, but then I realized it was a goddamn drop. The decision was fast—an unknown drop was better than becoming gator chow, so I jumped.

I gagged and choked as the water carried me down a steep incline, like the world’s most dangerous and gross waterslide. I cursed my luck the entire time, obscenities echoing through the tunnels.

And then, I dropped into even deeper water.

I swam to the surface and spluttered, coughing as a waterfall pounded down on me. The water here was at least five feet deep. My head was just above the surface as my feet hit the ground. But at least it smelled less disgusting, and there was more light in here. Small victories?

I noticed a strange, raised tunnel about a foot above the water. I started to move toward it because there was fuckwhere else to go. I bumped into something, and my ass wasn’t about to make the mistake of looking down, because I knew that—yep, it was another fucking skeleton. I saw it now, with literally no meat on its bones.

And then—here we go—I saw another scaly tail. And another. And then three and then, well, six. Math was the fucking enemy.

“Goddamn it,” I cursed out loud, the words echoing through the tunnel. I knew I wouldn’t make it to that opening in time, so I shifted further. I wasn’t about to go down without a fight, no matter how vicious and hungry these beasts were. I would not be eaten, goddamn it!

All of a sudden, the splashing stopped.

The silence was unnerving. The gators’ snoots were all a foot away from me, arranged in a semicircle.

*What the hell is happening here?*

As I was about to tell these sons of bitches that I wasn’t gonna become their snack, one of the gators moved forward. I readied myself for some gator wrestling…

But then the beast shifted. Something I was definitely *not* expecting.

As if that wasn’t enough, the shifter revealed himself as a very naked and *very* attractive man. He shot me a smirk and a wink that I would have found flattering in any other circumstance. “Well, what have we here?”

# Episode 3216

I was sitting in a stark white waiting room. The only sound was the thudding of my pulse, echoing in my ears. I had no idea what kind of place this was, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t mind link with my mates, which was freaking me out.

*Is this magic? It must be!*

That Azalea witch was probably doing something to jam the mind link. I’d been here for a while, and my hands were shaking, my leg bouncing up and down with anxiety as I wondered how much longer they were going to keep me here.

*Why am I even in here in the first place?*

I’d asked the guards about it multiple times, but the customer service in this place remained appalling. Nobody had told me what was going on, they’d just said to stay there and wait in the world’s cleanest waiting room. I’d thought about asking if my mates had come looking for me, but I didn’t know if that would make the situation worse or put them in danger, so I didn’t mention it. At least for now.

I could only hope they were okay and hadn’t done anything too rash. Xavier lost his shit very, very easily. As for Greyson, I was pretty sure that he was constantly one blowup away from cutting a bitch, so I didn’t know what to think.

*Ugh… How much longer do I have to wait? God, this is just—*

The door opened. Finally. A pretty woman in a sapphire skirt suit came in, looking oh so poised. With a nod and an official tone, she said, “She’ll see you now.”

Azalea. She had to be talking about Azalea.

The pretty young woman in blue led me down a fancy marble corridor that ended at two large, golden doors. The décor was so flashy, like a palace or a museum. It was both intimidating and more than a little awe-inspiring. When the doors opened, I found myself in that giant eagle eye suite above the casino floor.

Greyson had been right—the location was strategic and made it so easy for the manager to examine everyone in sight. The floor-to-ceiling windows were massive, and I looked out in dismay to see that the whole casino floor was empty and shut down. My stomach dropped, panic starting to rise.

*Where the hell are Greyson and Xavier and the others?*

I couldn’t afford to lose my cool, though. If the boys had started a fight, I couldn’t do the same. I faced the girl who’d brought me here, about to ask what was happening, but then I heard a smooth female voice behind me.

“This is the person who used magic in my casino?”

I whirled around to see a giant golden desk, just to match the rest of the not-so-subtle aesthetic. Behind it sat a chic white woman in her late sixties. She had called it *her* casino, so this had to be Azalea.

She had one of the keys that we needed to free Tabitha.

Did she know we already had the first key? I had no idea.

I also didn’t know what I’d expected, but it wasn’t a grandmotherly lady with a fashionable blazer and a pearl necklace, her hair cut to her chin in an elegant bob with bangs. She looked like she should’ve been throwing a ladies’ tea time event—*not* sitting up in the tower of a casino.

Nevertheless, there was a gleam in her violet eyes that made it clear she was not someone to be trifled with.

“I wasn’t cheating,” I blurted out.

The woman stared me down. Then she wagged a finger at me. “Approach.”

Swallowing roughly—mainly because she totally reminded me of a strict grandma who was disappointed in me—I walked closer to her.

“I’m not lying,” I muttered. “I never meant to—”

“But you *did* perform magic, didn’t you?” she asked seriously, leaning back in her chair.

I opened my mouth, and my voice came out in a squeak. “I didn’t intend on using my magic. It just happened, because I got mad about losing, and I…”

I wondered if I should call her out right now over the fact that I knew she was basically hypnotizing people at the slot machines to steal their money as they turned into mindless zombies. In the end, I decided to kept that card up my sleeve.

*I need to be strategic, here. I’m not exactly sure what my strategy is, but still!*

I finally said, “I may have used magic, but it wasn’t on purpose. I wasn’t trying to cheat.”

Azalea’s eyes narrowed on me. “Are you aware that magic is actually *forbidden* in my casino?”

I shook my head. “I had no idea.”

The eagle-eyed woman frowned. “You didn’t read my rules before entering?”

“I mean, I tried to read the rules, but then I got distracted by the nice pictures and colors, and also the rules were kind of confusing, so I just thought I’d play without—”

“Realizing what you signed up for,” the witch said, eyebrows arched. “Oh, *my*. That isn’t good.”

The way she looked at me was unnerving. I had no strategy, sure, but then I realized that probably the best strategy with her would be to be polite and remorseful—she seemed like the kind of witch who could go from zero to a thousand in a second.

“I’m sorry for the misunderstanding,” I said. “I won’t use magic anymore.”

The woman pursed her lips together primly. “Well, a rule breaker cannot be trusted to keep her word, now, can she?”

I felt like I was being chastised by my grandmother. Only worse, because this lady felt a whole lot more dangerous considering she was in front of me now and not my actual grandmother. I lowered my head in shame, hoping it would appease her. Didn’t she have grandchildren? I was only a pure, innocent child!

*The purest ever—just look at my sad face! It’s the saddest face of all!*

Full disclosure: the puppy-dog eyes worked with my human grandma every time. This lady just stared at me, though. Just as I began to worry that I’d oversold everything, she gave a long-suffering sigh.

“This is my casino, dear, and everybody needs to play by my rules. Do you understand that?”

I kept my tone earnest. “Of course.”

“I can’t have what you just did going on in here,” she said. “It is lawless and unruly, and that is not what I stand for.”

I’d already gathered that, from the all-white spotless waiting room.

“Therefore,” she continued, “you must be a good girl now and tell me how you’re able to use magic.”

I chuckled awkwardly, dropping into the seat across her desk. “Honestly, I don’t know!”

My goodness, I sounded so innocent I almost started to believe it. But wait, I *was* innocent!

“That isn’t what I wanted to hear.” Azalea scowled, but at least she didn’t comment on my sitting down without permission. “This won’t do at all. I do not like these kinds of variables in my casino or my city, and that is—”

There was a knock on the door, and then the door opened. The pretty girl who’d led me here a few minutes earlier rushed in. “Azalea! Those men…” She shot me a pointed look, and Azalea did the same, her gaze intrigued.

My mind was running a mile a minute. If *those men* the young woman had mentioned were my mates and my friends, then Azalea had just realized that they were connected to me. She raised a hand to stop her attendant from saying anything else.

*Uh-oh. There goes my hope that my mates haven’t gotten in trouble*, I thought, my stomach dropping.

The young woman was dismissed, and it was just Azalea and me again. Despite the fact that she was intimidating, there was still an air of familiarity about her that made me want to talk to her. I glanced at her neck—perhaps she was wearing the key, like the other witch?

But no. All I saw was pearls.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself, young lady?” Azalea said sternly.

“May I speak candidly with you?” I asked.

She offered me a sharp smile. “Oh, I wish you would.”

Her tone sounded so threatening that my palms started sweating, but I couldn’t pull away now. This was the route I’d chosen, and my mates and my friends and I wouldn’t leave this place by fighting our way out. Harlow had said that the casino was guarded like a palace, after all. I had to try out a different approach.

Honesty.

“I know why you turned off the magic,” I said. “I know that there was something in this city affecting your magic, and it scared you. And it should.”

Azalea stopped tapping her fingers on her desk. She leaned forward, her eyes narrowed. “And what, pray tell, is that?”

“It’s a demon,” I said.

I chose not to tell her about the ashes. That would lead to me explaining my connection to Seluna, and that wasn’t something a potential enemy should know. But I was technically telling the truth.

“A demon’s magic has been affecting New Orleans,” I said.

Azalea’s eyes had widened. But then she fixed a neutral mask onto her face.

“And why should I believe *you*, a rule breaker?” she asked coldly.

“I admit that I should have read your rules. I apologize for breaking them. But why would I make up such a huge lie? What would I stand to gain?” I asked.

“Exactly,” she said. “I’m wondering what your game is, here.”

“I want to fix New Orleans’s magic completely,” I said. “I want to get rid of this demon’s power. But I can’t do that without all magic being turned back on. I have a plan, and I need you to believe me when I say that I won’t stop until I achieve it.”

Azalea squinted at me. She seemed to ponder this. Her silence was gut-wrenching.

“And what is it that you want from *me*?” she asked. “You obviously came to this casino for a reason.”

“I did,” I admitted. And then I gathered all my courage, looked at her straight in the eye, and said, “All I need from you is your key.”

# Episode 3217

**Artemis**

I held out the photo. “Now we know you’re not lying,” I said. “Tell me everything.”

Nikkos just stared at the picture for a brief moment. His expression flickered with surprise before he fixed it into a blank mask. He looked away and kept his tone even when he spoke. “Let’s go inside first. You must be hungry.”

Rishika shot him a glare as he walked past her and down the dock. Behind his back, she called, “Artemis asked you something—you’d better not ignore her!”

Nikkos raised his hand in a dismissive wave when he reached the end of the dock, where there was a small shack-looking place with a front porch and two rockers.

Gritting my teeth, I followed him, glancing at Rishika. “I’m gonna fix this.”

She nodded as I moved forward to the porch, just as Nikkos opened the door.

“Tell me how you know Adair, or Rishika and I are leaving,” I threatened. “We won’t help you find Adair, which I know is something you definitely want.”

Still holding eye contact like an audacious feline, Nikkos did not speak. He merely opened the door wider and went inside, leaving me on the porch. I felt like a tea kettle about to go off.

Rishika was waiting at the edge of the dock, eyebrows arched. “Well?” she asked in a low voice.

“I don’t know!” I huffed. “I’m seriously considering turning around, taking the motorboat, and getting the hell out of here.”

This was my temper speaking. Rishika knew it, because she knew *me*. She walked closer, resting her hand on my shoulder. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

I pressed my lips together, still feeling angry and frustrated, but her touch settled me down. Soothed me. I let out a loud breath, shaking my head.

“No, that’s not what I want,” I whispered. “You know I can’t leave until I learn everything I can about my uncle.”

That was what I’d said out loud, but on the inside, a myriad of thoughts were invading, like giants out to stomp on all my hopes. What if this was my only chance to find my uncle? What if I never found him? What if I’d brought Rishika here, put her in danger, and it was all for nothing?

This had to be worth it.

If it wasn’t… I couldn’t stand the idea that I’d come all this way only to hit yet another dead end.

“I’m going inside to talk to him,” I told her.

She offered me a nod of encouragement before I entered the shack. It was surprisingly cozy. The main area had a small kitchenette on one side, a comfy couch in the living room on the other side, and a wood-burning stove that was probably meant to heat the space.

A couple of doors led off to the side, and through the back windows, I could see the forest of the bayou beyond. The view was beautiful. Nikkos was nowhere to be seen, but I heard a creak from deeper into the shack. A moment later, he came out through one of the doors. As he walked into the living room, I looked over his shoulder and realized that the area he’d just emerged from was a bedroom. A very nice one, too.

I didn’t like Nikkos, but I sure liked this place.

“I didn’t mean to be so aggressive,” I blurted out.

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that an apology?”

Cali was good at apologizing and acknowledging her mistakes. I was not—at least not to Nikkos. “This is the closest thing to an apology you’ll ever get from me.”

He scoffed, shaking his head.

I rushed to add, “I just need to know what’s going on, Nikkos. Adair is my family, and this whole thing, looking for him and not knowing…” I swallowed roughly, nodding at the photo in my hands. I had to offer a smidge of truth here. “It hurts. After all I went through as a child, looking for my family hurts. Do you get what I mean?”

Nikkos paused. My words had affected him—that much had become clear the moment I’d uttered the word *family*. He sighed and gestured toward the couch for me to sit. He took a seat next to me, taking the photo from my hands.

He stared at it quietly for a moment. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought I saw affection in his eyes. I told myself to be patient with him.

“I’ll tell you everything. Adair and I were childhood friends,” Nikkos finally said. “We were raised and trained together.”

I bit my tongue to stop myself from asking if he’d also known Kadmos. I had no idea how familiar Nikkos might be with Kadmos, or how he felt about him. It might derail the task at hand here—finding my uncle. I decided to let him continue.

“We were close, Adair and me,” Nikkos said. His voice was throaty now. “As close as any two Fae could be. I used to know everything about him. What he was thinking, what he loved, what he hated. I thought it would always be like that. That we’d go on to fight in battles together, find glory together…”

He looked up at me, his gaze wounded.

“And then, one day, after his brother died, he disappeared. Just left. He didn’t even tell me he was leaving.” Nikkos frowned, and his grip on the photograph tightened, wrinkling it. I didn’t dare speak. He let out a deep breath and relaxed.

I still kept my mouth shut. It felt like this was Nikkos’s story to tell, and interrupting would only ruin everything. When Nikkos spoke again, his grip on the picture had loosened.

“It took me a long time to get over that abandonment. To convince myself that it wasn’t my fault that Adair left without a word.”

Those last words struck a chord with me. I had been abandoned at birth, after all. Before I’d known the truth about what had happened, I had wondered for a long time if it had been my fault. If I’d done anything wrong, if I wasn’t good enough, if I could just turn back time and beg my parents to come back.

I couldn’t tell Nikkos any of that, though. I always struggled to talk about my feelings—even more so with a practical stranger. He seemed devastated, though. And I could relate, so I just… I did what I’d seen Cali do when people were sad.

I reached out a hand and patted Nikkos on the shoulder. This is what most people did when they were trying to comfort someone, wasn’t it? Was I doing it right?

Nikkos didn’t respond. Okay, maybe I was doing it wrong.

“Is that it, then?” I finally asked, breaking the silence. “You want to find him to ask him why he left?”

Nikkos nodded. “That’s definitely part of it,” he said quietly.

I wondered what other reasons Nikkos had, but it seemed that they would remain a secret. But all those things he was still hiding—they didn’t seem so nefarious anymore. It sounded like Nikkos truly held a lot of affection for my uncle, and he needed some kind of closure.

I could accept that. I was in search of closure myself. Always, it felt like.

Perhaps I should give this man a pardon for now.

After all, if our positions were reversed, I would’ve been just as guarded as he was. Nikkos had no way of knowing what I wanted with Adair, either. My uncle being family didn’t mean anything when families slaughtered each other all the time in the Fae world.

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” I told Nikkos in the end.

He nodded again.

I had about enough of sharing feelings, so I cleared my throat and said, “So what’s next in the plan?”

He lifted a brow. “So you finally accept that we should work together?”

I patted his shoulder again. Though this time, it was mostly condescending. “For now. Don’t get too cocky.”

He rolled his eyes, just as the front door opened and Rishika came in. Her timing was perfect—I assumed she’d probably been waiting for us to finish our private conversation. I wondered if she’d eavesdropped with her werewolf hearing, or just walked in when she no longer heard us muttering. Either way, I was happy she was here.

“So, what’s our next move?” Rishika asked Nikkos, echoing my earlier question.

“You asked me earlier why I needed two hours before we could meet again,” Nikkos said. “The reason is that I had to see an informant of mine. He’s a little antsy, so I knew showing up with two unknowns could’ve scared him off.”

That did make sense, actually. During my bounty hunter days, I’d had many informants. I knew how tricky those relationships could be.

“Did this informant of yours have any good information to share with you?” Rishika asked, crossing her arms.

“It was great information, actually,” Nikkos said. Then he paused.

I raised an eyebrow. “Right now would be the perfect time for you to share it with us, actually.”

Nikkos snorted before looking between Rishika and me. Finally, he said, “There’s someone Adair has been in contact with. Apparently, he’s going to meet up with them soon.”

A flare of excitement and hope burst inside my chest. I gripped Nikkos’s arm. “Then that’s where we’ll be too!”

# Episode 3218

Azalea stared me down, and I gulped.

*Stay strong, Cali. Don’t forget why you’re here.*

Azalea stood and walked over to the adjoining bar/kitchenette area in the corner of her office, where she poured herself a couple fingers of a dark amber liquid. Then, as if she’d suddenly remembered I was there, she turned back to me and held up the tumbler.

“Bourbon?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I’m fine, thanks.”

The witch took her tumbler of bourbon and walked over to the small sitting area set just off to the side of her office. As she settled into the large armchair, I suddenly pictured her as a queen surveying her kingdom. And with the casino a few floors down, she very much fit the bill. I could tell Azalea was a witch who knew what she wanted and was used to getting it. She was a woman of power and privilege and prestige. She probably had more magic in one hand than I had in my whole body.

And me? Judging by the way she was staring me down, I was a peasant at best.

“Now, why do you think I would hand over something so precious?” Azalea asked.

This was it. *Time for your pitch, Cali. Thank god you love* Shark Tank*.*

I took a seat on the couch across from Azalea, trying to sit up straight and look imposing, even though the cushions deflated under my weight and tried to devour me. I sat forward and smiled. “Because I know how to fix the magic problem. The one that’s affecting magic not only in New Orleans, but all over the world. Isn’t that why you and the other elder witches turned off magic to begin with?”

A delicate frown twisted the witch’s lips as she sipped her bourbon. “You’ve done your research, Fae. I’ll give you that.”

That had to be a good sign, right? She wasn’t sending me off with her goons, or casting a spell on me, or throwing me into some kind of casino prison. For reasons I still didn’t quite understand, Azalea seemed inclined to let me say my piece. We weren’t going to get a better opportunity than this to get that key. Now was my chance.

Emboldened, I pressed forward. “I know I’m an outsider and that the New Orleans witches are very protective of their territory, but I can promise you, we want the same thing. Magic’s balance restored.”

“That’s all well and good, but we’ve already found a solution to our problem. Your help, well-intentioned though it might be, is redundant.”

I thought of Harlow, and all the other witches in the city who were suddenly without their magic. So many people who used magic for safety, for their own livelihoods, or simply because magic had hummed in their veins for as long as they could remember—all of them were going without.

I wanted to ask Azalea if the rest of the witches here in New Orleans were as content with her “solution” as she and the other elder witches clearly were, but I knew to tread lightly.

If the witches of New Orleans were anything like the various wolf packs I’d come across, then it would probably rub them the wrong way for an outsider to come in and start pointing out cracks in the way they did things. I was probably already ridiculously lucky that she’d listened to me so far. I couldn’t get cocky. If I wanted to pull this off, I was going to need to finesse the situation. So I decided to try another route.

“I know you only turned off magic for New Orleans, which means there are, what, dozens of witches without magic here who have been left defenseless. What happens when other witch covens hear that the New Orleans witches don’t have magic? Aren’t you worried that will make you vulnerable to anyone who might decide to come here, coveting your territory?”

A crease appeared between Azalea’s brows, the only signal that she was actually listening to me.

I put my hands up. “I’m not trying to come here with threats. I mean you and the other witches no harm. I just want to offer up some solutions. I want to get rid of all this imbalance too. I want everyone—you, me, and all the witches in this city—to have access to their magic.”

Azalea set down her bourbon on the end table next to the armchair and leaned forward. “You’re a Fae from parts unknown. A tourist, at best. What makes you think that you’re the right person to fix this situation?”

*Uh, because it’s happening because of me? Ish?* I bit my lip. I hadn’t planned to tell the witches about my history with Seluna. Being cursed by a demon wasn’t really something I wanted to go around telling everyone, and beyond that, who knew what this witch would do with that kind of information at her disposal?

“What if I asked you to just go with it?” I asked.

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Then I’d tell you to kindly get the fuck out of my office.”

“Fair enough.” I sighed. Apparently, I was going to have to give up this sensitive personal information in order to gain this woman’s trust. “I… have a personal connection to this imbalance… which is, like I said, caused by demon magic. And because of that, I’m *very* invested in stopping it.”

The witch’s brows rose. “A personal connection? To a demon? How?”

I’d thought that by telling her, I might earn her trust. She might realize that, even if she didn’t know the first thing about me, she’d see that we had a shared goal. That I was trustworthy enough for this one task, if this one task only.

But the way Azalea was looking at me now, the tension that hummed through her frame… It set me on edge more than being hauled into her office for accidentally cheating at the slot machine. The witch looked like she was ready to fight—and I was her opponent.

*Shit. How have I already screwed this up?*

I’d have to talk fast to prove to her that I was an ally, that I meant no harm.

“It’s not what you think!” I blurted out. “I’m not *with* the demon. I’m one of her victims. The demon marked me before I killed her, and I need to remove all traces of her magic from the world to restore the balance of things. If I don’t, magic will only get worse, and the curse is likely going to kill me.”

“And what’s to convince me that this is true?”

“Is my word not enough for you?”

Azalea laughed. “Oh, child. I think you know the answer to that question.”

I swallowed roughly. She was really going to make me bare it all—literally.

“I have physical proof.” I turned around and tugged down my collar to expose the mark on my shoulder. It was fainter now, with the magic subdued, but it was still visible. And judging by the witch’s gasp, there was no mistaking it.

Azalea’s eyes were riveted to my shoulder as she rose from her chair and slowly approached me. It wasn’t even a tiny bit comforting that this incredibly powerful witch seemed genuinely freaked out by what had become part of my day-to-day life.

*That can’t bode well for me.*

I pushed that thought away. I was here to *solve* my various problems—not find a whole new reason to panic over them.

*Focus, Cali. You’re so close.*

Azalea reached out a hand to press against the print, and a weird tingle of magic washed over it. Pain spasmed through my body, almost like she was activating an echo of the handprint’s dark magic. I tensed and let out a sharp hiss as the witch read the print with her own very much intact magic. Still, I stayed where I was, allowing Azalea to work whatever magic she needed to for her to believe I was above board. A little pain was more than worth it.

I briefly considered asking her if she could fix it. She was probably the most powerful witch I’d ever met—something I’d never admit around Big Mac. But it was also probably for the best if I wasn’t indebted to this witch any more than I had to be. That seemed like the kind of thing a person could lose an eye over.

Finally, she pulled her hand back, and my knees almost buckled in relief. I quickly pulled my collar back into place and collapsed gracelessly back onto the couch before I hit the ground. I was breathing hard, the ghost of that pain still thrumming through me. “Do you believe me now?”

Azalea nodded stiffly. “Yes. I can tell it has the same magic signature of the evil energy that was wreaking havoc on the magic here before.” She reached around her neck and pulled off her necklace. “The key is yours, for as long as you require it to fulfill your purpose.”

*Oh, thank god!*

I let out a shuddering breath. Relief didn’t even begin to cover it. “Thank you. You won’t regret this.”

I practically tripped over myself to take the key, but she yanked it back at the last second.

“But before I entrust you with this,” she said, “you will need to give me a Fae promise.”

# Episode 3219

**Gabriel**

*What fresh hell is this?*

I blinked, staring at the ridiculously hot naked white guy standing in the middle of this gator-infested sewer with me. I didn’t know where to look—at the mystery man’s sewer-water-slicked eight pack, or at the gators surrounding us.

Fortunately, the swamp dinosaurs were hanging back and watching. But even that was a little unsettling. What the hell were they waiting for?

I cleared my throat. “Sorry, what’s going on here?”

The man smiled, revealing perfectly straight white teeth. He had a hell of a smile, which I was definitely not staring at or distracted by. “My name is River Boudreaux, and this is my pack,” he said in a smooth, charming Southern accent. “You’re in our territory, stranger.”

River’s voice and face—and body, but we were trying to ignore that—were so disarming, it took me a minute to fully comprehend what he’d just said to me.

*Shit. These are* gator *shifters? Is that even a thing?*

I’d seen coyote shifters in the desert out West, and I’d heard of bobcat shifters and the like, so this really shouldn’t have been all that surprising. *I guess I kind of assumed that all shifters were, like, warm-blooded.*

And yet, here I was. Stuck in a fucking sewer beneath some witchy casino slash paranormal death trap, with a *pack* of gator shifters. Pretty much the last thing I needed right now.

I suddenly remembered the floating body I’d come across earlier and grimaced. “So, uh, are you guys thinking I’m your next meal or something?”

River—which, sorry, but what a fucking name for a gator shifter—frowned, then chuckled. All around me, the gators let out little chuffing sounds as well.

*Are they laughing at me? What the hell kind of swamp universe have I fallen into?*

My utter horror and confusion must have been written all over my face, because River shook his head. “Oh, no. Those men ran into the *real* alligators that live down here too. You’re lucky we found you first.”

“Lucky, right.” I laughed nervously. “That’s me.”

“We were able to convince them to back off so you and I could have a little chat.”

*Just a fun, casual conversation with the freakishly hot Swamp King. Cool, cool, cool.*

I guessed as long as I wasn’t being attacked by alligators, this whole situation was still net positive. “And what did you want to… discuss?”

River gave me another dazzling smile that might have taken my breath away if 1) I didn’t have a mate, and 2) I wasn’t so goddamn freaked out by every single aspect of this situation. “I can tell you have Alpha blood.” He pointed to a cut on my arm, which must have spilled into the sewer water.

*Shit. I’d better not get some swamp infection.*

“Alpha to Alpha,” River continued, “I wanted to extend some hospitality.”

I had a sarcastic reply about the hospitality of Alphas locked and loaded on my tongue, but Mikah must have been rubbing off on me more than I thought, because I held it back. “Um, that’s… nice of you?”

“What’s your name, Alpha?” River asked.

I considered lying but didn’t really see what purpose it would serve down here with the lizard people. If they were really shifters, they didn’t have any more magic than I did. “Gabriel. And I don’t do that gig. I could, but I don’t.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Gabriel. As a fellow Alpha, I find it abhorrent to think that you would be killed in such an awful way. It would shame the Alpha label for all of us.”

My brows rose in tandem with the downward twist of my mouth. “Uh-huh.”

“So, as a favor, I have decided to make you an offer. Instead of leaving you to defend yourself down here against every assailant the tunnels have to offer, you may leave.”

I nodded. “Sounds great. I’ll just be on my—”

River held up a hand. “*If* you can beat me.”

I scowled. *Of course there’s a catch. There’s always a fucking catch.*

And tonight, the catch was that I’d still have to fight my way out of here. I glanced around the filthy, shoulder-deep water.

*Assuming the cholera doesn’t get me first.*

“You want to fight here?” I asked.

River rolled back and forth on his heels, humming as he looked around the sewer. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what this place must’ve looked like from his perspective. His sinfully full lips pulled up into another smile, and he brushed his dirty blond locks away from his face.

“Fair point, Gabriel. We can move to a more neutral location.”

*Hopefully one with about eighty percent fewer gators.*

I nodded. “Lead the way.”

And with that, River climbed the ladder to the opening of the upper tunnel, obviously unbothered by the fact that he was completely nude.

And as I followed behind him, all the way up the ladder, I had to admit, the Southern comfort wasn’t looking too bad.

Mikah was going to kill me.

*Get your head in the game! You’re gonna have to fight this guy—not drool all over him. How about we focus on not dying?*

I followed River down the tunnel, relieved to be out of the water. That would surely give me a leg up, wouldn’t it? Alligators were deadly both on land and in the water, but a wolf on land—that was *their* domain.

Footsteps slapped on the cement behind us, and I glanced back to see that River’s pack had shifted and was following us down the long tunnel.

*Thank god I don’t have to fight them all.*

We made our way into a large, open area where, to my complete and utter surprise, a boxing ring had been erected.

*What the fuck?*

Apparently the gator folk lived far richer lives here in the sewers than I’d given them credit for.

River climbed into the ring, accepting a pair of shorts from one of the guys lounging by the side.

I had a lot questions. Was that guy always there? Where did they wash their gym clothes? Was there a little sewer mailbox somewhere?

You know, we could revisit it after I didn’t die.

River tugged the shorts on, though they were still slung impossibly low on his chiseled hips. He turned to face me, gave me another one of those warm-you-from-the-inside-out grins, and crooked his finger for me to join him.

*What the hell does this guy have to be so smiley about? He lives in a sewer! He might be unbearably hot as a human, but he shifts into an ugly dinosaur.*

I rolled my shoulders, then worked out a crick in my neck before I climbed into the ring.

“So, I just have to beat you in order to get out of here?” I asked.

River nodded. “Show me what you’ve got, Gabriel.”

I kind of hated the way he said my name. All melodic and lilting and sexy. Like we shared a secret or something. The sooner I left this guy in the rearview, the better.

“Fine. Let’s do this.”

I launched myself at River, swinging out a punch before I even finished my sentence, and nailed the gator shifter in the jaw. The other shifters booed at the dirty trick, but I wasn’t sorry.

River didn’t seem to mind, either. He grinned, almost baring his bloodstained teeth. “Oh, this is going to be fun.”

He burst into motion, but I was ready for him, dodging the right hook River sent my way. The initial blow I’d gotten in didn’t seem to have fazed him in the slightest—if anything, he seemed thrilled by the fact that I’d gotten in a cheap shot.

*This might not be the easiest fight of my life.*

We circled each other at first, dodging and weaving, feeling each other out. Every blow I sent his way was easily blocked, and I was watching him so intently, he didn’t manage to land a punch either. We spun and bobbed and jabbed and dodged, each of us getting a few hits in here and there, but neither one of us truly making any kind of headway.

If my immediate future outside of this godforsaken sewer hadn’t been on the line, I would’ve enjoyed being so well matched with an opponent. But since I was determined not to die down here, this fight needed to come to an end—fast. There was no telling what the hell was going on up in the casino. Mikah and Xavier might need me.

And I really needed a shower.

River set a jab at my face. I threw up an arm to block him and then went for a sucker punch to his diaphragm that had him reeling forward, right where I wanted him. I clocked him right in the jaw, then went for the other side, one after another. My knuckles split on his chiseled jaw, his teeth, but still I kept going.

*Fuck, Lizard Man can take a beating.*

I pulled my fist back to knock him down *hard*, when suddenly a dark blur of muscle and scales brushed over the ground and knocked my feet out from under me. I partially shifted as I fell, so I could bounce back faster.

*Holy shit.*

River had partially shifted too. And attached to that perfect ass was a long, thick alligator tail.

I blinked, absolutely stunned. I’d never seen anything so fascinatingly grotesque in my life.

My opponent took advantage of my distraction and launched a counterassault of his own—a powerful, partially shifted one-two that knocked me on my ass.

*Shit!*

He tackled me as I hurried to recover, pinning me down and punching my face again and again. White-hot pain radiated up my jaw, and I shifted my hand, claws out, and punched him in the ribs with all my might.

He let out a breathless groan and stuttered in his assault. It was all the opening I needed. I knocked him to the ground and flipped him onto his stomach, pinning him both with my weight and my claws against his jugular.

“Now,” I panted, “show me how to get the fuck out of here.”

# Episode 3220

**Greyson**

I walked the length of the fucking box Mikah, Xavier, and I were trapped in, checking the corners and walls for any weaknesses—anything we could exploit and potentially use to escape. When the first pass through didn’t yield any results, I swept the room again.

Restlessness and panic itched beneath my skin. I was trapped here. Meanwhile, Cali was god only knew where, in this hellscape of a casino, without the full strength of her magic. I had to do *something*, even if it was useless, and combing through the room again and again was that something.

In any case, it seemed slightly more productive than Mikah’s and Xavier’s approaches.

“Hey, you witchy assholes! Let us out!” Xavier roared. “If I find you, I’m gonna rip you limb from fucking limb!”

I rolled my eyes. *Right. They’ll be tripping over themselves to help us with a threat like that.*

Mikah was pacing back and forth, his eyes unfocused as he tried to mind link with Gabriel. I felt a thread of sympathy for the guy. Xavier and I weren’t the only ones here with a mate who was MIA. And hell, at least Cali hadn’t disappeared through a hole in the floor like this was some kind of murder house.

Mikah groaned and shook his head. “I can’t reach him. He must be too far away or—” He swallowed roughly.

“I’m sure he’s too far, or something is blocking you from reaching him,” I said.

“What makes you so sure?” he asked, looking at me with a combination of hope and dread, like he was ready to accept my theory but afraid of being wrong.

“He’s your mate.” I shrugged. “If he was dead, you’d know.”

Didn’t know if I was reassuring Mikah or myself.

After my fourth pass through the room, I blew out a breath.

“This isn’t working,” I said. “We need a better plan.”

Xavier, who hadn’t stopped screaming threats and trying to literally punch his way through the door, didn’t even spare me a glance. “My plan is to break the hell out of here and rescue Cali.”

I walked up next to him and rapped on the door, which, despite all Xavier’s abuse, didn’t show a single sign of wear. “There must be some kind of magic fortifying the door, otherwise you’d have broken it down by now.”

Xavier paused, his chest heaving, and nodded. “You’re right. I just can’t fucking stand this.”

“Me neither.” I turned to Mikah and asked in a low voice, “So, how good are you at that vampire mind control shtick?”

His brows rose. “It’s called compulsion. Why? What are you thinking?”

I pulled them both in closer, just in case the security cameras in the room were also rigged with audio. “I think you and Xavier should pretend to get into a huge fight, and when the guards come in to break you apart, you command them to let us go.”

Mikah frowned, then shrugged. “Fine. It’s worth a try.”

“You know I’m good at getting into fights,” Xavier said, sounding oddly proud of this fact.

I grinned. “Oh, I know. Put your skills to good use, bro.”

With that, we broke apart and went back to our separate “activities” for the benefit of the camera. I checked the perimeter. Mikah paced. And Xavier? He banged on the door so hard I was surprised he hadn’t broken something.

“SOMEONE! LET US THE FUCK OUT!” he roared.

It was a little scary, actually, how obnoxious Xavier could be with a little effort. *If this is his ten, maybe I should count myself lucky that I normally only see him at a five.*

Mikah stopped and rounded on Xavier. “Oh my god! Will you fucking stop pounding on that door? You’re obviously not strong enough to break it down, and you’re giving me a headache!”

Xavier stopped. “Oh yeah? How about I show you what a real headache feels like.”

Mikah didn’t back down. In fact, he got up in Xavier’s face. “I’d love to see you try, mutt.”

Xavier took a swing at Mikah, and they went down in a heap of limbs, wrestling on the cold cement floor.

“Guys, stop!” I jumped in, pretending to try to break them apart.

“Stay out of it!” Xavier roared, grabbing me by the collar and throwing me against the wall so hard, a burst of pain flared up my ribs.

*Well, that was a little rougher than necessary.*

I leaned into it, pretending to be more dazed than I actually was. I allowed myself to slump to the ground, my eyes fluttering closed like I’d just passed out.

I heard the *snick* of the door unlocking, and then footsteps echoed as the guards raced in. I stayed completely still, waiting for the right moment to hop back up and be the backup muscle if Mikah’s compulsion attempt didn’t go so well.

The guards stepped in to pull Xavier and Mikah apart, and when I cracked my eyes open, I saw Mikah turn and grab his guard by the face, making deep, close, and intense eye contact. I didn’t hear what he murmured, but the guard’s eyes glazed over and he stood still.

Then Mikah called out, “Xavier, now!”

Xavier spun in his guard’s arms, catching him in a full Nelson so he was forced to stand there and stare at Mikah. He did the same intense eye contact trick, and this time I heard Mikah murmur, “Be still.”

Immediately, the guard stopped struggling.

I climbed to my feet and walked over to the nearest guard. I plucked his security badge off his belt, and Xavier grabbed the other guard’s Taser.

“Just in case,” he said when I looked at him with raised brows.

Couldn’t argue with that.

We stepped out of our prison cell, locking the guards in behind us—just as Gabriel raced up to us.

“Gabe!” Mikah cried, a relieved smile spreading across his face. “What are you doing here? How the hell did you find us?”

“What do you mean, what am I doing here? Obviously I’m here to rescue you!”

The vampire shook his head. “We were coming to rescue you.”

“Oh, dude.” Xavier clapped a hand over his nose. “You smell rancid. Where the hell have you been? Did you roll in something?”

I gagged a little as the scent hit me too. Xavier wasn’t overreacting. “You smell like a used diaper filled with mold and rotten eggs.”

“Well, *I’m sorry!*” Gabriel scowled. “I was dropped into a sewer against my will and had to fight a bunch of freaking gator shifters to get out!”

Mikah’s eyes widened. “Wait, *gator* shifters? As in, allig—”

“I’ll explain later,” Gabriel said. “Right now, we need to get the hell out of Dodge.”

“Yeah, let’s get moving,” I said. “We need to find Cali.”

Gabriel pointed over his shoulder. “I passed by some fancy-ass security doors on the way here. She might be in there.”

I nodded. “Lead the way.”

I followed Gabriel from a safe distance, because if I got any closer, I was absolutely going to vomit.

I tried to mind link with Cali to let her know we were coming for her, but she didn’t reply. I had no way of telling if she could even hear me.

“There!” Gabriel pointed to a set of golden doors, and I raced up and swiped the security badge over the access point. The door unlocked with another *snick*, and Xavier stepped forward to pull the door open just as the security guards from before appeared down the hallway.

I groaned. “How the hell did they get out?”

Mikah and Gabriel turned to fight them—the guards did a double take when they got up close and personal with Gabriel’s stank—and Xavier and I pushed through the golden doors. We raced into an ornate, beautiful office. The kind of place that could’ve been on the cover of some witchy magazine.

Two people spun in their seats to face us, and relief almost knocked me over.

“Cali!”

Her eyes widened as she recognized her mates plowing into the room.

An older woman was with her, and she scowled. “Who the hell are you lot?”

I didn’t hesitate—I raced forward and grabbed Cali’s hand, pulling her after me and through the golden doors. Xavier jumped into the fight with Mikah and Gabriel, and I heard them dispatch the guards before racing to catch up with Cali and me. We sprinted down various hallways, knocking out any guard who tried to stop us.

As we turned a corner, a crackling sound buzzed past us and a ball of magic slammed into the wall where my head had just been.

I glanced over my shoulder to see the older woman in pursuit. She was obviously a witch.

“Stop! That’s Azalea!” Cali cried.

The witch kept blasting magic at us and shrieking at her guards, but I didn’t stop, and I didn’t let go of Cali. All I could do was hope that the others hadn’t fallen behind.

We raced down the stairs, through the still-empty casino, and out into the cool night.

Outside, Harlow was still parked. We all practically dove inside, startling her. “Wha—”

“We’ll explain, just GO!” I shouted.

Seconds later, the car sped through the city, and soon Harlow pulled into what looked like a construction site.

We spilled out, breathing heavily from the adrenaline.

Harlow gagged. “Oh my god. What is that *smell*?”

I looked around wildly for Cali. After everything, I needed to hold her in my arms and know that she was okay.

Suddenly, something blurred past me. It was Mikah, growling and snarling as he lunged straight for Cali.

# Episode 3221

**Marta**

I’d spent all day locked away in my room, ever since the big blowup with Lilac, and if I was being honest with myself, I didn’t really want to come out anytime soon. There was nobody I wanted to talk to here. Hell, I didn’t even know who I could trust.

After learning that the two people I’d thought I was closest to in this house had been keeping a big secret all this time—a secret that very much affected me—I kind of wanted to stay curled up under my covers forever.

*Lilac has a mate.*

The words had been running through my head all day, ever since I’d overheard them.

*Lilac has a mate, and I’m not it. I’m not Lilac’s mate. Lilac’s mate is out there—and he’s found her. Lilac is supposed to be with someone else.*

God, today sucked. What the hell was I supposed to do with this life-changing information? How was I supposed to just go on with my life, knowing that my boyfriend was fated to be with someone else? And that someone else wasn’t just a hypothetical someone. They were a living, breathing, *real* someone he’d actually *met.*

A knock sounded at the door, but I ignored it. I rolled over in my bed and pulled the covers up even further, shutting out the ambient light from my window.

Dani’s voice slipped through the door. “Marta, you haven’t eaten anything. I’ve brought you some food. Can I come in?”

As if on cue, my stomach growled. *Maybe I can’t lock myself away forever after all. At least, not without some snacks.*

And somewhere in the back of my mind, I realized I couldn’t just ignore everything and everyone—even though I really, really wanted to.

Finally, I threw my covers back, pushed myself off the bed, and unlocked my door to let Dani in.

She was standing outside, bearing a tray with a cup of tea and a sandwich on it.

I mustered up a weak smile. “Thanks. Come on in.”

I took a seat at the head of my bed, and Dani perched at the foot, pushing the tray toward me. I picked up the sandwich and took a small bite.

Despite my hunger, my stomach was roiling and I felt kind of nauseated, but I forced the bite down. I had to eat, and I knew I’d probably feel a lot better with some food in my belly.

I forced myself to take another couple of bites before putting the sandwich back.

“Are you okay?” Dani asked gently.

My throat clogged with emotion, and I shook my head. A fresh round of tears burned my eyes, and my vision blurred for a moment before those tears started trailing down my cheeks.

“Oh, Marta.” Dani took my hand. “You don’t have to tell me what happened if you don’t want to. I just want to be here for you so you’re not alone.”

I swallowed down the emotion clogging my throat, then took a sip of tea, which felt much better to my knotted stomach. “No, I think I need to talk to someone about it. There are just so many thoughts going around in my head, and I don’t know what to think anymore.”

She nodded. “You can tell me anything. I’m here for you.”

“Lilac… He…” My throat closed up again, and my voice broke. Dani reached out and put her hand over mine. It was the simplest gesture in the world, but in it I found the strength to continue. “I finally found out what he’s been keeping from me.”

She didn’t say anything, just waited patiently for me to explain.

I sucked in a deep breath and forced myself to say the words out loud for the first time. “Lilac has a mate.”

Dani sat ramrod straight, blinking in surprise. “He… He does?”

I nodded, too miserable to speak.

Her expression shifted to something like sympathy. “Oh, Marta. That totally sucks!”

I nodded again and picked at the sandwich, my tears dripping onto the tray.

She leaned in and wrapped her arms around me. And it was that unconditional comfort and understanding that finally broke me. I’d experienced disappointment, heartache, and betrayal before. But such pure empathy? The kindness of someone who understood enough to know that I was suffering and just wanted to help me through it?

*That* was more than I could take.

I cried into her shoulder, letting out all the hurt and desperate anguish I’d been holding onto since I’d overheard those earth-shattering words.

Dani pushed the tray aside and moved in closer to embrace me fully, and my arms looped tight around her, holding on for dear life.

I sobbed so hard I was hyperventilating. “I—don’t—know—what—to—do!”

She patted my back. “You don’t have to do anything. Not right now. You have time to figure things out, so don’t worry about what comes next, okay? That step will be there when you’re ready to take it.”

Slowly, I regained my composure. My tears dried up, and I was left feeling… Well, empty. Completely drained.

“Thank you,” I said weakly.

“You’re welcome. And I meant what I said. You don’t have to make any choices about any of this. It’s a sucky situation all round.”

I nodded. “The worst thing is, I’m not even really mad at Lilac. I mean, I’m mad that he kept this secret from me. But I know that there’s literally nothing either of us can do about it. A mate bond isn’t a choice.”

“What did he say about it?”

I looked down at my lap. “I didn’t really stick around for him to say anything. I just yelled at him for keeping it a secret and stormed out.”

She nodded. “Okay. Do you *want* to talk to him about it?”

I sighed. “I think I have to. There’s nothing I can do about this on my own.”

“But you should also think about what you need, here. You have a right to do what’s best for you, even if you love him.”

I nodded. “That’s what’s so impossible about all of this. Because I think what’s best for me is the last thing I actually want to do.”

“Do you want me to come with you to talk to him?”

I shook my head. “No. I need to do this alone. It’s between the two of us.”

“Okay.” Dani wrapped me up in another hug. “Come find me after, if you need me.”

With that, I stood to go find Lilac. It didn’t take long. As it turned out, he was hiding out in his room too.

I knocked on the door. “Lilac?”

The door swung open, and he stood on the threshold, staring at me like we’d been apart for years. “Marta, I’m so happy to see you, and I’m so sorry for everything. For keeping it a secret and—”

I held up a hand to stop him. “Can we just talk?”

“Oh. Um, sure.”

I nodded and stepped into his room, closing the door behind me. I walked over to his desk and turned the seat so I could sit down and look at him. He sat on the bed across from me. Only a few feet separated us, and yet I’d never felt further away.

I pulled in a breath. “I think that, no matter what, you were wrong to keep this a secret from me.”

He nodded. “I know that now. I’m so sorry. I should have told you as soon as I found out.”

“How long have you known?”

He bit his lip. “Ever since the big showdown with Knox and the Samara pack. But,” he added, “I didn’t tell you at first because I wanted to confirm it. Before I told you this huge thing, I wanted to make sure I wasn’t wrong.”

“I can understand your desire to protect me, but it caused you to keep a huge secret from me, and more than anything else, *that* is what hurts.”

He knelt on the floor in front of me and took my hand. “I’ve learned my lesson. I’ll never do that again.”

I pulled my hand out of his grip, and his face fell.

I didn’t want to hurt him, but I just couldn’t touch him right now. I needed to keep a clear head for this conversation.

“I understand that the mate bond isn’t your choice,” I continued. “But I also understand that it’s kind of unavoidable.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t want to be with Perrie. I want to be with you. I *choose* you. I *love* you. Doesn’t that matter anymore?”

Tears welled up in my eyes at his words. They were everything I’d ever wanted to hear him say, and I wished we could try to make this work, that we could survive this and pretend that the mate bond wasn’t a thing.

But there was no getting around this. And even if we tried, we’d only be prolonging the inevitable.

Through my tears, I said, “I love you too. So much. But I can’t be selfish here. We can’t always wonder ‘what if.’ And I know that what’s best for both of us is for me to let you go.”

# Episode 3222

“Oh my god!” I screamed, falling on my ass as a red-eyed and literally bloodthirsty Mikah lunged straight at me.

I heard Greyson’s voice call out, “Mikah, no!”

But before he could get to me, Gabriel was there. He planted himself between Mikah and me and caught the vampire by the arms.

Mikah snarled and thrashed in his grip, and I half-expected Gabriel to throw him back, to try to physically overpower him. Instead, he stood his ground, his voice soothing.

“Hey, it’s okay. Here, drink.” Then he shoved his wrist out in front of Mikah’s face.

The vampire was too gone with bloodlust to even try to stop himself. His bright-red eyes fluttered shut with pleasure as he sank his fangs into Gabriel’s skin.

Gabriel winced but didn’t move. He just stood there, letting Mikah drink from him and whispering sweet nothings.

Strangely, Gabriel’s calm and compassionate control of the situation helped ease me out of my own animal panic. *Mikah’s probably delirious with hunger*, I realized. And to a tired, bloodthirsty vampire, too out of it to know any better, Fae blood was the perfect meal.

Xavier and Greyson rushed to my side and helped me up.

“Are you okay, love?” Greyson asked while Xavier checked my hands for scrapes.

I nodded. “I’m fine. It’s okay. Mikah’s clearly not in his right mind—luckily, Gabriel stepped in before anything bad could happen.”

Greyson looked back at the couple and sighed. “Mikah had to use his compulsion ability on two guards back at the casino—it probably drained him.”

Gabriel, who was now pressing his hand to his still bleeding puncture wounds, spun on his heel. “What the fuck? He used his compulsion? That shit is exhausting, and he barely drinks blood as it is, but you have to replenish after. How could you let him do that?”

Mikah wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and shook his head. “No, it’s okay. It was the only way to escape. I should have realized that I was on the edge and given you all fair warning. That would have been the responsible way to handle this.” His gaze shifted to me. He looked pained. “I’m so sorry, Cali.”

I forced a smile, though I was still a little shaky from the whole thing. Well, that and our hasty escape from the casino, which reminded me…

I turned to Greyson and Xavier. “What were you two doing, breaking into the office like that?”

Greyson did a double take. “What are you talking about?”

“We *rescued* you,” Xavier said.

“Uh, no, you didn’t! I was in the middle of a negotiation with Azalea when you burst in and all hell broke loose!”

“Wait, we saw the guards taking you away,” Xavier pressed. “You were in trouble. What were we supposed to do?”

I sighed. Just like always, this was a big misunderstanding. When were my mates going to believe that I could handle things myself, even without the full use of my magic? “My magic flared for a second because of some kind of charm on the slot machine. I accidentally used it to win the jackpot, and it alerted Azalea. I was worried at first, but then I thought, ‘Hey, I’ve got a private audience with the witch whose key we need—maybe I can just ask her?’ so I tried to convince Azalea that we were on the same side.”

Harlow, who had been staying off to the side and watching this new round of chaos unfold, crossed her arms with a laugh. “Yeah, I probably should have warned you that Azalea is kind of a hard-ass. She didn’t become a mogul for no reason.”

I nodded. “That she is. But, as it turns out, she *can* be negotiated with.” I reached around my neck and held out the key.

Greyson’s jaw dropped. “You got it?”

I grinned. “I got it.”

Xavier let out a whoop and gathered me up in his arms, planting a kiss right on my lips and clearly not caring at all that his brother was right there.

“You are a genius!” Xavier said. “How did you even get this?”

*Oh. That.*

My smile dimmed as I hesitated, which, of course, Greyson and Xavier both noticed right away.

*Ugh, could they be just a little less observant?*

I watched Xavier’s mouth twist into a frown. “So, you have to promise me you won’t be mad—and that you won’t freak out, either.”

Greyson’s expression was grave. “You have to know that saying that will only accomplish the opposite. What happened? How did you end up with that key? Don’t tell me she just gave it to you because you asked nicely.”

“Bargaining with a witch like Azalea isn’t cheap,” Harlow added. “What’d it cost you?”

I really wished I could go back to the part where they all thought I was some kind of amazing badass. But they deserved to know. If things didn’t go according to plan, the fallout would affect them too. Or Greyson and Xavier, at least.

I sighed. “I had to make her a Fae promise.”

Xavier’s jaw dropped. “Are you shitting me? No. Don’t tell me you actually agreed to that.”

“Don’t you remember what happened the last time a Fae promise went awry?” Greyson demanded.

Oh boy, did I. Charon and the whole Lakini mess.

“Of course I do!” All of my joy had dried up because Greyson and Xavier were right back to treating me like I was too helpless to protect myself, or to make difficult decisions. “I’m not an idiot. Besides, it was the only way to get her to trust me. Believe me, I learned my lesson about Fae promises the hard way. I didn’t make it lightly.”

“What was the wording?” Greyson asked, though he almost looked like he didn’t want to know.

I swallowed. “I promised her that I would do everything in my power to send away Seluna’s magic from this world… or die trying.”

A deafening silence set in, and I found I couldn’t even look at either of my mates, or their absolutely devastated expressions.

Harlow was the one to break the silence. “That’s, um… That’s a pretty intense Fae promise.”

I winced. “Yeah, it is. But I didn’t really have another choice.”

“Why not?” she asked. “Did Azalea threaten you or something? Did she force you into the Fae promise?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not that. I just—”

“Cali,” Xavier said sharply. “Don’t talk about all of this in front of her—we still don’t really know her.”

Sure, we hardly knew her, but at this point it didn’t matter. The terms of my Fae promise weren’t some big secret—nor was the true threat of failure.

“You can trust me,” Harlow said.

Xavier scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I can see how this promise might seem like a big deal, or even reckless, to all of you, but trust me: if I don’t get rid of this evil magic then I’m as good as dead anyway. At least with the Fae promise, I’m leveraging some benefits out of it.” I held up the key as a reminder.

Greyson made a pained sound and shook his head. “Love, please don’t say that.”

“But it’s the truth,” I said gently. “And it doesn’t help any of us to deny it. If obtaining this key gets us closer to our goal, then that promise is more than worth it.”

Gabriel cleared his throat. “So, um, I’m sorry to interrupt this very serious and meaningful conversation, but we do have some potentially more pressing issues to deal with.”

“Oh god. What now?” I asked.

“There are alligator shifters living underneath the casino.” He paused, seeming to consider something. “Or maybe they just loiter there—I’m not really sure how they choose to spend their time.”

“What? Alligator shifters?” I gasped. “Is that even a *thing*?”

“Apparently. And we really pissed them off, so I would recommend we get the hell out of here pretty soon, if upsetting the owner of the casino wasn’t enough.”

“Wait, are you saying Azalea has a pack of paid”—I made a face as I spat out the words— “*gator shifters* on her staff?”

“It kind of seems that way? I’m not really sure why else they’d be down there.”

“Wow,” Harlow breathed. “I always thought gator shifters were an urban myth that our parents made up to keep us away from the river.”

Gabriel made a face as he looked down at his filthy, still-damp clothes. “Nope. Definitely *not* a myth.”

“Well, let’s get out of here, then,” Harlow said. We all piled into the car, and Greyson shared his, Xavier’s, and Mikah’s part of the story: being detained and trapped in a magically fortified room with no way to contact me or Gabriel.

“I’m so glad we were all able to meet up again,” Greyson said, taking my hand.

I squeezed his hand. “Me too.”

For now, everything was okay. I just didn’t know how much longer that would be the case.

*What’s going to tear me apart first—the ashes or the Fae promise?*

# Episode 3223

**Xavier**

Cali’s news hung over me like a dark cloud, but I forced myself to stay calm, to stay focused on the present instead of all the horrible what-ifs circling around in my head thanks to the Fae promise Cali had agreed to.

“We’d better get out of here if we don’t want Gabe’s gators to come after us,” I said.

Gabe scowled. “They’re not *my* gators.”

“Are you sure? Because you smell just like ‘em.”

He muttered something under his breath about trapdoors and “fucking lizard shifters.” I smirked and slung an arm around Cali’s shoulders. “All good?”

She nodded, but I could see the distance in her gaze. I could tell the promise she had made was weighing on her more than she was likely to let on. Which, to me, was all the more reason to get going. The sooner we found the remaining keys, the sooner we could restore magic to New Orleans, track down the ashes, destroy them, and, if we were lucky, stake a vampire-witch along the way.

Because this deal Cali had made—I couldn’t accept the consequences of failing her. *Not that I ever would.* I tightened my arm around her. She’d put herself at risk, knowingly. *Of course she did. This is Caliana Hart we’re talking about.*

If she didn’t put herself before someone else—or in this case before the whole city’s magic supply—I’d actually be worried that something was going on with her.

Still, I hated any reminder of the huge risk to her life—or the additional risk she’d taken on to get that key.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here,” Cali said.

Gabe raised a hand, and I laughed. “Yes, Gabe?”

“Yeah, where exactly are we supposed to go now? The safe house?”

“Or at least somewhere Gabe can take a shower, or three,” Mikah added.

Gabe scowled at his mate. “I think that’s enough commentary from the peanut gallery, thanks.”

I nodded. “Let’s get out of the open. We’re exposed out here, and I don’t like the idea of us being so vulnerable while we regroup.”

We all piled back into the car—except Harlow.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” Cali asked.

The witch shook her head. “I’m going to go do more reconnaissance on the next key—I have an idea where it might be, but I want to confirm first. Let’s meet up tonight once I have more intel.”

“Sounds good.” Greyson nodded. “See you then.”

I settled into the back seat with Cali, my arm still around her. Hopefully we’d be able to get the last two keys as easily as she’d managed to get this one. I didn’t want her tied into this dangerous Fae promise for a single minute longer than she had to be.

We made our way back to the safe house, and as we walked through the door, a wave of exhaustion slammed into me. When was the last time I’d slept? Eaten? Sat down for longer than a handful of minutes at a time?

I shuffled into the room where I’d haphazardly dropped my things earlier and stared longingly at the bed. Sleep was calling my name, but so was dinner. And a shower. God, I needed a shower. Beyond my own sweat and the blood of those guards clinging to my skin, I was pretty sure some of Gabe’s sewer rot had rubbed off on me. Secondhand stank. Or maybe the scent had just branded itself onto the inside of my nose.

I wished we could go get our stuff from the Airbnb. I’d have had more clothes to choose from, and my toiletries—and we’d have to go back at some point—but while we were being chased by various things, it was probably best to stay away from the place.

*At least this place has hot water and a fully stocked pantry.*

As far as essential staples went, those were the big ones.

Before I could decide between my three most pressing needs—food, shower, and sleep—a knock sounded at the door.

“Xavier?” Cali’s voice called to me. “Can I come in?”

I opened the door, a little confused about why she hadn’t just walked in herself. Then, when I saw the mugs in her hands and the plate of toast balanced on one of her arms like she was a server at a restaurant, I understood.

I took the plate and stepped back so she could come in, looking down at the spread in mild amazement.

“What’s all this?” I asked.

“I thought you might be hungry.”

She wasn’t wrong.

I took a seat on the edge of the bed and downed my toast in three large bites. *Wow.* *I’m even more ravenous than I thought.*

“Thanks,” I said, wiping crumbs from my mouth. “I don’t think I realized how starving I was.”

She nodded and held out one of the mugs of tea. “I figured. I managed to squeeze in a piece too, before Gabriel could eat everything in sight. Apparently, fighting alligator shifters works up an appetite.”

I shrugged. “He’s always been a bottomless pit.”

“I don’t think you two are all that different.” She gave me a knowing smile. “Gabriel’s just better at taking care of his needs. When you get high on adrenaline and focused on a mission, you tend to let those basic needs fall by the wayside.”

“And that’s what you’re doing here, right?” I held up my mug to clink against hers. “Acting as my caretaker.”

“I’m happy to help however I can,” she said simply.

“I’d rather be the one taking care of you.” My brows rose suggestively, and she laughed, hopefully at the joke and not at the idea of me taking care of her. Still, I could tell from the slump of her shoulders and the dark circles beneath her eyes that she was as worn out as the rest of us, maybe even more so. After all, I wasn’t the one with a demon curse hanging over me.

I set my mug down on the tray and patted the mattress next to me. “Come here.”

She set her tea down too and slipped into the open place in my arms.

I held her tight and kissed the top of her head. “You know, what you did with the Fae promise was kind of fucked up.”

She tensed. “It seemed like our best option. I was taking a calculated risk—like you and Greyson do all the time.”

“I never said it wasn’t ballsy.” A smile tugged at my lips. “But still… anytime you make one of those promises, I wish I’d been there to talk to you out of it.”

She smacked my arm playfully. “Then maybe it’s for the best that you weren’t.”

I decided not to argue with that. If I could, I’d go back and make sure she stayed far away from that scheming witch, but it was too late to change anything now. All we could do was look forward and try to make the best of things.

I kissed her head, breathing in her scent. She smelled vaguely of sweat and perfume and Cali. Absolutely mouthwatering. Without Gabe in close quarters, the gator stank was completely gone. Thank god.

Things might’ve been a mess, but right now, with Cali in my arms, all I felt was overwhelming gratitude, and a bone-deep desire to never, ever let her go. I’d hated losing sight of her in that casino. It had been terrifying, not knowing where she was or what was happening to her. And I knew that plenty more danger lay ahead, but for now, I tried to savor the quiet. The knowledge that Cali was right here, next to me, safe and sound.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Cali murmured against my chest.

“I was about to say the same thing to you.”

“We both know a lot about getting into trouble, don’t we?”

I laughed and pulled back just enough to look down at her. “I know you’re strong and can take care of yourself. Believe me, I do. But I will never stop being worried about you when we’re in situations like that.”

She nodded. “I feel the same way about you.”

I leaned down and brushed my lips against hers, intending something sweet and simple. But when our lips met, sparks burst along my skin. Cali wrapped her arms around my neck and deepened the kiss, and we fell backward on the bed, our tea completely forgotten.

I pressed her into the mattress, drinking in the taste of her, savoring the sounds of her breath, the little gasps and moans she made as my hands caressed her body. Her fingers combed through my hair as I kissed her, and I felt her hips cant upward against mine. She was just as hungry as I was, and not for food.

“Xavier,” she breathed against my lips. “I need you.”

“You have me. I’m right here.”

This was my mate, the love of my life, the woman I would’ve done anything to protect.

And now that she was here, now that we had this moment, I intended to make the very most of it.

# Episode 3224

When we’d arrived back at the safe house, getting hot and heavy had been pretty much the last thing on my mind. All I’d wanted was to eat something, and preferably get some space from the sewer smell hanging around Gabriel.

And then Xavier had kissed me, and suddenly all I could think about was how much I needed him.

Xavier’s lips trailed a hot line down my throat, and I let out a gasp. I felt hot all over and so desperate to feel more of him. All of him. Kissing wasn’t nearly enough.

I sat up suddenly and crawled into his lap, tugging off his shirt and throwing it into the corner. Then I pushed him down and straddled him, desperate to feel his hardness right where I needed it most.

“Fuck, Cali,” he moaned as I rocked my hips against his.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” I managed.

He chuckled. “So are you.”

We needed to fix that, and fast. I reached up to tug my shirt over my head, and I had it over my breasts when the door suddenly burst open and Gabriel walked in.

“Hey, guys, we need to—oh shit! Sorry!” He threw a hand over his eyes.

I squealed and practically leapt off Xavier so I could tug the blankets up over me, even though I was still fully clothed—minus the shirt that was still riding up around my breasts. I tugged the shirt down. “Gabriel! What the hell?”

“I see my timing is impeccable as always.”

Xavier sat up with a growl. “What the hell? Have you ever heard of knocking?”

He grinned, clearly not the least bit repentant. “You guys should, uh… finish up. We have to go meet Harlow soon.”

“Oh my god,” I muttered. My face was on fire. I couldn’t for the life of me remember the last time I’d felt so embarrassed.

And then, to make matters worse, Gabriel *lingered.*

“Gabe, if you don’t get the fuck out of here, I’m gonna finish you,” Xavier warned.

“That’s nice of you to offer, but I don’t think Mikah would appreciate that.” He winked. “I’ll make sure Greyson doesn’t come up here. Enjoy, you two!”

He left Xavier and me to stew in the awkward silence.

He heaved a sigh. “Can I safely assume the moment’s over?”

I nodded. “Dead and gone.”

In the absence of all that wanting, guilt rushed in. I should have been focusing on the mission, not my hormones.

Xavier dug around for some new clothes, finally changing out of his casino outfit, and we headed downstairs, where the others were waiting for us. I hadn’t realized just how much time Xavier and I had spent talking and… doing other things.

I did a double take at Greyson to see if he was upset, but it seemed like Gabriel had kept mum about what he’d just walked in on. I honestly hadn’t realized he had it in him.

“Ready to go?” Mikah asked.

I nodded, and we all piled in the car. It still had some dirt and grime from our casino adventures, along with a subtle sewer smell, but I wasn’t about to complain. Up front, Mikah was teasing Gabriel about the smell.

“I showered *thrice*, thank you. It’s the car now.”

A smile tugged at my lips as I pulled out my phone and texted Artemis.

*How’s it going? Are you guys doing okay?*

I anxiously waited for the reply—it felt like ages had passed since our whole group was together. To my relief, Artemis texted back immediately.

*We’re fine. We’re going to go see if we can catch Adair when he meets up with someone tonight.*

My brows rose. *That’s great! I hope you finally get to talk to him.*

She sent back a crossed-fingers emoji. With how long we’d been separated during our time here in New Orleans, it was great to find out Artemis and Rishika were okay and were on their way to meet Adair. I knew how much it meant to Artemis to finally get a chance to meet a member of her long-lost Dark Fae family. I hoped this opportunity was everything she was hoping for.

*What’s your status?* she asked.

I frowned. I didn’t even know where to begin. I’d be able to catch her up in person, with time. But over text? That didn’t sound like such a good idea. I knew she’d freak out when I told her about the Fae promise I’d made to Azalea—and probably rightfully so—but that would be a whole thing that I didn’t really have the time or energy to deal with right now. Plus, I didn’t want to distract her when she was so close to finally finding and meeting Adair.

In the end, I settled for something short and simple.

*Got two out of four keys. Also, FYI, alligator shifters exist.*

Those three little dots appeared in our message thread for a long time, then disappeared, then reappeared. I imagined she was trying to wrap her head around this new information. I couldn’t say I didn’t feel the same. I’d always thought shifters only existed for, you know, *fuzzy* apex predators. Like wolves and coyotes and bears and bobcats and stuff.

*What does a gator person even look like?*

A crease appeared between my eyes as I, too, tried to wrap my head around that idea. But as curious as I was about the concept of a pack of reptile shifters living in the sewers beneath Azalea’s casino, I didn’t really want to meet them. My life wasn’t worth a few (okay, a boatload of) questions about this new species of shifter.

Finally, Artemis’s text came through. It was surprisingly brief.

*Noted about the gator shifters. Will keep an eye out.*

My thumbs hovered over my phone for a moment as I considered telling her more about what had happened today, but I ultimately decided against it and stowed my phone in my pocket. I didn’t want to distract her. We could catch each other up on everything properly later.

We drove back into the city and looked for a parking spot along one of the big touristy streets.

“Are you sure you want to park here?” I asked as Gabriel scanned the streets for a spot. “It seems like we’d have an easier time finding a spot on a less populated street.”

“I’m sure,” he said easily.

“Parking here, where it’s nice and crowded, will help us blend in,” Mikah added.

After some searching, we found a spot and climbed out of the car. As we made our way down the street, I took in the scenery, the street performers and shops and restaurants. The weather was lovely, and the sidewalks were crowded with people laughing and drinking.

Soon, as we made our way down one of the side streets, the voices of the tourists faded behind us.

We arrived at the meeting place and found Harlow waiting for us outside.

I glanced up at the building, which looked like an old, run-of-the-mill diner.

“What are we doing here?” I asked.

“The third elder witch is known to frequent this place,” she said.

I looked through the large windows in the front of the restaurant. Only a smattering of patrons were inside, along with a handful of staff members. They all looked like normal human regulars, but then again, Azalea had looked normal too.

“Which one is she?” I asked.

“Oh, she’s not in the diner,” Harlow said mysteriously. “Follow me.”

I frowned, confused. We’d come to the diner because the elder witch allegedly hung out there, but she wasn’t actually in the diner?

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked, clearly not pleased by this new puzzle either.

“It’s easier if I show you,” Harlow said. “C’mon, you want to keep asking questions, or find this witch?”

She led us through the diner and back toward the kitchen.

“Does the witch work here?” I asked.

Harlow laughed and shook her head. “Not quite.”

We followed her into the kitchen, where none of the staff seemed surprised to see a group of six strangers walking through.

We stopped at a large metal door, and Harlow knocked four separate beats. A small window opened, and I was just able to make out a person glaring at us from the other side of the door.

“Password?” he grunted.

Harlow leaned in close and whispered “siren song” into my ear. Taking that as my cue, I stammered it back to the bouncer.

The window slammed shut, and for a moment I wondered if I had said the right thing. But soon enough, the door opened for us.

“Welcome,” the bouncer said.

*But where exactly are we?*

Harlow gave a satisfied sigh. “All right, this is as far as I can take you. Ask for Sariah. That’s the witch.”

She didn’t give any of us a chance to ask questions as she stalked away. Guess she was pretty serious about not wanting to be seen with any of us. Xavier gave a shrug, and the rest of us continued to file into the club.

We tracked down a narrow, dark stairwell and into a speakeasy. I looked around, blinking in surprise. The contrast between the speakeasy and the dingy diner above couldn’t have been more pronounced.

“It’s supernaturals only here,” Mikah said with a sniff, and I could tell he was sensing the place out.

I smiled, taking in the space. “This place is awesome. So old-fashioned. Guess they go all out in the Big Easy.”

We headed to the bar, and Gabriel ordered us a round of the “special cocktail.” While the bartender mixed our drinks, he casually leaned against the bar. “Is Sariah singing tonight?”

The bartender shook his head. “Hasn’t been around for a couple days.”

Gabriel cursed under his breath.

“But that’s her in that photo there,” the bartender said with a gesture toward the wall of framed portraits on the far side of the bar.

I followed his line of sight to the photo smack dead in the center of the wall. The picture he’d indicated was of a glamorous and gorgeous Black jazz singer.

*So, this is our next mark*.

The bartender passed out our drinks, and as I went to take a sip, a woman appeared next to me and grabbed my wrist. “You looking for Sariah?”

# Episode 3225

**Artemis**

I shoved my phone back into my pocket as the motorboat raced over the river.

“How’s Cali doing?” Rishika asked. “Is their search going okay?”

Briefly, I considered filling her on the alligator shifter revelation. *Best to save that for later, after we’ve regrouped with Cali.* Perhaps she could answer some of the dozen or so questions I had about that particular piece of information.

“It sounds like she’s getting stuff done,” I said. “They’ve got two keys already.”

Rishika’s brows rose. “Wow. Do they need backup?”

“It doesn’t sound like it.”

“Good.” She nodded. “That’s good.”

I turned my gaze down the river, in the direction we were heading. Restlessness and anticipation itched beneath my skin. I couldn’t believe I was on my way to intercept my uncle. After all the time I’d spent wondering about him, imagining what it would be like when I finally got to meet him, all the questions I wanted to ask him, now it was finally happening.

This was the first time we had any kind of solid lead on Adair’s whereabouts. I wasn’t going to miss this opportunity.

I didn’t realize I was bouncing my leg in anxious anticipation until Rishika put a calming hand on my thigh.

She took my hand and twined our fingers together. “It’s going to be okay. I’m with you, no matter what happens. Okay?”

I nodded, then swallowed roughly as the far shore approached. This was it.

Once we idled up to the dock, Nikkos tied the boat up and we deftly climbed out on our own. This time, he knew better than to offer to help us with getting out of the boat.

“So, what information do we have, exactly?” I pressed.

“All I have is the time and location.” He sighed. “I have no idea who Adair’s meeting or why.”

I nodded. “Fair enough.”

Still, I wished I knew what had compelled Adair to meet up at a cemetery, of all places. *Why the hell do so many people hang out in cemeteries in this city? There are plenty of other places to go*.

The last cemetery I’d visited before coming to New Orleans was the one I’d fought revenants in. It wasn’t exactly the best memory, and I hated being constantly slapped in the face with it with every cemetery we visited. Why anyone would spend more time than they needed to in one of these places was a mystery to me.

But it seemed like New Orleans revered its cemeteries in a way that other cities didn’t.

“When we find Adair, our first objective is to convince him we’re just here to talk,” I reminded the others. “It’s taken a long time to get a lead like this, and I don’t want to spook him.”

Nikkos nodded. “I agree. Though I have to admit, I’m a little worried Adair will be on such high alert that he won’t be sticking around to chat.” He eyed me for a moment. “Maybe you should take the lead on this. You say you’re his family, after all.”

I frowned. Though I hadn’t lied when I’d told him Adair was family, I also hadn’t been truthful, exactly, about the nature of my relationship with him. For instance, I hadn’t told Nikkos that I’d never met Adair before. That the only photo I’d ever seen of him was the one Nikkos himself had shown me.

Nikkos was probably the far superior choice to speak with Adair first. But I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t have a close connection with Adair outside of our shared bloodline. I still didn’t know if I could fully trust Nikkos, and who knew what he’d do with that information?

So I nodded. “I think we should all go in prepared for anything.”

There. That was decisive, diplomatic, and gave exactly zero information about my connection—or lack thereof—with Adair.

Nikkos shrugged. “Of course. I’m always prepared for any situation.”

My brow creased. *Maybe I shouldn’t read too much into that.* If I was feeling on the paranoid side, I’d have said that was a threat. But I’d decided to trust him—for now. Literally for this single step of meeting Adair at the cemetery. And then, after that, if Nikkos continued to prove himself not to be an issue, I’d trust him for another step.

It was the only approach I could come up with that didn’t drive me crazy with overthinking. I had bigger things to worry about right now.

Besides, I was obviously using him to get to Adair. I knew that, and I was certain he knew it too. There were no delusions about this arrangement, or our respective roles in it.

And if Nikkos was using me too, for something I hadn’t signed up for, then we’d cross that bridge when we got to it.

We approached the entrance to the cemetery, and Nikkos whispered a series of numbers to us.

I frowned. “Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

Rishika pointed to the burial plot nearest to us. “They must be grave markers.”

Following that logic, we made our way through the various tombs until we found the meeting place. I glanced around—there were lots of potential hiding spots nearby, but there were also a thousand different escape routes. Also, anyone approaching would be able to see this place from at least fifty feet out.

“I don’t think we should stand right here on the meeting spot,” I said. “It’s too easy for Adair to see us and run away.”

Nikkos nodded. “Agreed.”

We all found different hiding places around the rendezvous point. I went high and climbed up onto a tomb a few plots away to get the bird’s eye view. My belly flat against the roof of the tomb, I watched as clouds gathered and darkness swept across the sky.

*Looks like rain. Great. Nothing better than waiting around while getting drenched.*

The cemetery was extra spooky without the sunlight, and a chill slipped down my spine.

We waited in our respective hiding places for what felt like hours. And then, finally, I spotted movement—heading right toward us.

I looked toward the spot where Rishika was hiding. Even though I couldn’t see my girlfriend among the various tombs, I knew she was there. She was just that good.

Finally, the person reached the meeting spot.

*Is that Adair? If it is, he’s sure making a lot of noise. Not very Fae-like.*

Once the person arrived at the rendezvous, another figure emerged from the shadows, completely silent on their feet as they approached the meeting spot. My gut instinct was panic.

*I didn’t even see that person arrive. When the hell did they get here? And how did they do it without me seeing them?*

Then, after the initial shock wore off, I realized—with another jolt that went straight to my heart—that the dark and silent newcomer had to be my uncle.

I watched, my eyes fixed on him as he spoke with the other person. He was tall, I realized. With silver hair. The details, so simple and obvious that anyone who saw him in passing would be privy to them, felt momentous to me.

*He’s here. I see him.*

But I couldn’t hear him. Their voices were so low, I couldn’t make them out.

I crept as close to the edge of the tomb as I could without giving myself away. This was it! Adair was not twenty feet away. Finally, I was going to see his face. Talk to him. Connect to this long-missing piece of my family.

I pushed myself closer to the edge, desperate to make out his voice or some other details of his appearance, and in my excitement, I kicked a handful of pebbles loose from the top of the tomb. They clattered to the ground, loud as thunder in my ears.

Adair’s head jerked up, his eyes zeroed in on me, and our gazes locked for the space of three heartbeats.

*His eyes are blue. Just like mine.*

And then, without warning, he took off.

I didn’t hesitate. “Wait!” I cried, tearing after him, leaping over mausoleum rooftops and dodging headstones. “I just want to talk!” I snapped over to Rishika, barely able to keep the panic out of my voice. We were so close! I couldn’t lose him now. “He’s heading north!”

I’d never run so fast in my life. I spotted him through the tombs and diverted my course, chasing him to the edge of the cemetery. He disappeared, and by the time I caught him again, he’d scaled the wall.

“Please stop!” I shouted. “I’m not here to harm you! I’m your family!”

I knew my words had some effect on him. He lurched to stop right at the top of the wall, but he didn’t turn around. I couldn’t see his expression, but he was clearly hesitating.

“Please,” I begged. “Please, talk to me.”

For a long string of seconds, it seemed like he might. Like he would turn around, jump down, and we’d have the reunion I’d been dreaming of for so long.

And then he leapt off the wall, escaping down the other side.

By the time I’d scaled it after him, it was too late.

Adair was gone.

“Gods dammit!” I dropped back down inside the cemetery, and something crunched beneath my foot. I moved my foot to reveal a notebook. Frowning, my chest still heaving, I picked it up just as Rishika reached me.

“He spooked?” she asked.

I nodded and started flipping through the notebook, which was full of neatly written notes about various cemeteries, burial dates, and the names of families buried in them.

“What is that?” Rishika asked.

“He dropped it. It looks like research notes.” I looked up at Rishika. “But why would he be researching New Orleans cemeteries?”

# Episode 3226

My eyes narrowed as I looked at the woman.

*Where the hell did you come from?*

She looked like a middle-aged human in a T-shirt and jeans, which would have fit in perfectly at the diner we’d just walked through, but it was way too casual for the speakeasy.

I looked her up and down. “It’s possible we were hoping to find her here. What do you know?”

“A word of advice: Sariah isn’t someone to mess with. If you want to find her, you’d better know what you’re getting into.”

Who did this lady think she was? More importantly, who did she think *I* was?

“I’m aware that Sariah is powerful,” I said, “but I have no choice but to try to meet up with her. It’s important. If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t be here.”

The woman nodded. “She was supposed to be here tonight, but I heard she got a visit from one of the other elders and took off. Seemed like she was in a big hurry, too. Whatever they had to say must’ve really spooked her.”

*Shit shit shit.*

My heart fell. How were we supposed to find her now? This was the best lead Harlow had been able to come up with in such a short amount of time, and even then, this seemed like the place Sariah visited regularly. The place she went when she wasn’t trying to hide. How the hell would we track her down when she was actively trying to stay off our radar?

My panic must have shown on my face, because the woman pulled out a slim cigarette and lit it. She took a couple puffs before casually adding, “But you’re in luck. I see a lot.”

I leapt at this opportunity. “You know where she might be?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged, rubbing her fingers together. “My memory’s a little hazy.”

*Oh*. *She wants a bribe.*

Well, today was *her* lucky day, because I wasn’t above greasing her palms to get a lead on Sariah. Maybe this made me an easy mark, but I was too desperate to care. I had a demon curse and a Fae promise hanging over my head. Getting rid of those two things and getting my life back was worth any amount of money, as far as I was concerned.

I turned to Xavier. “I need your wallet.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Just give it to me.”

He sighed and did as I asked. I pulled out a couple hundred dollar bills and passed them over to the woman.

“Cali, what the hell?” Xavier demanded.

I ignored him. “Where’s Sariah?”

The woman took the bills and tucked them into her bra. “I’ve seen her go to this place along the north edge of the city, bordering the lake.”

“Okay, what place?”

The woman smiled and took another puff of her cigarette. With her free hand, she rubbed her fingers together again.

I ground my molars together. If this lead didn’t take us somewhere useful, I was going to sic Artemis on her. I pulled out another hundred dollar bill. Next to me, Xavier sighed but said nothing.

I held out the bill, and the woman reached for it. I pulled it out of her reach at the last second. “The name of the place, please.”

“It’s a lighthouse. The only one you’ll see along the north shore.”

Then she grabbed the bill and tucked it into her bra with the others.

I frowned. “How do I know this information is good?”

She leaned forward, and the scent of cigarette smoke washed over me as the woman scowled. “Because that bitch and the other elders turned off my magic. I don’t need to be loyal to someone who does something like that.”

Her words made my eyes widen. I knew from Harlow that lots of witches in the city weren’t happy with the elders’ decision to turn off all magic, but this witch seemed downright pissed off.

I kind of wished she could have just told me her magic had been taken away from the get-go. I would have been a lot more sympathetic.

*There’s a lot of inter-witch politics going on in this city that I probably shouldn’t get involved with.*

“Thank you,” I said to the witch.

She just shrugged and climbed off her stool, then made her way out of the speakeasy. *Did she seriously just come here to look for someone who was tracking down Sariah?*

The coincidence nagged at me, but I ignored it. This was good, *expensive* information. And, more importantly, it was our next step to finding the third key. That was all that mattered.

Pushing Xavier’s considerably lighter wallet at him, I turned to the rest of the group. “I know where we need to go next.”

Mikah’s brows rose. “Oh? How’d you manage that?”

I relayed my bribed conversation with the witch. “According to her, we can find Sariah at a lighthouse on the north shore.”

Gabriel clapped me on the back. “Great job, Cali! I can see why these two keep you around.” He winked.

I smiled. In reality, I was very proud of myself for getting such good information for us, and so quickly too. My newfound decisiveness had come in handy when I’d met with Azalea, too. While the guys had been fighting off gator shifters and freeing themselves from the casino prison, I’d calmly made a deal and acquired the key. And this new intel I’d gotten from that woman was just more proof for Xavier and Greyson that I was just as capable as they were.

I called Harlow. She picked up right away. “Do you know anything about a lighthouse on the north shore of the city?” I asked.

She sounded seemingly puzzled, then understanding dawned. “Of course! I should have thought of that! Some of the city witches use it as a place to call on nature to perform spells and ceremonies. It’s really well guarded, though. It’s going to be nearly impossible to get in, especially if Sariah still has access to her magic like the other two.”

I relayed Harlow’s message. Greyson took a long pull from his drink and set the empty glass on the bar. “That’s just something we’ll have to worry about when we get there.”

Xavier touched my arm. “You did well, tiger.”

I smiled. “I’m just glad things are finally going smoothly.”

God knew we could use a break.

Suddenly, Mikah cut in. “Um, I think we should go.” His eyes were locked on something over my shoulder, and I turned to see what he was staring at. Across the bar, some kind of back door had just opened. Half a dozen huge guys were making their way over.

I ducked behind Xavier, pretending to be interested in my drink as I subtly watched the guys talk to the bartender.

Then the bartender pointed right at me and the guys.

*Shit.*

“Shit,” Gabriel cursed. “Looks like that bartender is on Team Sariah.”

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Greyson said.

We headed up the staircase leading toward the exit, but when we reached the top, the bouncer was standing in our way, his arms crossed over his chest. Intimidating didn’t begin to describe him. I gulped.

Then, I pasted on a smile. “Excuse us! We were just leaving!”

“You’re not going anywhere.” His eyes narrowed. “You really shouldn’t have come here looking for Sariah.”

My mouth went dry. *What are they going to do to us?* Azalea had a built-in prison and sub-level sewers teaming with alligator shifters. What did Sariah’s favorite haunt have in store for a bunch of out-of-towners asking the wrong questions?

Greyson stepped in front of me, his hands raised. “I think there’s been a misunderstanding. We don’t mean Sariah any harm. We just want to talk to her and ask her a couple of questions—that’s all. You have my word.”

The bouncer scoffed. “Your word’s supposed to mean something to me?”

“Greyson,” I whispered, tugging at his shirt.

If the bouncer wasn’t bad enough, the six other burly guys had arrived, pressing in behind us, and now we were blocked into the narrow stairwell.

“The thing is,” the bouncer continued, “when Sariah left, she told us to look out for a bunch of werewolves who are rumored to be going around the city, taking out elder witches. My bet is that’s you. You came to the wrong city and messed with the wrong coven.”

I scowled. *That’s so backward! We’re not taking out anyone! We’re trying to save the magic here in this city—and that includes this coven’s. We’re not the bad guys here!*

But there wasn’t really time to explain any of that. We were good and trapped, and the guys blocking us in looked pretty punchy.

I glanced up at Greyson, my heart in my throat. He squeezed my hand. “Stay behind me, love.”

And then he half-shifted and lunged at the bouncer.

# Episode 3227

**Greyson**

*I’m really starting to think we won’t be able to get through a single item on our to-do list in this godforsaken city without having to fight for our lives.*

If my mate’s life weren’t on the line—in several ways—I might not have minded. But now it was starting to piss me off.

I grabbed the bouncer by the throat and threw him at the group behind us. They fell in a tangle of white, pasty limbs, and the bouncer didn’t get back up. Unfortunately, five of the other bruisers did. They rushed at us, and while one of them went on the offense, another one jumped on my back.

In a tight space like this, with almost ten people fighting at once, it was nothing short of absolute chaos. Next to me, Xavier was beating the hell out of one of the security guards. I tried to keep an eye on Cali, who was pressed up against the wall behind me, her fists up as a paltry defense. With how tightly packed we were, I was afraid of accidentally hitting her.

I tried to keep my back to her, to block her from the guys trying to pummel us into the ground, but dammit, it was so hard when I barely had enough room to move.

The bouncer I’d thrown was back on his feet, and Mikah was grappling with him, using his vampire strength. But the bouncer was not to be underestimated. He knocked Mikah out of the way then lunged toward me, baring his fangs.

“They’re vamps!” I called out.

Xavier stepped in the way of the bouncer, partially shifting and slashing the guy’s chest with a razor-sharp handful of claws.

“I thought I smelled something rotten,” Gabriel piped up.

“Hey!” Mikah cried, trying to pick off one of the vamps at the end of the row. “Not cool!”

“Oh, not you, *babycakes*,” Gabriel called back. “You smell like roses and a fresh mountain glen!”

Mikah rolled his eyes a split second before he had to duck to dodge another punch. The bouncer pushed past Xavier and lunged. With Cali behind me and Sariah’s other vamp guards pressing in on the other sides, I had nowhere to go.

The bouncer’s fangs sank into my arm, and I let out a snarl as I kneed him in the gut. He was a strong little bastard, with jaws of steel, and he didn’t let up. He sucked down my blood so fast I felt it in my head, but I tried to ignore the sensation as I kicked at him.

“Get—the—fuck—off—me!”

He wasn’t going anywhere—fucking *parasite*. I felt the blood leave my face and my knees go weak.

Suddenly, Xavier was there. He grabbed the vamp by the scruff of his neck and yanked him off me with an agonizing *pop!*

“Fuck,” I groaned, grabbing my arm. “Think you can pull ‘em off without ripping through my arm next time? That fucking hurt.”

“You’re welcome.” Xavier punched the vampire in the face. His nose crunched, and blood—mostly mine, probably—sprayed everywhere.

I stumbled a bit, but Cali was there to catch me around the middle. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, though the world had taken on a distinctly hazy quality. I blinked slowly, trying to bring the world back into focus. By the time things settled, the rest of the vampires were lying on the floor, groaning and bleeding. One of them looked dead.

*Holy shit, they did it.*

I shook myself. “Come on. Let’s move!”

We rushed out of the speakeasy and through the diner, in case another wave of homicidal vampires was heading our way, but nobody stopped us. We practically dove into the car, with Cali and me upfront, and took off, following Harlow’s directions to the lighthouse.

The sky was dark with clouds, and thunder rumbled in the distance as we approached the coast.

Cali looked out at the sky through the windshield. “I don’t like the feel of this storm.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s just… I don’t know. An instinct? But it feels like the air is electric somehow. Like we shouldn’t be out here.”

I frowned. *Well, that doesn’t sound great.* I’d learned to trust Cali’s Fae instincts, even if we didn’t always know the reason why they were telling her what they were telling her, but we were also in a hell of a time crunch here. Turning back didn’t feel like an option.

*I just hope her instinct isn’t witch-related, but we should be on our guard, just in case.*

A light drizzle started pelting the windshield as Xavier sat forward and pointed. “I see it. There’s the light!”

There it was, indeed. The window on top of the lighthouse turned in a circle, casting its brightness across the storm-darkened skies.

“Let’s try to stay together this time,” I said. “We need to be ready for whatever defenses Sariah might have at this place.”

We parked a ways off from the lighthouse. Even if we were exposing ourselves to the elements, it felt safer to approach on foot. I rubbed at my arm, which was still stinging from the vampire bite. I was still a little woozy from the vampire venom, too.

“You okay?” Xavier asked. “You’re walking like a drunk. Do you need to sit this one out?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine.” There was no way in hell I was letting them run up against the witch without me coming along as backup.

He frowned but nodded. “Tell me if something changes, okay?”

“I will. But you don’t need to worry.”

It didn’t take long to hoof it to the lighthouse, and as we stared up at the towering structure, Mikah shook his head.

“I don’t like this. Why isn’t anyone guarding the place?”

Gabriel shrugged. “Maybe she doesn’t know we’re coming?”

I shook my head. “Someone had warned her to leave the speakeasy, and there’s no way her friends at the speakeasy haven’t called her by now. She had plenty of time to make preparations while we drove out here.”

“Maybe all the defenses are inside—oh!” Suddenly, Cali was pushed back a couple feet by some invisible force.

I hurried to her side. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, looking a little dazed and confused. “I’m fine.”

Mikah lifted a hand and pressed it against the air in front of him. “Shit. It’s a magical barrier.”

I ground my teeth. “Fucking great. If it’s anything like Big Mac’s, then it will be almost impenetrable.”

“Key word: ‘almost.’ Try going toward the water,” Harlow suggested.

We all turned to look at her. Between the fight with the vampires and hauling ass over here, I hadn’t realized she’d made it here at the same time as us. “You want us to jump in the water?”

“Sometimes barrier spells need to be rooted on the land, which might mean that the spell would be weaker by the shore where there’s no land to latch onto.”

I sighed. I didn’t want to get anywhere near that water—after the riverboat fiasco, I’d had more than enough—but what else were we supposed to do? “It’s worth a try.”

I took a step toward the water, but Harlow shook her head. “I’m going to stay here.”

“You should come with us. You have valuable insight into the witches.”

But Harlow wouldn’t budge, and Cali took my arm. “She needs to stay safe after all this is done, remember?”

I nodded, then turned back to Harlow. “Stay with the car, just in case we need another quick getaway like at the casino.”

“You got it.” She started walking back to the car as the rest of us made our way toward the shore, keeping the same diameter out from the lighthouse so as not to accidentally get zapped by the barrier.

We stood on the rocky shore, and the water sloshed up, spraying our faces and drenching our clothes.

I lifted a hand to the barrier. I could still feel it, but as I pressed more firmly against it, it seemed more… elastic, somehow.

“I think if we all push against it, then we could maybe break through,” I said.

“Should I try to Fae blast it?” Cali asked.

“Let’s try it my way first. I don’t want you to get hurt by your magic—it could bounce off the barrier.”

Cali nodded. The other wolves and I semi-shifted, and, along with Cali and Mikah, we pressed against the barrier. The barrier pushed back, making my muscles strain with the effort. I’d almost managed to get my hand through when a voice echoed down from above.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

I looked up to see a Black woman standing at the top of the lighthouse, silhouetted for a moment in the lantern as it passed by her frame. Then lightning flashed, and the rain seemed to pour down even harder.

The wind howled as I kept pushing against the barrier.

“Don’t let up!” I cried. “We’re almost through!” The wind and rain stung my eyes, but I didn’t stop.

Suddenly, a roar echoed behind me and, just as I lifted my head to look, a giant wave crested over our heads. It crashed down on us, and my feet were swept out from under me as the wave carried me away.

# Episode 3228

“GREYSON!” I screamed, watching in horror as he was pulled out into the crashing water. I sprinted to the water’s edge and scanned the water, looking for any sign of him—any bubble or ripple or splash—but there was nothing. I took a deep breath, getting ready to dive in, but then a pair of strong arms gripped me from behind, pulling me backward.

“Let go of me!” I shrieked, fighting against the arms that held me fast. “I have to go! Greyson! Hang on! GREYSON!”

“Cali, stop,” a low voice said in my ear. It was Mikah. “I can’t let you go. There’s no way you’re strong enough to fight the waves.”

“But Greyson—” I pleaded, nearly sobbing. “Please let me go!”

“He’s an Alpha, Cali. Please.” He tightened his grip on me as I tried to lunge toward the water. “Just think. He’s strong. He’s *strong*, Cali.”

His voice was low and soothing, and as he spoke, the words he was saying started to sink into my frenzied brain. But then I heard another yell that made my whole body freeze with shock.

“Xavier! *Wait!*” Gabriel yelled after Xavier, who was sprinting toward the water.

And I watched in frozen terror as my other mate dove headfirst into the crashing waves, swimming after his brother.

“You’ve got to be shitting me with this,” Mikah muttered. He let go of me, and he and Gabriel started toward the water.

“*There!*” I screamed, my heart leaping into my throat. I pointed into the storm-tossed sea. “There they are! Mikah! Gabriel! You have to do something!”

Mikah and Gabriel followed the direction of my finger and saw Greyson in the water, fighting hard against the waves. And there, a short distance away, Xavier was swimming toward him, his strong, sure strokes carrying him quickly through the frothy water.

I held my hands together, clasping them so hard my fingers started to ache. *Just keep going. Just keep going. Just keep going.*

I could see that Xavier’s strength was starting to wane, and his strokes got slower and slower. I fought back the desperate urge to mind link with my mates. I wanted to tell them to hold on, and to be strong, and that I loved them, but I didn’t want to risk distracting either of them. If I lost both of them…

I let out a breath as Xavier reached Greyson and grasped his arm. Xavier started back toward the shore, towing Greyson slowly behind him. I could hardly see as I squinted toward where I knew they were. The rain was only getting worse, and the sea seemed so angry as it tossed and frothed.

*Just keep going. Just keep going. Please keep going.*

I was petrified that the undertow was going to suddenly change direction and pull both of the men I loved out into the endless water, taking them forever.

I knew Mikah was right, that I didn’t stand a chance against the freaking OCEAN, but I *hated* standing there, waiting for them to return, when I wanted to help them so badly, I could’ve cried.

A hand settled on my shoulder, and I looked up to see Mikah’s dark eyes looking down at me.

“They’re okay, you know. They’re going to be okay. Just watch.”

I didn’t reply. I just kept my eyes pinned to my mates, who were still struggling against the waves, paddling back to shore.

“Fuck it,” Gabriel muttered. “I’m going in after them.” He moved to pull off his shirt.

“And if you get pulled out into the ocean with the others?” Mikah asked. “Then what are we going to do?”

Gabriel glared at the vampire, looking pissed that Mikah was preventing him from doing what he wanted, but he listened to his mate and stayed on dry land.

My heart felt like it was being pummeled by the waves as I watched my mates struggle toward the shore, but when they were close enough that I could see their exhausted faces through the rain, I gave a grateful sigh.

“*Now* can I go help them?” Gabriel demanded.

“Fine,” Mikah agreed.

Gabriel waded into the frothing surf and helped Xavier pull an exhausted-looking Greyson from the water. Gabriel had to put his arm under Greyson to pull him the rest of the way onto shore. When they were both safely back on land, they dropped limply onto the sand.

I raced toward them and threw an arm around each of their necks. The waves were still coming, and one splashed over me as I crouched on the sand, but I didn’t care. I was just so grateful that they were both okay, I couldn’t even speak.

“Why the hell did you dive in like that?” Gabriel was gasping, glaring at Xavier.

“He was bitten at the speakeasy,” Xavier said, spitting salt water from his mouth.

“*Seriously?*” Gabriel asked.

“Yeah. I knew he wasn’t at full strength,” Xavier said.

I pulled back to look at him in surprise, then turned to Greyson, searching him quickly for the injury.

But Greyson shook his head and pushed me away, albeit weakly. “I’m fine,” he gasped out. “I’m fine. I could have gotten back on my own.”

Xavier snorted a laugh. “How many times am I going to say ‘you’re welcome’ without a ‘thank you’?”

Greyson looked over at his brother, his grey eyes turning serious. “Thank you, Xavier.”

Xavier blinked in surprise, then cleared his throat. “Yeah, okay. Don’t worry about it,” he said gruffly.

My heart had gone through quite a lot in a short space of time, but now it felt like it was going to burst. The brothers might have had their own obstacles—myself included—but they cared about each other. It was always good to see.

“Thank you, Xavier,” I told him too. He gave me a small smile.

Gabriel looked around quickly. “Wait, where’s Mikah?”  
 I glanced around, suddenly realizing that Mikah was no longer standing with us. What the hell? He’d just been standing next to me!

“Mikah!” Gabriel called, standing and looking around the rain-washed beach. “Mikah, where are you? *Mikah?*”

“Where would he go?” I asked, confused. “Wasn’t he just right here with us?”

“He wouldn’t go anywhere without saying something,” Gabriel said, his eyes frantic.

I heard a strange hum in the air and looked around, wondering what could be making a noise like that. But there was nothing nearby that looked like it was responsible for the sudden low-fi tone.

I turned back to Gabriel. “Can you try mind linking with him?” I asked.

Gabriel nodded, then looked down at the sand, concentrating. After a moment he looked back up, and his expression was panicked. “He’s not replying. Where the fuck did he go? I’m trying to find his scent, but it’s all fucking sea air and shit.”

I looked around the beach, but I was torn between staying with my two exhausted mates who were still recovering from their ocean dip and helping Gabriel look for Mikah.

Xavier struggled to his feet. “Let’s go look for him.”

Greyson nodded and started to push himself up from the sand. He was struggling, and I slipped my shoulder under his arm, steadying him as he stood. Then I slipped my arm around his waist to support him.

We started up the beach, calling Mikah’s name, but our voices were lost to the wind. The rain was still falling fast, and it was hard to see more than a couple of feet ahead of us. I was starting to feel hopeless when Xavier stopped in his tracks.

“*There!*” he bellowed, pointing.

I looked forward, squinting into the nearly sideways rain, and gasped. It was Mikah all right, and he was almost at the front door of the lighthouse.

“What the hell?” I asked. “How did he do that? How did he get past the barrier?”

“Mikah!” Gabriel called, racing forward. “*Mikah!* What are you doing?”

But Mikah didn’t turn at the sound of his mate’s voice.

Gabriel sprinted toward him, which meant that when he hit the barrier, it was at full speed. He let out a moan of pain as he was thrown back by his own force. He scrambled to his feet and banged his fists against the barrier. “Mikah! Mikah! Turn around, man! I’m right here. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

We all stared in shock as the door of the lighthouse swung open. Sariah stood, framed in the doorway, the warm golden light from inside spilling out around her. She stepped into the storm, and the wind whipped her dress and cloak around her. She leaned toward Mikah and reached out her hand.

I didn’t breathe as I watched the witch stroke a finger down Mikah’s still face.

Then she turned her sharp gaze directly on us and spoke, her voice somehow crystal clear to my ears through the howling wind and rain. “Now you will pay the price for coming after me.”

# Episode 3229

**Artemis**

I stared in confusion at the notebook in my hands, baffled as I leafed through page after page. I couldn’t make heads or tails of the random notes. They didn’t even seem to have been written in any kind of order.

I looked up at Rishika. “Why would he be researching this stuff?” I asked. I turned and looked behind me, taking in the shadowy cemetery. It wasn’t like the place wasn’t interesting. New Orleans cemeteries were unlike any I’d ever seen. There were no headstones, because no one was buried underground—the city was so low, at times the elevation was *below* sea level—so everyone was buried in crypts, which stood like tiny stone buildings, as tall as I was, all over the gated property. Whole families could be buried together, so each crypt had the name of the family engraved at the top of the vault, then each individual’s name engraved on the stone covering the opening. The dates went back to the late 1700s.

Rishika shrugged. “I have no clue what he’s doing here. Maybe it’s—” She stopped speaking when we heard the sound of scuffling feet behind us.

We both spun around when we heard a low voice muttering in the distance.

“*Shit!*” someone hissed.

Nikkos emerged from the shadows of a large family tomb. He was walking slowly and laboriously, and I realized it was because he was dragging someone behind him. I immediately recognized the informant that Adair had been meeting up with.

Nikkos was holding the guy’s arm high behind his back, and judging from the expression on his face, the position was pretty painful.

When he reached us, Nikkos looked around. “Did you lose him?”

I scowled at that. “He was too fast.”

Nikkos sighed. “Maybe this guy can give us some information,” he said, giving the guy’s shoulder a push.

I took a step closer and looked at the man. He looked completely average—no one I would’ve given a second look to if I’d passed him on the street. Which was probably important for whatever shady line of work he was in. He was of average height, a little pudgy around the middle, balding on top—absolutely nothing special or distinct about him.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated hard, but I couldn’t sense even an inkling of Fae magic around him. But that didn’t mean he was harmless. Just because he wasn’t Fae, didn’t mean that he wasn’t something else.

I narrowed my eyes. “Why were you meeting with that man?” I demanded.

The pudgy man scowled at me. “I don’t gotta tell you nothing, girlie.”

I raised an eyebrow, then glanced up at Nikkos. He nodded and pulled the man’s arm up even higher, making him squeal in pain.

I shook my head with a manufactured look of concern. “I have to let you know that I really don’t have much control over my associate, here. I mean, I certainly do try, but he’s just a law unto himself, and once he gets it into his head, I really won’t be able to stop him from breaking your arms if you choose not to cooperate with us.”

Sweat was starting to bead on the man’s pasty brow, and he took a shallow breath. “Listen, listen to me. I don’t really know much about him, okay?” he said hurriedly. He forced a laugh. “I don’t even know the guy’s name. Honest.”

“So why don’t you tell me what you *do* know about him?” I snapped. Why couldn’t this guy just crack so we could leave?

“All I know is that he said he’d pay me for information, and I figured, hell, why not?” the man said, his voice dry and raspy.

“What information did he want?” I asked.

“Shit, I don’t know, nonsense stuff,” the guy said, rolling his eyes. “Tourist crap. Maps of the cemeteries in the area. The history of the tombs and shit. Stuff he could get if he went on a walking tour. ‘Get on a tour bus,’ I told him.”

I sighed. “You’re not being very helpful, you know.” I glanced up at Nikkos, which made the man almost leap out of his pants.

“Hang on, hang on!” he said desperately. “There was something else.”

“What?” I bit out.

“He had this weird drawing that he wanted me to look at,” the guy said.

“A weird drawing,” I repeated.

The guy nodded emphatically.

I stared at him for a moment, then held up the notebook in my hand. “Was it in here?”

The man squinted through the shadows at the notebook. “Yeah, that was it. He was just starting to show it to me when you started chasing after us.”

I chewed on a corner of my lip. “Show me the weird drawing,” I commanded, thrusting the journal toward the man.

The man gave a nervous smile. “I’d love to, but I kinda need my arms for that, don’t you think?”

I nodded up at Nikkos, who pulled a face but finally let the guy go.

Rishika stepped closer to Nikkos and me, closing the circle around the guy, just in case he decided to try to escape.

The guy noticed this and sighed in a defeated way, then took the notebook from me. He shook out his arm, moaning dramatically, then opened the notebook. He flipped through the pages for a long time, then finally held it out to me. “This.”

I looked down at the book.

“I told him it maybe looks like a family crest, but it’s incomplete. See there, the shape is unresolved,” the guy said, pointing down at the sketch.

I looked down where the guy’s chubby finger indicated. The sketch looked to me like part of a fleur-de-lis, and beneath that, in complicated, flowing script, was the phrase même pas la mort. I stared at the drawing for a long time, then looked up at Rishika.

“Do you have any idea what this says?” I asked.

Rishika shook her head as she read the phrase upside down. “I don’t think so…” She mouthed the phrase. “Maybe it’s French? Latin, maybe? I really don’t know, Artemis. I don’t speak either.”

“It means *not even death*,” the man said in a superior tone of voice.

I looked at him, then back down at the drawing. “Okay, thanks. You’ve been really helpful.”

“Does that mean I can go now?” the guy asked hopefully.

Nikkos started forward, a dangerous look on his face, but before he could do or say anything, I nodded.   
 “Yeah, man, you can go.”

As the man scuttled away from us, down the narrow cemetery lane, Nikkos let out an annoyed huff.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“What?” I asked.

“Think about it! What if he tells people what we’re looking for?” Nikkos pointed out. “What part of *covert* don’t you understand?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, newsflash, Nikkos, I think we gave up being *covert* when we literally chased a guy through a cemetery. That was a first for me, and probably also a first for that tour group watching us.”

Nikkos looked unimpressed with my explanation, but he shrugged. “Whatever.”

The drizzle had turned into actual rain, and it was getting worse by the minute. I pushed my hair out of my face and looked around the cemetery as the rain beat down on the crypts, all of them bleached white by the hot, southern sun. The cemetery ferns and grief-planted rose bushes bent beneath the steady beat of rain, and the wind started to pick up. I looked around, remembering that I’d read that the water table in New Orleans was high, so root systems didn’t grow deep. They spread out, close to the surface. I thought about that as a strong wind shook the branches of a nearby oak.

Rishika must have been thinking something similar, because she looked around. “We should get inside somewhere,” she said, speaking over the sudden howl of wind. “There’s nothing else to find here.”

It was disheartening to hear the words, but she was right, and I nodded.

Rishika, Nikkos, and I left the cemetery through the large iron gates and headed back toward the French Quarter. Just as we crossed Bourbon Street, there was a crack of thunder, making the crowds strolling the streets gasp and look around, disoriented.

“Let’s just duck into a bar or a café or something,” Rishika said, glancing up.

I nodded and turned to tell Nikkos, but to my surprise, I realized he was no longer beside me. He’d stuck close the whole walk, so I looked around. Then I spied him, just up the block. He must have stopped to look at something in a shop window or something.

“Nikkos,” I said jogging toward him, but I stopped in my tracks when I realized that he wasn’t alone.

He was standing on the street corner, speaking quietly to someone. And, as I drew closer, I heard the man speaking.

“—and, Nikkos, can you tell me why you haven’t been reporting in?”

# Episode 3230

At the door of the lighthouse, Mikah turned, angling his head so I could see his face for the first time, and I gasped. Even from a distance, I could see that his normally sharp black eyes were glazed over, like he was in a daze. Or under some kind of spell, more likely.

That wasn’t good.

Gabriel was still banging his fists on the barrier and screaming, and Xavier stepped forward to push against it as well. He must have been thinking about the weak spots in Big Mac’s magical barrier, because he moved the pressure around, looking for a way in.

“Please! Let him go!” I screamed at the witch. “We’re not here to fight you!”

Sariah threw her head back and laughed. “You could have fooled me!” she called back. She shook her head in disbelief. “Tell me, girl, do you *always* try to break into strangers’ safe houses, or should I feel honored by your attentions?”

“Please! Just talk to us!” I pleaded. I thought about how I’d been able to convince Azalea that we were on the same side, and I wondered if I could do the same with Sariah. “One of your elder witches believes we’re here to help!”

Sariah narrowed her eyes. “Do you mean Azalea? Of course you do. Please.” She shook her head. “Azalea is blinded by greed for money. I can’t trust her judgement.”

Dammit.

My heart fell. Sariah didn’t seem very open to discussion.

“What are you doing to Mikah?” Gabriel called out, his voice shredded with worry. “Let him go, witch!”

The witch ignored Gabriel and turned to Mikah, stroking her hand softly down his cheek again. She hummed deep in her throat, and even over the distance, the sound reverberated through my body. It made my spine shiver.

Next to me, I felt Xavier and Greyson do the same thing. Even Gabriel looked unnerved by the sound.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

Sariah turned her steely gaze on me. “I can smell the Fae blood in you, girl.”

“What does that have to with—”

“But you’re not *full* Fae, are you?” she asked, cutting me off. She gave me a strange, piercing look. Shit. “That means you—of all people—should realize that not all of us are full witches.”

“Oh, fuck no,” Gabriel said, his voice almost a cry. “Come ON!”

I turned to him. “What is it? What does that mean? What is she talking about?”

Gabriel swallowed hard. “I think she might be half Siren.” He turned his gaze to the water past the shore, which was rolling and frothing like a boiling pot. “*Fuck*.”

“Dammit,” Xavier muttered. “That makes sense.” He pushed his hand through his sopping wet hair. “I can’t believe we missed it. We should have guessed it as soon as Mikah was put into a trance. But I’ve never even seen a Siren, never mind come up against one.”

Greyson cleared his throat. “We have to be careful,” he said, his voice still raspy and soft. “They’re powerful. Cover your—”

But he was cut off by a high, clear note of song. Sariah was singing, and the sound made goosebumps break out on my arms.

“Greyson, what are we supposed to—” I stopped speaking when—to my horror—I saw his eyes go unfocused.

I turned to Xavier and saw that he too looked clouded and dazed.

“No!” I screamed. “Don’t listen to her! Cover your ears!”

I grabbed Xavier’s arm as he started toward Sariah. “No! Stop, please!”

I tried to put my hands over his ears, but he was too strong for me to hold back. He kept moving forward, dragging me along behind him.

I tried to dig in my heels, but the sand gave me no traction, and Xavier kept moving forward. A piece of driftwood tripped me, and I fell to the sand, panting, as tears streamed down my face, mixing with the rain.

I looked up to see both my mates walking like zombies across the sand toward the magic barrier. The wind buffeted them, but they didn’t even seem to notice. When they reached the barrier, it allowed them through, and they walked toward Sariah, just as she sang another perfect note.

Thinking that they must have gotten through a break in the barrier, I scrambled to my feet and raced toward it. But Sariah must have closed the break, because I slammed into the solid, unyielding barrier.

Magic tingled on my skin as it threw me back. Breath heaving, I glared at Sariah. Then I noticed something in her hand. Something shiny.

I turned back to Gabriel, who was pressing his fingers into his ears. I pointed to the shining spot in the siren’s hand. “What’s that?” I shouted.

Gabriel squinted at it. “It looks like a charm!” he yelled back, raising his voice to carry over the sound of the wind and rain, and the muffling pressure of his own hands.

I nodded in agreement and leaned close enough to Gabriel to yell into his covered ear. “Is that how the elder witches kept magic for themselves?!”

I hadn’t seen the other witches with them, but it didn’t mean they didn’t each have one on their person… I just hadn’t noticed. Or known to look for it. But if that theory was correct… Well, there was only one way to find out.

“I think you’re right!” Gabriel shouted.

I stared at the Siren, thinking hard. Maybe if we could just get that charm away from her, we’d be taking away her witch magic. I wasn’t exactly sure what that would accomplish, but anything that might weaken her seemed to be a good thing. If it didn’t work… Well, we’d be onto Plan F.

*Fuck if I know.*

I didn’t appear to be affected by the Siren call, so I wondered if I might be able to use my Fae magic against her. I knew I didn’t have full control of it, but what were the other options? The Siren had all the magic and both of my mates. My magic was the only weapon I had at this point.

Looking over at Gabriel, I mimed snatching the charm.

Gabriel looked confused for a moment, so I did it again. That time he got it and nodded.

Then I mimed pushing against the barrier.

He frowned and shook his head, and I realized that in order to do that, Gabriel would have to take his hands from his ears, which would make him vulnerable to Sariah’s call.

That wouldn’t be great, I had to admit, but I didn’t know what else to do. I had no other ideas about how to get through the barrier.

“I know!” I screamed. Gabriel kept looking confused, so I shrugged and mimed pushing again, indicating we were going to have to do it anyway.

He looked unsure, but he finally nodded in agreement.

I knew we probably only had one shot at this, but as I watched my mates move slowly toward Sariah, I also knew that we had to try.

My heart was beating so fast I felt like it was going to burst from my chest, and the wind kept whipping my wet hair across my face. It was soaking and drenched with sea water, so it was like being slapped with seaweed.

I pushed it out of my face and took a deep breath. Then I held up three fingers and lowered each in turn in a silent countdown.

*Three, two…*

I gathered all my magic, just like I’d been taught by my grandfather. It felt like that lesson in the woods had happened a hundred years ago, but I thought of his voice as I pulled magic from the air around me. The storm was electric with it, and I could feel it building within me, its strength frightening.

*ONE!*

I turned to the barrier and released my Fae magic in one giant blast. It was powerful enough that it pushed me back, and I flew a foot into the air, landing hard on the sodden sand.

Disoriented, I blinked and shook my head. Then I looked around, remembering to look at where the barrier was. I was hoping to see some sign that the barrier had come down—or at least that a crack had opened. But instead, I saw Gabriel walking toward the barrier, his movements strange and jerky. NO! Not Gabriel too!

My stomach sank as Sariah let out another high note, the sound threading its way through the storm. It seemed like the wind was carrying it toward us.

“Gabriel!” I screamed, getting to my feet “Stop! Don’t listen to her! Put your hands back over your ears!”

But Gabriel didn’t seem to hear me. He didn’t turn back. He was in a trance, and nothing I screamed at him made any difference.

I lunged after him, but it was too late. He was walking toward Sariah and past the barrier, where I couldn’t reach any of them.

# Episode 3231

**Gabriel**

I could feel the pull of the Siren’s call tingling through my body like an electric shock. The magic of it washed over me like the waves in the ocean nearly at my feet, and I could feel myself being drawn toward her. If it weren’t for the seaweed I’d managed to stuff in my ears, I’d be a fucking goner.

Because of that little ocean superfood, I had some control over my body. I just needed to keep it that way. Fighting against her hold was difficult. It was like her magic was a thread wrapped around me, rather than a rope. It was a strong thread. I should’ve stuffed more seaweed in when I had the chance.

But as I slid a sidelong glance at Mikah, I felt anger rise inside of me. His dark eyes were glazed and vacant—he was fully trapped by the Siren’s song, and fully under her control as she kept singing.

*Mikah*, I mind linked. *Resist her.*

No response.

*Can you hear me?*

No response.

*Fuck.*

Sariah had to be stopped. I just needed to be close enough to her—somehow resisting her Siren call—in order to do it. Walking alongside Mikah, Xavier, and Greyson, I matched their stance. I’d play along with her game for as long as I had to. She needed to believe she had me. Make her let her guard down.

I *had* to, to save Mikah. Somehow, I was going to need to snap my mate out of this spell—not to mention Greyson and Xavier—so I let myself be carried forward by the magical pull until I was standing right next to Mikah.

When we reached her at the doorway of the lighthouse, Sariah looked at the four of us, then past us, a smirk twisting her mouth.

“Now what will you do, Fae?” she gloated at Cali. “All alone?”

While she was distracted, I fought to reach out my pinky, letting it just brush Mikah’s hand, to let him know I was near. But Mikah didn’t even move at my touch. There was no sign of recognition at all, and it nearly made my blood boil.

Who did this Siren-witch think she was to affect us this way? To affect my *mate*? She was going to regret this choice.

“Xavier! Greyson!” Cali screamed from beyond the barrier. “Please, turn around! Look at me! Don’t listen to her! Listen to me! Please! *Greyson!* *Xavier!*”

Even with the seaweed in my ears, I could hear the sobs in her voice, and it was gut-wrenching. I felt terrible, but I knew I couldn’t break the ruse. It would risk too much to turn to her now. I had to find the right moment to strike out at Sariah, and this wasn’t it.

But I remembered what Cali had noticed about the Siren, and my eyes traveled down her arm to where she was clenching something—the charm—tight in her fist. I needed to get it from her, but I knew I’d only have one chance, and I was standing at the wrong angle. I only had one shot. I needed it to count.

Sariah turned back to the four of us, and I quickly shifted my gaze so I was staring into the distance, hoping it made me look properly glazed and bewitched. Or be-Sirened.

She smiled at us. “Come with me, boys,” she purred, and turned back to the lighthouse.

The other three moved like puppets, following her every command. I followed, too, staying as close as I could to Mikah. I tried to keep my steps as robotic and halting as possible as we walked inside, and I resisted the urge to look around.

At least it was dry inside, but I wished there were a way to signal to Cali. To let her know that I was going to try to take care of things. But I didn’t get the chance before Sariah slammed the door shut on the howling wind and Cali’s desperate cries.

I glanced at Xavier and Greyson, wondering if there was a chance they were faking it too and they weren’t fully entranced, but they both looked really out of it. Their eyes were glazed, and their jaws seemed slack.

Fuck this witch. Focusing on the plan, I repeated it: I just needed to get close enough to Sariah to grab that charm out of her hand. Then at least the barrier would disappear and Cali would be able to come into the lighthouse. Then she and I could fight Sariah together.

The Siren led us up a narrow, tightly winding staircase. It led to a relatively open space that must have been the lighthouse keeper’s apartment at some point, but it was now filled with potion making ingredients. Sage, rue, and thyme were scattered across a scrubbed wooden table in the center of the small space, and the smell of herbs hung heavy in the air.

As Sariah led us in, Mikah, Xavier, and Greyson all lined up obediently along one wall, so I stepped into place next to them.

I was trying to stay loose but still keep my eyes open and observe as much of the space as I could. It would be useful to know the lay of the land once the fighting started.

Sariah was still humming to herself, I had to remind myself to fight the strange tingling sensations that shot through my body. It felt like being really fucking tired. Like when sleep was calling to you, drawing you in, but if you fought hard enough, you could stay awake. But it was exhausting.

And then just like that, her humming stopped. My entire body jolted. The hold of her Siren call on me was gone. And she had no idea.

Sariah had moved to her table and was speaking to herself as she sifted through the debris. “What luck that three Alphas and a vampire have fallen into my lap like this. I couldn’t have planned it better if I’d tried. Your blood will do very nicely for one of my potions.”

She turned back to face us, and I saw a knife glinting in her hand. It was small and curved but sharp as hell. And as she walked toward Greyson, I could see that it looked like the ceremonial knives I’d seen other witches and warlocks use.

Before I could react, Sariah raised her hand, punctured Greyson’s arm, and sliced downward. Blood began to flow from the wound, and she caught it neatly in a small wooden bowl. When the blood flow slowed, then stopped as his fast healing stitched the wound back together, Sariah smiled up at his blank face.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” she said. She ran a loving hand down his cheek, and I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

She had to be fucking kidding.

But when she picked up another bowl and turned to Mikah, I felt the muscles in my jaw clench. She pressed the knife into Mikah’s skin. Fuck no. There’s no way she was going to touch my mate.

I lunged at the witch.

She cried out, struggling against me as I fought for the knife. She was strong for an older witch, but I had the element of surprise. I twisted her wrist, and the knife clattered to the ground. Now I just needed the charm—

A strong hand was suddenly at my throat, squeezing it with formidable strength.

It was Mikah.

*Fuck fuck fuck.*

I grabbed at Mikah’s hand. Again, I didn’t want to hurt him, but fuck if maybe I was going to have to do something. I resisted as he lifted me up off the ground.

“Mike.” My voice sounded like gravel. “It’s *me.*”

*I’m trying to help you.*

“Good boy,” Sariah said, addressing Mikah. “He seems to have avoided my charms, boys. We can’t have that, can we? Show him what happens to the bad ones.”

Mikah reacted—he was *obeying* her—and threw me across the room. My back slammed into the wall, and I scrambled to my feet, every breath burning. Quickly, I reached my hands to my ears. Thank fuck. The seaweed was still there.

“You want to dance, witch?” I asked, beginning to partially shift my hands. “Let’s go. You and me.”

Sariah turned toward me, her eyes blazing. My eyes darted all over her. She had to have the charm somewhere on her. She walked between Mikah, Greyson, and Xavier. Her hand was in her pocket as she began to hum again. *Hello, there. Jackpot.*

“You thought you could trick me?” Sariah asked, still managing to hum as she spoke. “I see that seaweed in your ears, mutt. That’s no match for me.”

My friends and my mate started to advance on me.

“Come on, guys, it’s me! Gabriel Jackson? Your best friend you’d never hurt?” They weren’t listening. Shocker.

The only way out of this was to get that damn charm.

“Fuck it,” I said. I dove for Sariah, pushing against the strong arms that were trying to stop me. I coldcocked Xavier in the face and elbowed Greyson. Mikah lunged for me, his fangs bared. I ducked, barely missing him, and I slammed myself into the witch.

She fell to the ground and the charm slid right out of her pocket. Around us, Xavier, Greyson, and Mikah stopped, wavering on their feet. Was the Siren hold on them broken?

There was a low sizzle in the air as the barrier spell dissipated and her gaze shifted to the window, where lightning forked across the stormy sky. Was it really down? Could we get through?

Sariah and I exchanged a glance, and a chill ran down my spine as she smiled. Her gaze flicked toward the charm, and suddenly she pounced. I lunged for her. This had to end.

I grabbed ahold of her, just as her fingertips grazed the charm, and I slammed my fist into her head.

# Episode 3232

**Xavier**

I was completely surrounded by a haze of grey and thick, almost woolen fog. Everywhere I looked I could see nothing but the same hazy grey. I could barely move through the stuff. There were noises and shadowy shapes on all sides, but I couldn’t focus on any of them. I couldn’t see them, and I couldn’t understand them. I couldn’t blink. It felt like I was barely breathing. What was this? Was it a dream? And if it was a dream, why couldn’t I wake up?

It didn’t feel like a dream, though. It was something else.

But then I heard a voice shouting. It sounded familiar, and it broke through the fog physically and mentally clouding me.

Was that Cali?

Then I heard Gabe’s voice, piercing through as well. “Grab her!”

“Don’t let her go!” another voice said urgently. It was a voice that electrified something deep inside me. *That* was Cali.

I blinked hard and fast, and it felt like waking up from a deep, deep sleep. But as the room swam back into focus, I saw Gabe take a wild swing at Sariah. What the fuck was happening? I watched in stunned surprise as the Siren’s head snapped back.

Without even a cry of surprise, she dropped limply to the ground. Something rolled from her hand and shimmered next to her on the floor.

I looked around, trying to get my bearings. I was inside, but I didn’t remember how I’d gotten here. Gabe was here—along with Sariah—and Greyson and Mikah, too. And Cali. She was standing in front of me, breathing hard and fast. She had blood on her lip. What the hell had just happened? It felt like my brain was moving at half-speed. I wanted to run toward her and grab her—protect her—but my body didn’t seem to want to move. My limbs felt like they’d been filled with lead.

Gritting my teeth with the effort, I took one laborious step toward her, then another. I kept that up until I was able to finally stumble to her side.

“Cali,” I slurred, sounding drunker than I’d ever been. “Are you okay?”

My words were barely intelligible, but Cali seemed to understand, and she wrapped her arms around me. It took nearly everything I had, but I lifted my own leaden arms to wrap around her. And the instant I did, I knew the effort was more than worth it. She felt so good—it always felt incredible to have her in my arms, and this moment was no exception.

“Oh god, Xavier. I was so scared,” she whispered, nearly sobbing. “When she started singing and you started walking—I didn’t know what she was going to do to you.”

I rubbed her back, feeling more articulation in my hands as memories of the last few moments came slowly back to me. They were more like shadows of memories, but I remembered the song, and the strange magic I’d felt tingle over me. Then I remembered the door to the lighthouse closing behind me, and the heavy smell of herbs in the air.

Greyson stumbled over and put a hand on Cali’s back, then one on mine. “Are you two okay?” he asked.

I looked up at my brother. “For someone’s who’s just coming out from under a Siren’s spell, I think I’m okay. How about you?”  
 Greyson nodded, then he scowled as he looked past me. Following his gaze, I looked over to see Mikah and Gabe heaving Sariah into a straight-backed wooden chair and tying her to it.

The Siren-witch was still unconscious, and we all gathered around her limp form.

“Did you get it?” Cali asked, looking up at Gabe.

He held up a shiny little item. “Got it. When this came off her, her magic stopped and the barrier came down.”

I stared at the thing, confused. “That’s pretty weird, isn’t it? I’ve never seen an external source of magic like that. Could that thing have been helping her?”

Cali nodded. “Maybe. I mean, the other elder witches have been able to do magic even with the cap on everyone’s else’s abilities. I think I was right, and this charm must be how they’re all holding onto their magic while no one else can use it.”

Gabe palmed the charm and looked closely at it. The thing was silver-colored and circular, with a strange green crystal embedded in the center. The edges were engraved with scrollwork.

He looked up at all of us. “Well, now that we have it, anyone know what the hell we’re supposed to do with the thing?”

Cali stared at it for a moment, then held out her hand. “I’ll take it.” Gabe handed it over gladly. “We might be able to find another witch who can use it,” she said, pocketing the charm.

“So what the hell happened?” Mikah asked, turning to Gabe. He looked shaken, not to mention edgy and anxious—not his usual calm self.

Gabe raised his eyebrows. “You three were all Siren slaves—that’s what happened.”

“Were you not?” I asked Gabe, frowning.

“Nope. I mean, I felt her pull, but I was still able to control my body somehow.”

Greyson looked incredulous. “How the hell were you able to do that? What makes you so damn special?”

Gabe shrugged. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re mated,” Cali suggested. “Or because you’re mated to a vampire? I could resist because I’m half-Fae—”

“But the rest of us are mated, too. Why would Gabe’s mate bond be so special?” I asked, shaking my head.

“*Oh*,” Mikah said suddenly, his eyes growing wide.

We all turned to him and waited to hear what had sounded like a revelation.

“What?” I finally asked when he didn’t go on.

Gabe gave his head a little shake, jarring loose two wads of seaweed he had packed into his ears. “Look, it may not have been my most glamorous idea, but it sure saved all your asses, didn’t it?”

I found myself laughing despite our recent brush with danger.

“Welp,” I said, clapping Gabe on the shoulder, “thanks for saving us, man.”

Gabe grinned. “Any time. And by any time, I mean let’s never do this again. Ever.”

There was a moan, and we all looked down as Sariah slowly came to. She looked around for a moment, confused, then jerked to attention, struggling against her bonds. She let out a muffled grunt from behind the gag Mikah had put on her, to stop her from singing. She looked furious—glaring around at all of us—but her eyes zeroed in on Gabe. She made some more muffled sounds, and it appeared that she might have been cursing his name from behind her gag.

Gabe leaned toward her. “Looks like you got bested by a little seaweed and some quick thinking, didn’t ya? How does that feel, oh big, powerful Siren-witch? Not too great, I think.”

I snorted a laugh. Gabe could probably gloat about this for years.

Sariah looked—if possible—even more furious, but when Cali stepped forward and held up the charm, the Siren froze in her seat.

“I get that you can still use your Siren powers even without this. But just know that there is one of us who isn’t affected by you at all. And you’re right, I *am* Fae, and I still have my powers. Which means I could blast you here and now. You got it?”

Sariah looked from me to the charm, then back up again. She finally nodded.

Cali nodded to Mikah, who removed the gag from her mouth.

“What the hell do you want?” Sariah snapped.

“I’d like to point out that this could have been far more pleasant if you’d just talked to us earlier,” Cali said. “I really didn’t want to have to do any of this—I swear. We are on the same side when it comes to fixing magic.”

Sariah narrowed her eyes at Cali. She looked angry, but she didn’t interrupt.

“We are aware that you have to willingly give us the key. So we’re going to give you the chance to do that now.”

Sariah looked long and hard at Cali. “And what if I don’t?”

Gabe shook his head with practiced casualness. “Oh, that’s not hard at all. If you don’t, we get to see how well a Siren can swim with a fifty-pound weight tied around her ankles.”

Sariah shot him a deadly glare, then turned back to Cali. She seemed to be doing some quick calculating in her head, then—finished—she gave a resigned sigh.

“Fine,” Sariah said. “I’ll give it to you. Not that it’ll do any good.”

“Why not?” Cali asked.

Sariah heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Because Odette is the most powerful witch in the region, and you’re as good as dead as soon as she hears you’re coming.”

# Episode 3233

**Artemis**

Shocked into stillness, I took a step back, watching Nikkos shrug his shoulders dismissively in response to the guy’s question. I peered at the man, wondering if I recognized him from anywhere, but he was a stranger. He was also Fae—*that*, I could sense. The other Fae looked annoyed at Nikkos’s brush-off, but also like he didn’t know what more to do.

I—on the other hand—was *pissed*. Who the hell was this guy? And what the fuck were they talking about? And what hadn’t Nikkos been reporting on?

I had a dark feeling I wasn’t going to like the answers to any of these questions, but all I knew for sure was that—yet again—Nikkos was hiding something.

Weeks ago, Cali and I had been watching a baseball game on TV. It had been kind of an accident, because it had been on when we’d walked in, and neither of us had been able to find the remote, and neither of us had known how to change the channel without it. So we’d ended up watching it for a while, and during the game, Cali explained the rules. They’d seemed pretty straightforward—hit the ball, run the bases—but I’d been particularly interested when she’d explained the concept of the three strikes rule.

It made sense in baseball, it made sense in life, and by my count, this was two strikes against Nikkos.

The other Fae—the one Nikkos was blowing off—walked away looking annoyed, and Nikkos turned. As he did, he spotted me watching him. His eyes widened, and I watched him realize I must have overheard his very shady conversation.

“Hey, Artemis,” he started, clearly readying an excuse as he strode hurriedly over to me. “Let me explain—”

“Just stop,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t want to hear any of your dumbass excuses right now. You think you could double-cross us and get away with it? You know, I was just starting to believe you because of your damn sob story, but clearly that was a huge mistake. I can’t believe I let you screw me around like that!”

Nikkos held up his hands. “Please, Artemis, just listen to my side of it—”

“And why,” I asked with a mirthless laugh, “should I do that?”

“Because,” Nikkos said, his eyes flashing, “you know what it’s like to have to deal with your past connections to the Fae world. They don’t always let go of you as easily as you might hope, do they?”

That wasn’t the response I’d been expecting, and it stopped me in my tracks. Because he was right. I *did* know what it was like to try to leave your past behind, but have your past not want to leave you.

Dammit.

I crossed my arms across my chest. “Fine,” I bit out. “What’s your side, then, Nikkos? No lies.”

He took a breath. “Okay. Obviously, there’s another faction of the Fae out looking for Adair. That part you already know. But I might not have been fully transparent with you about when I actually cut ties with them.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Is that because you haven’t actually cut ties with them?” I asked, suspecting I was right.

Nikkos swallowed audibly. “Well, as far as they’re aware, no, I haven’t. They still think I’m working for them.”

I gritted my teeth as anger seethed through me like white-hot lava. I was furious, but more than that, this was *not* what I needed right now. I did not need a spy in my midst—working for the other side—who knew everything I’d done up till this point.

“But I did tell *you* the truth,” Nikkos went on. “It’s true that I have separate and personal reasons for wanting to find Adair before they do.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure,” I said venomously.

“And I figured if they think I’m on their side,” Nikkos said, pressing onward, “then I can move around the city without them trying to track my every move. Think about it, Artemis. You used to be in the game. You know what it’s like out there. Doesn’t that make sense?”

I thought through his reasoning, and—to my dismay—realized that it did make a weird kind of sense. And I hated that.

“I don’t know if I can trust you right now,” I snapped, angry at Nikkos, and angry at myself for understanding where he was coming from.

“Yeah, I get that,” he said with a nod. Then he looked at me hopefully. “But…?”  
 I heaved a frustrated sigh. “*But*, I am willing to use your connections for my own purposes, so I guess we’re at an impasse,” I said. “But from now on, I’m the boss of this operation. Icall the shots. You got me?”

Nikkos nodded quickly. “I got you. That’s fine with me. We’re on the same side, Artemis, I swear.”

I scowled. “That is yet to be determined,” I reminded him. “Come on.”

I led the guy back to the corner where I’d left Rishika, but I realized with a jolt that my girlfriend wasn’t on the sidewalk.

I looked around nervously and had just pulled out my phone to text her when I heard my name being called over the din of Bourbon Street.

Spinning around, I saw Rishika waving at me, then waving me toward her. As I moved closer, I saw that she was holding a bunch of pamphlets like a hand of cards, and she was standing in front of a tiny souvenir shop. It was more like a stand than a shop, really, selling cheap-looking shot glasses and plastic beads in every color. A rickety table out in front was stacked with pamphlets for walking tours, candlelit cemetery tours, and boat rides where you were guaranteed to see a gator.

“Why’d you walk away?” I asked, worry giving my voice a harder edge than I intended. “I couldn’t find you.”

Rishika flashed her handful of pamphlets at me. “I just came down here.”

“Yeah,’ I said, looking around warily, “but what is *here*, exactly?”

“Look,” she said, holding out a bright blue pamphlet. “I don’t think finding out what that crest means is going to easy.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked, but I grew silent as I looked down at the pamphlets. There was a tour of the oldest mansions in New Orleans, and another for New Orleans architecture. I looked down at what Rishika was pointing to and saw that most every building pictured in the glossy pamphlets had a crest at its peak, and almost all of them were a version of the fleur-de-lis.

Dammit. I could already tell where this was leading.

I sighed. “This is going to be a lot of boring busywork, isn’t it?”

“I know research is hardly your favorite thing, and it’s not mine either, but it’s not like we have much of a choice if we want to find what Adair is looking for,” Rishika said heavily.

“May I make a suggestion?” Nikkos offered tentatively.

I shot him a glare. “What is it?”

Rishika looked surprised by my tone, but I shook my head, signaling that I would explain my sudden turn in feeling toward Nikkos later.

“Well,” he said, “there’s a historical society of New Orleans that might have records of crests in the city. That might be easier than just wandering around, looking at buildings and trying to find something that matches that picture in the journal. They’ve got archives, which might be a less scattershot approach. I assume we’re looking for a specific family crest, right?”

“Possibly,” Rishika said.

“And if Adair is looking in cemeteries, then he must be looking for a specific family’s tomb,” Nikkos reasoned.

I nodded. That did seem to make sense. But that line of reasoning asked as many questions as it answered. Because why my uncle wanted to find some mortal family’s tomb was beyond me.

“Fine,” I said shortly. “That’s probably the best next step. Lead the way to the historical society, then.”

“Sure thing,” Nikkos said quickly, clearly pleased to be of use. “It’s easy to get to. Just off Lafayette Square.”

As we wove our way through the strolling crowds, Rishika fell into step next to me.

“What the hell happened back there?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling punchy.

She gave me a long look. “Why are you giving Nikkos the death stare all of a sudden?”

My head was starting to ache. “He’s still in contact with operatives from the Dark Fae court,” I admitted to her. “They’re here in the city.”

Rishika was stunned by this information, but I could see that shock quickly melt to anger in her eyes. “That damn double-crossing piece of—”

“I know,” I said heavily. “So I think we should start coming up with a plan of our own—one that doesn’t involve Nikkos at all.”

Rishika nodded thoughtfully. “What were you thinking?”

I looked at Nikkos, who was waiting to cross a busy street. “I think we should double-cross the double-crosser.”

# Episode 3234

I shifted in the back seat of the car, trying to find a more comfortable position, but I figured that was probably impossible. I was still damp from the rain, but at least the car was dry.

Looking out the window, I ran over the events of the last few hours in my head. Had the storm been just a storm, or had it been something else? Had Sariah been doing magic to make the storm happen, or to intensify it?

I took a deep breath and tried to relax, but when I looked down, I saw that both my hands were clenched into tight fists. I was still gripping the key in one hand, and Sariah’s magical charm in the other.

“Do you think it was wrong of us to leave Sariah tied up like that?” I asked hesitantly.

Harlow—sitting next to me—shrugged. “If you hadn’t, she’d have come after us. I mean, she still will. She’ll get out of the restraints eventually. She’ll be pissed, but fine.”

I nodded, reassured. If there was anyone who knew New Orleans witches, it was Harlow, so I took her word for it.

“Hey.” Xavier—on my other side—laid a gentle hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Fine.”

I wasn’t sure if this was strictly true, but I wasn’t ready to think about the fear I’d felt out there, alone in the rain and wind, banging on the barrier as the others disappeared inside with Sariah. Nor did I look at the already healing cut on Greyson’s arm.

“You’re all safe,” I said, forcing a smile. “That’s what matters.”

Gabriel swiveled around to look at me. “I’m sorry I couldn’t signal you earlier, Cali. I wanted to, but—”

“It’s fine,” I said quickly, shaking my head. “I get it. You had to make Sariah believe that her Siren powers were working on you.”

“Exactly,” Gabriel confirmed.

“I’m just glad it all worked out okay.”

Mikah, who was driving, put his hand on Gabriel’s knee. “Who would have thought your thick skull would be good for something?”

Gabriel snorted a laugh and pushed Mikah’s hand away, making Mikah laugh, too.

I let the happy sound wash over me, reminding myself that they were fine. They were all fine. We had three keys. We were on our way to rescuing Tabitha, and then to figuring out where the ashes were, and then to banishing Seluna to the demon realm forever.

We dropped Harlow off at her apartment building.

“We’ll meet you here tomorrow,” Greyson said, leaning out the window. Harlow nodded and waved.

“I want to meet with Clementine, too,” I said as Mikah pulled away from the curb. “So Harlow’s building is a good meeting location.”

When we got back to the safe house, I headed straight inside, desperate to get out of my still-damp clothes. But as soon as I shut the door to the bedroom, I was overwhelmed with all that we had faced. The adrenaline had finally dropped, it seemed. I took a few deep breaths to try and steady myself.

I started to pull off my wet clothes—trying to breathe through the fear—but nothing much helped. I just kept seeing Greyson being swept out to sea, over and over and over.

I opened my door and stepped across the hall to the room he had claimed and knocked lightly.

The door swung open to reveal Greyson, clad only in a towel. My eyes moved across his shower-damp chest, and then up to his face, where a smile was spreading across his lips.

“Come on in,” he said, opening the door wider. He had another towel in his hand, and he used that to dry his light hair. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, but as he closed the door, I pivoted back to him and wrapped my arms around him, holding him tightly.

“Hey. It’s okay, love.” His arms closed around me, and I pressed my face against his warm skin, listening to the sound of his steady heartbeat, reminding myself with every beat that he was okay.

“I was so scared when you were taken out by that wave, Greyson. And then before you could recover, that witch put her spell on you and there wasn’t anything I could do to help.” I took a shaking breath and felt Greyson press his lips to my hair.

“Everything’s okay now,” he said softly. “We’re both safe, and together, and we got what we went out there for.”

I pulled back and looked down at his arm, then leaned in and kissed him right above the healing cut that Sariah had given him. Then I turned and kissed his other arm, right over the bite he’d gotten from that vampire at the speakeasy.

I ran my finger lightly over the marred skin. “I just hate it when you get hurt.”

“Same,” he said, and kissed my head again.

I looked up, lifting my face to his, and he leaned down to kiss me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and threaded my fingers through his damp hair.

“Can I stay here with you tonight?” I asked, whispering against his lips.

He nodded, then leaned in, slipped his arm beneath my legs, and lifted me into his arms. Then he carried me to bed.

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When I opened my eyes, I could tell it was still early, but I slid out of bed anyway. Next to me, Greyson was still knocked out. We’d fallen asleep almost immediately, holding each other until we both passed out.

And from the leaden way he lay even as I moved away from him, it seemed that he was still exhausted from everything he’d gone through the day before.

Opening the door quietly, I tiptoed to the bathroom. After a shower and a fresh change of clothes (scavenged from the safe house), I headed downstairs, feeling pretty good.

It was cold in the kitchen, but I found Mikah awake as well, and the smell of coffee was just starting to waft through the room.

I looked around the beautiful kitchen. “Maybe we should clean up a bit. Won’t the owners of the house be pissed if they see that we’ve been squatting?”

“They’re rich enough that they won’t care,” Mikah assured me.

“Right, but I definitely will,” I replied with a smile. I wasn’t going to leave a house like this dirty, and maybe cleaning would help me work off some of my nervous energy, too.

The smell of coffee was better than an alarm clock, and slowly the rest of the group began to appear in the kitchen.

Gabriel stumbled in, barely awake, and headed straight for the coffee.

“I want to get to Clementine’s quickly so I can talk to her,” I said. “There’s something I want to try.”

Greyson accepted the cup of coffee Mikah held out to him. “Maybe we should take a second and make a plan before we head out.”

But I shook my head. “We don’t have time for that if we want to rescue Tabitha. What if they move her?”

This startled Gabriel out of his morning stupor. “Cali’s right. We can’t risk it. We’re so close.”

Greyson sighed. “I can see I’m outnumbered here. I’ll drive.”

Everyone was already dressed, so we piled into the car and headed over to Clementine’s building.

She buzzed us up when we rang her bell, but when we knocked, she scowled at us through the crack in her door again.

“What is this?” she snapped. “A party?”

“We have something you might want,” I said and held up the charm.

Clementine’s eyes widened when she saw it, and she opened the door fully.

As I stepped inside, Clementine reached for the charm, but I pulled back.

“That looks like a powerful talisman,” she said, her voice awed. “Where did you get it?”

“From an elder,” I said, keeping it vague. “But before I give it to you, I want to make sure you’re fully on our side here, Clementine.”

She nodded, her eyes never leaving the charm. “Why would I try to stop you when you’re working to turn magic back on?”

“Fair enough.” I held out the charm. “An elder witch was using this to perform magic despite the ban.”

Clementine closed her eyes. “I can feel the power in it. It’s all around us.”

“Do you think you can use it? The way they did? Maybe you can try to do that locator spell for me.”

Clementine nodded and moved into the apartment. There was a messy table in the kitchen area, and she pulled a map of the city out from the bottom of a tall pile of papers.

She took the charm from me and, gripping it tightly, held her free hand over the map. She muttered the incantation—I recognized it as a version of the locator spell Big Mac had done for me in the past. In her hand, the gem in the center of the charm began to glow bright white. Then, suddenly, it turned blood-red.

I barely had time to register the change before there was a sudden, powerful blast, and everything in the room went flying.

# Episode 3235

**Greyson**

The blast emanated from the charm in Clementine’s hand like a nuclear pulse. It lifted me off my feet, and I sailed across the room until I slammed into the far wall with a crash. Then I slid down to the floor, groaning in pain.

This *couldn’t* be happening. I still wasn’t completely healed after the insane events of last night, and my whole body had felt super sore *before* being body slammed by… whatever the hell that had been.

I looked around, stunned and baffled. Why the hell had the charm done that, anyway? We’d all seen Sariah use the thing, and it hadn’t acted like this last night.

Clementine had been knocked on her ass, and she got slowly back to her feet, shaking her head. “The damn thing is coded for a specific witch,” she said weakly, coughing as she fought to get her breath back.

“What?” I asked, still confused.

“Think of it as being password protected,” she snapped. “The charm has a fail-safe on it. Why the hell would you give this to me?” she demanded, glaring at Cali.

“We didn’t know!” Cali said quickly. “Otherwise we obviously wouldn’t have given it to you! I didn’t even know that kind of thing was possible.”

Though she was on the ground, I was relieved to see Cali was sitting up and speaking. Her hair was a mess, but she looked unhurt.

When I glanced around, I saw Gabriel, Mikah, and Xavier all recovering from the magic quake, and around us the whole apartment was a mess, like a tornado had just touched down. Books had been ripped from their bindings and scattered, and furniture was broken and overturned. The apartment had been a mess when we’d walked in, but now it was just chaos. There was a big char mark on the wooden table where the map had been, and all the other papers were scattered, some still floating to the ground like giant snowflakes.

The charm Clementine still had in her hand was unrecognizable. It was twisted and burned black, like it had been pulled from the remains of a fire, and she dropped it onto the table with a clatter. “You should have known that the elder witches were too smart to let just anyone use a charm like this. They’re not idiots!”

“Well, sorry that we were dealing with a ton of shit last night, including a *half-Siren witch*!” Gabriel spat, looking furious.

Clementine’s eyes widened. “Wait. What did you just say? You saw the half-Siren? Are you telling me you went up against Sariah?”

“Yeah, she was a real treat, too,” I said sarcastically.

This seemed to impress Clementine more than anything any of us had ever said or done, and she looked at the group of us with new respect in her eyes. “Okay, fine. Sorry I yelled at you. But I don’t like being surprised by magic like that.”  
 “Yeah, me neither.” I pushed a hand through my hair, frustration coursing through me. “We probably should have guessed. I mean, we should have known that things couldn’t be so easy.”

“So,” Mikah said thoughtfully, straightening the collar beneath his sweater, “it seems like we’re just going to have to stick with our original plan, then. Find all the keys, get Tabby, and turn the magic back on the regular way.”

Clementine nodded. “And do you know where the next key is?”

“No, we don’t,” I admitted with a frown.

The witch raised her eyebrows. “Well, you should know that the last elder is Odette. I don’t know what you’ve heard about her, but you do *not* want to underestimate that old bird. Take my word for it.”

“When it comes to dealing with witches, this isn’t our first rodeo,” I reminded Clementine. “Plus, we’ve been able to hold our own with the other elders. How is this one going to be any different?”

But Clementine just shook her head, looking grave. “You don’t get it, man. Odette isn’t like the others. She’s as powerful as ten of them combined. You *can’t* underestimate her. You do—even for a second—and you’ll never succeed.”

I clenched my teeth. I hated to think of what could be more dangerous than what we’d already faced—including the half-Siren and the witch who’d employed freaking *gator* shifters—but I believed Clementine. Her warning seemed genuine, and there must be some reason Odette was head honcho around here—in a place with a *lot* of powerful witches.

“Is there any more specific information you have that might help us, going into this?” Cali asked the witch. “You know, other than to just *watch out*?”

Clementine sighed. “I might.” She reached behind her to a small stack of books on her kitchen counter that had managed to escape the worst of the blast. “I’ve got a few reference books here, and a few over there.”

She gestured toward a stack of books next to the couch, and—like the gentleman he was—Mikah stepped forward to gather them.

Cali was still on the ground, so I stepped over to her and pulled her to her feet, then ran my hands down her arms, looking her over carefully. “Are you okay? Were you hurt in the blast?”

“No, I’m fine,” she said, but she frowned as she lifted her own hand to my cheek. When she took her hand away, I could see blood on her fingers.

I put my hand up and felt the warm wetness on my cheek. I hadn’t even noticed I’d been cut. Something must have caught me during the blast.

“I’m okay,” I assured her, wiping away the blood with the back of my hand. “I’m a fast healer.”

She smiled, but the expression didn’t quite reach her eyes. And in a moment, I realized how worn-down Cali looked. Maybe bringing her to New Orleans hadn’t been the best plan. It wasn’t like we were having the most relaxing time.

I really should have fought harder to have her stay back at the pack house where it was safe, but—ultimately—I’d known better than to try. Cali had wanted to come down to New Orleans, and Cali was going to do what Cali was going to do.

“How are you feeling?” I asked. “Have you had any more headaches or hallucinations?”

She shook her head. “No. That’s the one good thing about the magic being turned off here. I haven’t had any more Seluna episodes.”

That was the silver lining to all this, and I realized she *had* seemed to sleep well last night, when she was cradled in my arms. I loved that I didn’t have to see the fear on her face every time she had a bad dream, or one of the hyper-real hallucinations Seluna caused her.

Which made me think. I wondered if there was a way I could ask this Tabitha person to come back to the pack house with us to help Cali hold the Seluna dreams off until we could get rid of the ashes, once and for all. It would both reunite Dani with her sister *and* protect Cali. Win-win.

But I put the thought away to consider later as Clementine looked up from the table. She had been sitting for a moment, leafing through the books and making furious notes, but now she looked ready to speak.

“Okay, I think I understand. I wanted to double-check and make sure I was right.” She took a deep breath and looked down at the notebook in her hands. “So, there’s a rumor that Odette once trapped a really powerful warlock for almost a decade. No one knows exactly how she did it, but it earned her a reputation for being very clever with her traps. That’s kind of what she’s known for, so definitely be very careful around her, and for crying out loud, watch where you step.”

That didn’t sound good, but it did sound a bit like a lead. But if this place was strong enough to hold a powerful warlock… Would we be able to get past it so we could rescue Tabitha? That was the real question.

I nodded. “Okay, that sounds easy enough to look for at least. Getting through will be another story, so we’ll try to stick together. That’s worked out for us so far.”

“I think that’s going to be your best bet—”  
 Clementine stopped speaking where there was a knock on the door. We all spun to look at it, and for a long moment, no one spoke. We were all on high alert—I could feel it in the air.

The witch scowled at the door and walked toward it. She peered through the peephole, then turned back to us, a contemptuous look on her face. “It’s your other witch friend.”

I stepped forward as she opened the door. Harlow stood in the hallway, looking tense.

“Oh, thank god,” she said, looking around. “I was hoping you’d all be here. We need to get going. *Now*.”

# Episode 3236

**Artemis**

Rishika and I headed down the street at a fast clip. We’d told Nikkos we were going out to grab something for breakfast, but really, we were trying to lose him so we could do some research on our own. We still had that list from Maren, and now we had Adair’s notebook. The historical society we’d hit up the night before had been a bust. There were just too many family crests that used the fleur-de-lis. Apparently, it was a popular design element.

We’d looked for hours, and I’d been furious by the time we left. I hadn’t come to New Orleans to skulk around some dusty library. I wasn’t a researcher—I was a hunter.

Which was why I’d convinced Rishika to come out with me early this morning and head back to the cemetery where we’d first seen Adair. It was our strongest link to him, and I wanted to retrace his path myself—*without* Nikkos interfering. I still didn’t know if he was our ally, but he had proven to be at least somewhat useful thus far.

The streets were quiet as we headed toward the cemetery, and the air was still as we got inside the gates. We headed back to the place where Adair was supposed to have met up with that informant. As I looked around at the muddy ground, though, my heart sank.

“It looks like the rain last night washed everything away,” I said sourly. No shoe impressions, no footprints showing me which way he’d come from… Nothing.

“Not everything.” Rishika closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m still picking up a faint trace of Adair’s scent.”

“You sure? You’re not just picking up my scent?” I asked warily.

Rishika shook her head. “I’d know *your* scent anywhere.”

I felt her words wash over me, leaving warmth behind, but I shook my head. As good as they made me feel, I knew I had to focus.

“Okay,” I said, gesturing. “You lead the way.”

Rishika turned and walked between two large tombs. She went slowly, pausing every now and then to stop, close her eyes, and smell the air. But I had to admit that my girlfriend’s werewolf nose was spot on, as I could recall now that we were following Adair’s exact path from last night.

When we reached the wall, I braced myself and jumped, boosting myself up. I perched on top and looked down to the other side. It was a long drop, but not fatally long, so I leapt off, landing easily.

A moment later, Rishika landed beside me.

“Nice landing,” she said with a smirk.

“You too.”

Rishika took a breath. “The scent here is really faint, but I think he went that way.” She pointed north and started walking.

But I wasn’t so sure. Rishika seemed to be leading us toward a less populated area, rather than toward the city center. I’d assumed Adair had headed toward Bourbon Street or Lafayette Square, where he could blend in with the crowds. I frowned as I looked around at the closed shops and boarded-up windows. Why would he have come down here?

We walked a few more blocks before Rishika pulled to an abrupt sop. She frowned, turned in a slow circle, then shook her head.

“The scent is gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I lost it.”

I signed. “At least we got this far.” I looked around. “Where are we, anyway?”

Rishika looked around at the worn-down buildings. “We’re still in New Orleans, but probably closer to the outskirts. No tourists around here.”

I shook my head. “What would Adair have been doing around here? Was he just trying to run? Or did he come down here for some specific reason?”

“We should see what’s around here,” Rishika said. “That might give us a clue. Maybe something will look familiar or interesting.”

“Okay,” I agreed. I didn’t have any better ideas.

We kept walking in the direction we’d been going, but we paid more attention to everything around us. And that was how we noticed that everyone was paying attention to us. An older woman watched us suspiciously from the dirty window of a corner deli. Two men with expressionless faces eyed us as we passed their porch.

“Not a very friendly neighborhood,” Rishika noted.

She was right about that. There was definitely a suspicious vibe, which made me even more curious about what Adair had been doing here. Did he know someone in this part of town? Or was he just passing through?

I didn’t know the answers to any of these questions, and the lack of information was infuriating. I hated not knowing my next move—my next *three* moves—and right now I had no clue what was happening, or what I was going to do next.

As we passed a metal door set into an old brick building, I slowed down. The door was locked with a collection of padlocks, each of them with different levels of rust. It looked like something was hiding behind that door. Or someone.

I took a step closer, but just as my curiosity began to itch, I realized the building’s windows were smashed in, and I could see right inside. It was nothing more than an old, empty warehouse. The floor was littered with trash and broken glass, but there was nothing of interest inside. At least not anymore.

When I turned back around to tell this to Rishika, I stopped, surprised. Rishika wasn’t there.

I frowned and looked around, wondering where she could have gone.

I didn’t like this. Not one bit.

Then a distant sound wormed its way into my ear. It was the sound of laughter—Rishika’s laughter.

I hurried toward it, and when I turned the corner, I saw Rishika jumping rope and laughing. A small knot of girls had gathered to cheer as she jumped. The kids were counting her jumps, and they got more and more excited as the number got higher and higher.

Finally, in the high seventies, Rishika waved her hand, signaling that she was tired.

“That’s it for me,” she gasped out.

The girls swinging the ropes stopped, and the whole group began to cheer. Rishika had a wide grin on her face as she gave them all high-fives. She got to the littlest girl and bent low to say something to her quietly. The little girl looked at Rishika with wide eyes, then nodded and whispered something back.

“This doesn’t look like reconnaissance,” I said as she rejoined me.

Rishika gave me an incredulous look. “You still have a lot to learn about the human world.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked.

“Any place where outsiders aren’t trusted, the best people to talk to are kids.”

“Really?” I asked, glancing back at the group of girls behind us. “Does that really work?”

Rishika shrugged. “That little girl back there told me she saw a very beautiful man last night. He went up that alley”—Rishika pointed—“and didn’t come back out for a few hours.”

I grinned at my girlfriend, then leaned over and gave her a kiss. “You’re a genius.”

“I know,” Rishika said, grinning back.

We headed up the alley. There were a few doors leading out of it—all of them rusted—and I wondered which of them to try first.

“Hey, let me see the notebook,” Rishika said.

I pulled it out. “What do you want it for?” I asked.

Rishika opened the book to the very last page and held it up. “Recognize any of these numbers?”

I read through the list. 597, 88, 389A…

“Hang on—389A?”

Rishika smiled. She pointed to the number next to the third door leading off the alley.

389A.

I smiled at her. “Like I said. Genius.”

The door was solid, but Rishika used her werewolf strength to break off the knob. That broke the lock mechanism, which meant we could just push the door open. We walked in and looked around. It looked like a storage area. An *abandoned* storage area.

We moved quietly through the dim, dusty place, making almost no noise.

Then, from behind me, I heard the shuffle of feet. I spun around to Rishika, and we signaled silently to each other. We were each going to take separate paths through the detritus in the warehouse, then flank the source of the sound.

I went right. As I moved deeper into the space, I spotted a cot behind a stack of empty boxes. It looked like a small, primitive living space, with clothes and notebooks strewn around.

And—most importantly—there was someone crouched beside the cot.

I held my breath. Was this it? Was this Adair? Was this the moment when I’d finally be able to speak to my uncle?

As I approached, the figure stood up straight and turned to look at me.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to get here,” Nikkos said with a smirk.

# Episode 3237

“What are you talking about?” I asked Harlow. “What do you mean, we need to come with you? *Where?*”

“The witches are convening for an emergency meeting at the greenhouse,” she explained. “On Odette’s orders. And it’s happening *now.*”

I turned to look at my mates, who both responded to this news by going on high alert.

“How did you hear about this?” Greyson demanded, moving toward the door.

Harlow tried to wave the question away. “We have a system to get messages to each other even without magic. I’ll explain it another time. We’ve got to go, now.”

“What’s the hurry? Why do we have to go now?” Xavier asked warily.

“The meeting is starting soon,” Harlow said. “We don’t want to be late.”

“Hang on,” Mikah said, holding up his hands. “Let’s think about this for a minute. Is this a bad idea? I mean, all of us going where there will be a bunch of witches, all gathered together?”

“Witches *without* magic,” Harlow pointed out.

“Except the most powerful witch will be there, with magic,” Xavier pointed out.

“It’s still our best lead,” I said, grimacing. “Odette will be there. If we don’t go to this meeting to catch her, then what? There’s a good chance she’ll just disappear into the wind afterward.”

“That’s true,” Harlow agreed. “Odette is very good at disappearing, if she wants to. If she gets away today, there’s a good chance you won’t find her again. Not for a long time.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said darkly.

“Let’s at least make a plan before we go,” Greyson said. “I don’t like the idea of just rushing into a scene like that unprepared.”

“We’ve already been there once, though,” Xavier said. “We know what it looks like, we know how the place is laid out. It’s just a big, abandoned-looking space. That makes it easy to plan—half of us go in the front, half go in the back. Bam. Plan done.”

But Greyson shook his head. “We went there when it was abandoned. There’s no way to know what it’ll be like when it’s crawling with a bunch of New Orleans witches. This is going to be a completely different setup. And it’s not like it’s going to be unprotected. There might be a barrier, and even if we can get past a barrier, what if they’ve set up fail-safes?”

“So what are you suggesting?” Xavier asked irritably. “That we don’t go at all?”

“No,” Greyson said, “I’m just saying that we can’t assume that racing in guns blazing is going to work this time.”

“Plus, two words—*gator shifters*,” Gabriel said with a shudder. “Disgusting.”

Mikah put a reassuring hand on his mate’s shoulder. “For what it’s worth, I think Greyson is right. We’ve seen some weird shit down here, and I want to make sure no one gets trapped by a Siren again or dropped in a river or whatever else might happen this time.”

It seemed that Mikah had made an impression, and Xavier thought for a moment. “Okay, fine,” he said, not pressing the issue. “So what kind of plan do you suggest? I mean, what do we know going in? Not much, right? Do we have any idea what this meeting is about?”

“I can probably help with that part,” Harlow said quickly. “It’s going to be about the keys.”

“You’re sure?” Xavier asked.

She nodded. “Positive. Three keys have been taken at this point. No one’s resting easy about that, and there’s no way they’re calling a meeting that isn’t about that.”

“Yeah, I agree,” I said, nodding. “They know what’s going on, and if this meeting is about the keys, that means they’ll probably anticipate that we’re going to try to crash the meeting. So we need to be ready for them to know that we know.”

“What about your Fae magic?” Clementine asked, speaking up for the first time. “What abilities do you have?”

“Well.” I frowned. “The thing is—”

“Uh-oh,” Clementine muttered.

“—my powers are working, but kind of on the fritz,” I finished.

“That’s nice timing,” she said.

“But honestly, even before they went a little haywire thanks to the elder witches using Tabitha, I wasn’t, like, the greatest at using them,” I admitted. “I mean, I haven’t known about them all my life, and I’m kind of just getting the hang of them. Maybe I could blast a few people if I tried, but there’s no guarantee that I wouldn’t potentially seriously injure them, and I don’t know if that’s what we want. And, also, I don’t really want to use my powers for anything other than a last resort, because so many of the witches don’t have magic. That doesn’t seem right.”

Clementine heaved a sigh and shrugged. “Fine. Then I have no other suggestions.”

“What can you tell us about this meeting?” Greyson asked, turning to Harlow.

“Well,” Harlow said, “I’ve only ever been to one other meeting at this particular location. And I was a little girl at the time.”

“You have to remember something,” I urged.

She thought for a moment. “I do know that my mom was really insistent that I not go outside of the greenhouse during the meeting. She was really intense about it, that’s why I remember.”

I frowned. “What does that mean? Why wouldn’t she want you to go outside? Could there be booby traps set up outside the greenhouse to keep people out? But why? They’re witches, and that meeting happened when they had all their magic.” I thought for a long moment. “If I’m right, then only three of the elders still have charms, since we took Sariah’s.” I looked at the young witch. “Harlow, do you think it’s even a little bit possible that Odette can be reasoned with?”

“I really don’t think so.” Harlow shook her head emphatically. “This whole turning off everyone’s magic thing was probably Odette’s idea in the first place. She has a reputation for making very harsh and extreme choices for the witches of New Orleans.”

That didn’t make me feel any better.

“Dammit. *Okay*,” I said bracingly. “I guess we just have to do the guns blazing thing after all.” I shrugged. “A show of force is kind of what we’re best at, anyway.”

Xavier nodded in agreement to this, but Greyson sighed, looking worried.

“Okay,” he said in a resigned tone. “But everyone needs to be fully shifted when we go in. I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Fine by me,” Xavier muttered.

“You got it, bud,” Gabriel agreed with his impish grin.

“When we get in there, give me five minutes, first,” Harlow said. “I’ll go in as if I’m just there for the meeting. I have an idea that might help.”

I nodded, then turned to Clementine. “Any chance you might want to come and help with all this?”

Clementine gave me a long, cool stare. “Absolutely not.”

“Clementine—” I started.

“I do not put myself in risky situations if I can avoid it, Caliana,” she said firmly. “You must have realized that about me by now.”

I nodded. I had realized that about her. Clementine looked out for Clementine, and I’d figured this would be her answer, especially since her magic wasn’t working at the moment. I knew it made her feel vulnerable, to be unable to protect herself.

“Okay, let’s roll,” Xavier said, his whole body looking tense. “No reason to wait around.”

The moment we got outside, I started feeling kind of woozy. The air felt like it was suffocating me. Like someone had wrapped wool around my mouth and nose. There just didn’t seem to be enough air. My head spun alarmingly, but I told myself I probably wasn’t drinking enough water. I always needed to remember to hydrate… It was hard to remember to drink water when we were running around trying not to die.

But as we kept walking, I started to feel really bogged down. It was like my limbs were filling with wet cement. They were getting heavier and heavier. My brain felt slow, and it was hard to form words into sentences. Even my thoughts were muddled. What was going on? Why was my body reacting this way? It couldn’t be simple dehydration. It felt like more. But what? That was the scary question.

I turned to call back to my mates, but as I turned to look down the sidewalk, the sidewalk around me melted away, and suddenly I was standing in a very dark cave.

“Greyson!” I called into the echoing darkness. “Xavier? Where are you?”

The only answer was my own echo.

Suddenly, there was a pain like a hot knife stabbing into my shoulder. I lifted my hand to my shoulder just as I felt the Seluna mark flare.

I cried out in pain and shock.

No! This wasn’t possible.

But a deep voice inside my head laughed, the sound terrible and cruel.

Then it spoke.

*Join me in hell.*

# Episode 3238

**Greyson**

I turned around and reached for Cali, but my hand grabbed nothing but thin air. I stopped short and looked around. *That’s weird. I’m all alone.* Everyone was gone—my brother, our friends, my mate… *What the hell is going on? They were all right here, just a second ago.*

My head started to feel a little cloudy, and suddenly, I was enveloped in a thick darkness that seemed to shoot in at me from all directions.

“Hello!” I called out into the dark as I felt around for where I was. “Hello?”

Seconds later, light flooded the area, and I was in the kitchen of the safe house. I blinked a few times, trying to clear the disorientation from my mind.

*How the hell did I get back here? We left the safe house… Didn’t we?*

I was seated at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and the newspaper spread out in front of me. I looked down to see that I had a pen in my hand. *Am I doing the crossword? What in the world?* I put the pen down. I’d never done a crossword in my life!

I pushed away from the table and stood up. *Now, what was it that I was doing?* My head was so damn fuzzy, but I just knew that I’d been doing something that had to do with my brother and a… young woman. I could see her face clearly in my mind, but her name wouldn’t come to me no matter how hard I tried to remember it. I was still trying to parse it out when the back door opened and someone came walking inside.

“Greyson, could you give me a hand with the groceries?”

“Of course.” I didn’t hesitate for a second. I raced to the door and took one of the bags, then set it down on the kitchen counter. I made a few more trips before the woman came in with a smile on her face, her eyes shining as she looked at me.

“Thanks for your help. I feel like I bought up the whole place, but wouldn’t you know it, I still forgot some stuff.” She sighed and shook her head.

I smiled at her. “You didn’t forget to grab the steaks we wanted, did you, Maren? I can start up the grill soon, if you got them.”

Maren smiled at me. “I got the steaks, thankfully—and that sounds perfect. It’s like I can already taste them.”

“Get ready, because I’ve got a new recipe that I can’t wait to try out,” I said, rubbing my hands together.

She laughed. “Can’t wait. I’m going to start putting away everything else.”

I followed after her to help, but then I was hit with another wave of disorientation, and I stumbled a bit before pausing right where I was. I was starting to feel a little woozy, and my head wouldn’t stop pounding. It was almost as if I was at the onset of a really bad headache, but there was something that felt a little… *off* about it, like there was something else going on.

Maren came over to me and put her arms around me to support me. “Are you okay, honey? Do you have a headache or something? You looked like you were about to pass out.”

I shook my head. “No, I just shouldn’t have had that second cup of coffee. You know how I get when I’m over-caffeinated.”

Maren flashed me a knowing smile before glancing into the depths of the house. “Where’s Fenrir?”

“Upstairs, doing his homework.”

“Hmm…” Maren said, looking up the stairs with a skeptical look on her face.

“Speaking of, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something. I’m not so sure Fenrir should be going to that school we put him in.” It had been a constant push and pull for him, from the first day he’d walked through the doors of the place. We’d done so much work to make sure that he was comfortable and that he was getting the best education available, but right now it seemed like we’d made the worst possible decision.

Maren rolled her eyes, sighing as she turned away to continue putting away the groceries. “Greyson, we’ve had this conversation a million times.”

“I know that, but the kids there bully him, and I can see that he has a hard time holding back. Not only is he Dark Fae, he’s a werewolf, love. He isn’t human. He’s special.” I could only imagine what it was like for him to have to grin and bear it and take all the puny barbs from human children, especially when he had the ability level of the entire school—or at least a wing of it.

Maren sighed again and wrapped her arms around herself. “I know that, and I feel bad about it, I really do, but what are we supposed to do? Is there a school made specially for supernatural kids like him? Somewhere he’d fit in better? Even if he did end up somewhere like that, they might not be so kind to him. He’s not your run-of-the-mill supernatural. You and I both know that supernaturals can be as vicious and cliquey as human kids.”

I pulled Maren into a hug. “I know, I know. All valid points. We’ll figure it out. Maybe I need to go ruffle some of those kids’ parents’ feathers. Then maybe they’ll teach their little darlings to behave better or suffer the consequences.”

*It would actually be my pleasure*, I thought, already picturing the damage I could do to them. It would serve them right. They should’ve taught their children manners before they’d unleashed them into the wild.

Maren gave me a playful swat. “No, none of that!”

“I *am* an Alpha, I can do it,” I smirked at Maren, knowing that she was going to give me shit for saying that.

Maren shook her head, giving me an amused look. “Okay, Mr. Alpha.”

“Hey, watch that tone of yours,” I joked. I backed her up against the counter. “We’ll figure it out. I promise, love. Don’t worry about it. I’ll make it my mission to ensure that our son gets the type of schooling he needs. I want him to be well-adjusted and successful, like his father.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Maren said before leaning in to kiss me.

“Please do,” I said between kisses. As our kiss deepened, her soft lips sliding softly against mine, an intense emotion began to overtake me. This was Maren, my wife, my Luna, the mother of my son. I loved her so much and had so much respect for her. I couldn’t have chosen a better partner if I’d had a thousand lifetimes to try, and I was lucky that I wouldn’t ever have to.

I stifled my groan as the kiss started to get a bit heated—like it always did. We weren’t very good at keeping our hands off each other, and I couldn’t see a reason why we should try to change that right now. A few moments passed before we heard someone stomping down the stairs. Maren and I shot apart, sharing a conspiratorial glance as Fenrir came walking into the room.

*Wow. He’s grown up so fast. I can’t believe he’s eight already.*

“How’s the homework going, Fen?” I asked. Unfortunately, I could read the answer all over his face.

“It’s not. I don’t want to do it,” Fenrir snapped. “Homework is stupid.”

“Don’t say that, baby. Homework is an important part of school,” Maren countered.

I didn’t quite agree with her, but there was no way I was going to tell her that in front of our son. She would have my ass in a vice for doing something like that. “Tell you what, go get your homework and we can work on it down here. Together.”

Fenrir stomped his foot. “*No!* I’m done with it! I don’t want to go back to that school! I hate it there!”

He released a blast of Fae magic that went sailing across the room and straight into the kitchen table, upending it along with a potted black orchid, which crashed to the floor.

I was absolutely horrified. “What are you doing?” I was angry, and so was Fenrir.

He looked up at me, a deep scowl on his face. “You’re just like your dad!”

Dark spots appeared in my vision. “What did you just say?”

“I said that you’re just like your dad! And I don’t want you as mine.” Fenrir stomped his foot and hit me with a blast of Fae magic that sent me flying back into the wall before I crashed to the ground.

“Fenrir! Stop!” Maren screamed.

My hands were all cut up from the broken pot on the floor, and I looked at them and then at Fenrir. *This can’t be real.* Then I looked down at my hands again, and at the very real blood gushing out of them. I watched the wounds, waiting for my werewolf healing to kick in, but it didn’t.

What the hell was going on here? Why wasn’t I healing?

# Episode 3239

**Xavier**

Ava and I were sitting under the stars, which were burning bright in the clearest sky I’d seen in a long while. Ava was snuggled into the crook of my arm, pointing out the constellations. I drew in a deep breath of the fragrant summer air as I took a quick look around the yard, admiring the black orchids planted nearby. The night air buzzed with the sound of cicadas and crickets, and though it was a warm night, the breeze was cool. Everything felt… almost perfect.

“I just want to be with you like this forever,” Ava said with a sigh. She nuzzled her head under my jaw. “Just like this.”

I hugged her close and looked back up at the stars. Everything should’ve been fine—it was a beautiful night, after all—but I was in a weird mood. I felt like there was something missing, something I was supposed to be doing, but it sometimes felt that way whenever I was with Ava.

*I need to just push through the weirdness and be present and in the moment with her, but it’s like something’s nagging at the back of my mind and it won’t quit.*

Ava put a hand on my chest and kissed my neck. “I’ve been waiting so long for a moment like this with you. Alone with the Alpha. *Finally.*”

I smiled. “Oh yeah? Still trying to make your bid for Luna?” I stroked Ava’s long hair, still trying to will the strange feeling away.

She smirked. “I think I already won, didn’t I?”

I shrugged. “You can still show me what you’ve got.”

Ava’s smirk became seductive as she leaned forward and kissed me on the lips. I pulled her to me until we were both lying down in the soft grass. I covered her body with mine, caressing the side of her face as my tongue explored the sweet warmth of her mouth. Ava arched against me, then wrapped her legs around my waist and tightened them, pulling me in even closer.

“Your lips taste so sweet,” I said, my voice sounding strange to my own ears.

“So do yours.”

We broke apart and gazed into each other’s eyes before plunging back in, even more intense than before. Ava ran her hands up and down my back, and I pressed my burgeoning arousal against her center, sweeping my tongue deeper into her mouth.

Ava rolled me over onto my back, yanked down my pants, and mounted me. I closed my eyes and laid back as she moved on top of me.

Ava was my mate, and this felt right, though I couldn’t ignore this strange sensation that I felt disconnected from my body, like I was watching myself from above. I forced myself to shake it off and focused instead on the glorious sensation of Ava’s warm body moving against mine. Not only was Ava my partner and my confidant, but she was my fierce, capable Luna, and that was all that mattered.

*All of that should make me feel good, but why does it feel like my heart has a hole in it? Why does it feel like there’s something missing? Something big. Something important. But why can’t I put my finger on what it is?*

Once we were finished, I sat up and ran a hand through my hair. I turned and gazed into Ava’s beautiful eyes, and she looked back with an expression of pure adoration.

*Why aren’t I enjoying this? She’s a beautiful woman, loyal, strong… But there’s something wrong here. Something just isn’t right.*

All of a sudden, I felt like I was itching to get out of my skin. I could barely sit still. I resisted the urge to shoot to my feet and start pacing—anything to stop the strange feeling that was overtaking my entire body.

*Maybe a run will do the job. Maybe I just need to burn off some excess energy or something.* I looked down at her. Ava’s cheeks were still flushed, and her eyes were heavy from our lovemaking.

“I think I’m going to go for a run,” I said. “We’re probably due for another patrol anyway.”

“Really?” Ava asked, trying to pull me back down to her. “No, X, stay with me. We barely ever get any time to ourselves. We just had sex! Are you really going to leave me right now? What about my cuddles?” she joked as she pouted up at me, fluttering her long eyelashes.

I looked down at her and smiled, resisting her pull. “Like you said, I’m the Alpha. I have to do my duty.” *And I need to get away from here. Far away from here. Now. What’s going on with me? Why do I feel so… off?*

Ava’s face fell. “But, Xavier…”

I stood up, not wanting to hear it. In another context, hearing her beg would’ve kicked off another round between us, but something just wasn’t right, and I couldn’t shake the feeling, no matter how hard I tried. *It almost feels like I just made a mistake…*

“Sorry, I’ve got to go.” I just needed to put some space between us so that I could clear my head and figure out what the hell was going on with me.

“Then I’ll come with you,” Ava said, straightening her skirt and blouse and moving to get up. “I can help with the patrol, no problem.”

“No, I’m going alone.” I definitely didn’t want company, and I was getting more and more antsy to get away as the seconds passed.

Ava looked up at me, confusion marring her features. “What? Why?”

I didn’t answer her. I was itching to get away from her and run. I had to stop myself from scratching all over, that was how intense the feeling was getting.

“What is this really about, Xavier?” Ava’s voice was even, but I could hear the displeasure resting just below the surface.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why are you trying to run away from me right now? Just a moment ago we were sitting here under the stars and enjoying each other, and now you can’t wait to get as far away from me as you can. What gives?”

I groaned and threw my head back in annoyance. *Of course Ava would think the worst of me at this moment.* “Listen, there’s no hidden agenda here. I just need to go for a run. Why are you reading so much into this?”

Ava got up and dusted herself off with quick, jerky movements, her frustration obvious. “Because you’re acting so weird. So unlike yourself. Can you just talk to me and let me know what’s really going on? We always talk to each other when something’s going on with us, so why not now? What’s changed?”

I shook my head and sighed. “We can talk when I get back.” I turned and started to head away from the house, resisting the urge to sprint off and shift right then and there.

“My god. Sometimes you’re just like Silas!” Ava hissed.

That stopped me dead in my tracks. I whirled around to look at her. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Ava held up her head defiantly. “You heard me. I meant for you to hear me. Sometimes you can be so cruel, Xavier, just like him. How can you not see that leaving me right now after we’ve just made *love* to each other is, like, the most insensitive thing ever? What kind of person does that?” Ava had crossed her arms over her chest, obviously not even thinking of backing down.

I felt like I was about to explode. So many emotions were rushing through me and filling me up that I couldn’t even begin to make sense of them all. I couldn’t discern one emotion from the other; it was all a big jumble in my head.

I raised my head and looked Ava in the eye. “Maybe this relationship isn’t working.”

Ava blinked at me, all the color draining from her face. “*What?*”

“Yeah. Maybe this isn’t working. To be honest, it never has. We shouldn’t be together.” This all felt a little rash and a bit rushed, but at the same time, it didn’t. It felt like the right thing to do. “This isn’t for me anymore. I’m done.”

Ava came walking over to me, her eyes pleading as she looked at me. “Xavier, you don’t mean that.”

I stepped forward, realizing that all my rushing emotions seemed to have congealed into an icy feeling at the pit of my stomach. “I don’t love you. We’re done.” The words sounded harsh and cutting as they left my lips, but I didn’t care. It almost felt like the itching had subsided a little as soon as I’d said them.

Ava gasped and turned away from me, her shoulders shaking as she began to cry. I almost stepped forward to comfort her, feeling like this was yet another mistake. Then she turned around to face me—except it wasn’t Ava anymore, it was Cali.

*Cali.*

*Fuck. What is going on?*

She looked up at me, her eyes brimming with tears. “Just go!”

# Episode 3240

**Gabriel**

I sat back on the bed with a book in my hand. I was pretty comfortable, but I didn’t open the book just yet. I was too busy admiring Mikah as he stacked the logs in the fireplace, his handsome face set in concentration. I finally tore my gaze away from my mate and flipped open the book. I leafed through it until I came to a pressed flower between two of the pages. It was a black orchid. I closed the book, turning my attention back to Mikah.

“You need to light the starter in the center of the logs, or it’s not going to work,” I said.

Mikah turned around with a bemused look on his face. “I’ve got this. Just sit back, relax, and get ready to enjoy.” He gave his head a little shake before turning back to what he was doing, angling himself so that I couldn’t see.

I rolled my eyes but watched with pride as the fire started burning. *What can’t he do?* Mikah flashed me a triumphant look before coming to join me on the bed. I put the book down and snuggled against him, laying my head on his chest, which was silent. *I don’t think I’ll ever get used to not hearing his heartbeat.*

“This is nice,” I said with a pleased sigh. “For once we get to just hang out without needing to save the world.”

Mikah laughed. “You mean without me having to save you from doing something that would *endanger* the rest of the world?”

I snorted. “Right. Sure. As if it’s always me doing something that puts everyone in danger.” He wasn’t wrong, exactly, but I still didn’t appreciate him teasing me about it. I always had the best intentions, after all.

Mikah shrugged. “All I’m saying is that there’s a track record. No need to get all defensive.” He gave me a teasing smile.

I sat up. “A track record? A *track record*?” I shook my head. “That’s it.”

Before Mikah could make a move, I scooped him up into my arms and stood up on the bed, jumping up and down with him and making him throw back his head and laugh.

Mikah had his arm wrapped around my shoulders. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

Feeling mischievous, I pretended to drop him, but then caught him at the last second. “What do you mean?” I pretend-dropped him again, almost letting him hit the bed before I swiftly caught him.

Mikah looked less than amused. “Stop, Gabriel.”

“Stop what?” I did it a few more times, causing Mikah to gasp, exasperated. “What’s the problem? I’m just cradling my mate in my arms. What’s so bad about that?”

“Stop it, Gabe, before you actually drop me and I bounce off the bed and onto the floor.”

“I’m sure you’d forgive me. You can never stay mad at me.” I made to drop him again. “So what’s the track record now? Huh?”

I went to drop him again, but then Mikah wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back down onto the bed. We fell into each other, a tangled mass of limbs. I was laughing so hard that I could barely catch my breath.

Mikah ended up on top and pinned me down. “Oh, well, isn’t this interesting? How the tables have turned.” He leaned in close, and I could feel the heat rolling off his body.

I took a moment to catch my breath, my eyes on Mikah the entire time. *He’s so gorgeous. I never would’ve thought that I’d end up mated to someone like this, let alone a vampire. It’s strange how crazy life can be sometimes.*

Mikah was looking me over as well, but he wasn’t laughing anymore. In fact, he looked super serious all of a sudden.

I reached up and cupped his cheek. “Penny for your thoughts?”

Mikah gave me a grave look. “We need to talk about something.” He sighed and looked away from me, staring into the fire as if hypnotized by the dancing flames.

The seriousness of his tone had me a little taken aback. “Really? What?”

Mikah rolled off me and sat up on the bed. “I didn’t really want to bring this up, not right away. I wanted us to have a good evening, but it’s just on my mind… I can’t help it.”

I sat up to and scooted closer to my mate. “Okay, now you’re starting to scare me. What’s up?” My mind raced, thinking of all the possibilities. *He’s not about to break up with me or something, is he? Things are great. He couldn’t be thinking that… Could he?*

Mikah looked me directly in the eye and said, “You’re going to die.”

I choked out a laugh and then waited for him to say that he was joking, but he didn’t. “Um, *what*? Like when? Right now?”

Mikah broke eye contact with me and looked back at the fire. “No, not exactly.”

I grabbed his chin and turned him to face me. “So… You’re saying metaphorically, like a little death? Is that some kind of weird vampire way to talk about having sex with me? Because if it is…”

Mikah shook his head. “No. I’m being serious. We need to face the reality of our situation. We’re mated, yes, but I’m a vampire, and you’re a werewolf. That means that eventually, you’re going to die. You’re going to die and leave me all alone.”

I shook my head, trying to make sense of the turn he’d just taken. One minute we’d been playing around, and now we were having one of the deepest conversations we’d ever shared. “Why are you bringing this up right now? I mean, I’m no vampire, but werewolves have a pretty long lifespan. Longer than humans, anyway.”

Mikah winced at the word “human.”

*Fuck… Mikah’s wife was human.*

“Yes, but I don’t age,” he said. “At all. I’ll continue to exist here in this world, and you? Well, you’ll have moved on. There’s no two ways about it. I’m going to outlive you, and that means I’ll have to deal with living in this world without you.”

“Sure,” I said slowly. “That might be true, but it also might not be. You realize how much crazy shit we’ve been involved in, right? I could become a werewolf god tomorrow, you don’t know. Who will outlive who, then?” I smirked, but Mikah still looked serious.

He took my hand. “I didn’t want to talk about this, but it’s been on my mind. I wanted to just leave it for another time and enjoy our evening, enjoy the fire.” He cast a forlorn look at the crackling flames. “But I just couldn’t stop thinking about it.”

I could see that all this was weighing heavily on him, and I hated to see him so torn up. I cupped his cheek again. “It doesn’t matter if we’re a werewolf and a vampire or a werewolf god and a vampire—”

Mikah snorted.

*Finally, he’s lightening up a little.*

“We’re mates,” I said. “That means I’m going to do whatever it takes to be with you, forever. Nothing will keep me away from you. Not even my potential death.”

Mikah opened his mouth as if to mount some argument against that, but I held up a finger.

“Let’s stop worrying about this right now.” I leaned forward, and Mikah’s lips met mine. As usual, a bolt of electricity raced through me at the contact, and I leaned in, easing my tongue into his mouth.

“Who can worry when you’re doing this?” Mikah said, breaking away for a moment to pull me down on top of him. He slid his tongue into my mouth, suckling my tongue as he tunneled his strong hands beneath my shirt to stroke my feverish skin.

I leaned away from Mikah, pulled off my shirt, and tossed it on the floor, then hurriedly returned my lips to his. I peppered his mouth with a series of quick kisses before I pressed my mouth hard against his, nibbling at his lips and then suckling the bottom one, making him moan. I couldn’t stop myself from slowly rolling my hips against him, urging him to feel how hot he made me.

Before things got any more heated, I pulled away and looked at him. “I love you—don’t forget that. Nothing else matters. Got it?”

Mikah nodded. “I love you, too.”

Our lips met again. I fucking loved it.

Suddenly, I was back reclining on the bed with my book in hand, watching Mikah start the fire. I admired my mate while he stacked the logs in the fireplace. I looked down at the book and the black orchid pressed between the pages, then back up at Mikah. “You need to light the starter in the center of the logs, or it’s not going to work.”

I was starting to feel really strange.

*Wait, what the fuck? Didn’t I just do all of this?*

# Episode 3241

The pain in my shoulder was near excruciating, causing me to wince and grit my teeth. *It has to be the mark flaring up. That’s all.* The pain sharpened, and I cried out, feeling almost like I was floating for a second. Someone—or something—was pulling at my hair, and I whipped around to see who it was. *Where am I?* I looked around frantically, but I couldn’t make sense of my surroundings. *Am I in some sort of void?*

I closed my eyes, hoping that when I opened them things would be back to normal. Then I heard Lola’s voice.

“WAKE UP YOU LAZY B! It’s your wedding day!”

My eyes shot open to see a fancy bedroom with plush white carpet and a sparkling chandelier overhead. I was sitting at an ornate white vanity beside a giant closet, and I was dressed in a silky white robe with my name on the breast pocket.

*Where the hell am I?*

I blinked a few times, taking in the sight of what looked to be nearly the entire pack buzzing around my room, getting ready. Everyone was wearing those silk bridesmaid robes. Mrs. Smith, Big Mac, and Zainab were sipping from flutes of what looked like mimosas in the corner, Dani and Marta were laughing and talking while steaming my dress, Rishika and Violet and Sage were busy arranging all of my hair and makeup stuff on the vanity, and Torin was loading a crystal tray with dainty breakfast pastries.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked back to see Lola grinning down at me. “Come on, we’re just getting started on your hair, and we can’t exactly do that while you’re falling asleep in the chair!”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Artemis said. “And I barely know how to curl hair, so don’t make it any harder for me. Sit up straight before my hand slips and I burn all your hair off.”

I gasped. “Burn it off?”

Artemis shrugged.

My mother came in, her eyes sparkling as she looked at me. “Now, now, girls, go easy on her. Let’s not ruin Cali’s special day.” She looked at Artemis. “Artemis, would you rather I curl your hair instead? You still need that done, and time is ticking.” My mother tapped the face of the watch she was wearing.

I was relieved when Artemis agreed. I started to breathe a little easier once she’d moved off and was no longer holding a hot metal rod anywhere near me.

Lola squeezed my shoulder again, her nails digging into my skin ever so slightly. “Aren’t you just so excited to be marrying your mate? *I’m* excited! I can’t believe this day has finally come!” She clapped her hands in glee and did a little hopping dance.

“Yes! Of course!” I said without really thinking. Then it hit me. *Which mate is Lola talking about? How is this possible? How don’t I know who the hell I’m about to marry? What’s going on here?*

Now I was feeling really self-conscious and more than a little freaked out as I sat there trying to figure out how to learn which mate I was about to marry. *How would a question like that even make me look?* I didn’t remember ever making a choice between Xavier and Greyson, but apparently I had.

*When? How? What happened?*

I started feeling really hot all of a sudden, and then I realized that Lola was holding a curling iron inches from my right cheek as she wound a tendril of my hair around it.

“CALI, DON’T MOVE!” Lola said. “You wouldn’t want a big red burn mark on your cheek for your big day, would you? Now face forward and stop fidgeting!”

I faced forward, and there was a bouquet of flowers in my face. It was a beautiful, robust mix of white roses and black orchids.

“Are these up to your standards?” Maya asked, twisting the bouquet around in her hands so that I could see it from every angle.

I gasped, taking care not to move my head too much in my excitement. I didn’t want to get chastised by Lola yet again—or worse yet, burned. “Yes, they’re beautiful!”

Maya brought the flowers close to my nose so that I could smell them, but it was weird. I couldn’t smell a thing.

“Good, Maya, we have to keep Cali awake and alert. She keeps falling asleep,” Lola said, thankfully moving on to another section of hair that wasn’t as close to my face. “Let’s hope she can keep her eyes open while I put the finishing touches on her hair.”

Maya set the bouquet down and crossed her arms over her chest. “Falling asleep? Seriously? If you’re tired now, how are you going to stay awake long enough to deal with your wedding night?” Maya raised an evil eyebrow, and I felt myself blush. “Are you going to be asleep at the reception, too? Sheesh!”

*I still don’t even have the slightest idea who I’m getting married to. How am I going to get that little tidbit of information out of anyone here without sounding completely crazy?*

“Why are you blushing like that?” Maya continued. “I thought you weren’t a virgin anymore, but you sure are acting like one. Don’t you already know what your mate likes? It shouldn’t be rocket science at this point.”

I blushed even more. “What who likes?”

Maya scowled and rolled her eyes. “Don’t play stupid, Caliana. Your mate. You know what your mate likes, right? Don’t tell me you don’t know how to give him an erection. Your wedding night is the perfect opportunity to show him exactly what he’s signed up for. Don’t make him regret it.”

Lola jumped to my aid. “You’ve been spending *way* too much time with Colton, Maya, asking for dirty details like that. He’s rubbing off on you, and that’s not good.”

Maya shrugged. “Just trying to prepare her. Getting married to an Alpha isn’t for the type of person who’s going to fall asleep at eleven p.m., post wedding. He’s going to want to go at it. All. Night. Long.” Maya waggled her eyebrows and smirked. “I hope you’ve thought about what to wear after you take that dress off. It needs to be something he’ll never fucking forget. Let me know if you need some pointers.”

I blushed again, and Maya’s wicked smile widened as she began to move off.

“I’d better go put my dress on. It’s almost time, Caliana!” Maya said, making it sound like a threat rather than what should have been one of the most amazing moments of my life.

I turned to Lola, distressed. “Why did I ask Maya to be a bridesmaid, again?”

Lola placed a hand on my shoulder, trying to calm me down. “Because she’s mated to your mate’s brother, why else?”

*That still doesn’t answer the question of WHICH BROTHER it is that I’m about to marry… But at least that leaves Colton out of the equation.* I shuddered. *Thank god.*

“Don’t worry, Cali, really. You’ve got this, and you’re going to make a lovely bride—during and after the wedding. If you sit still and let me finish your hair, that is.”

I did my best to stay still, my mind still racing as Lola pinned my hair up into artful ringlets, complete with a sparkling pin for the bling factor. Despite the rising panic in my stomach, I was able to appreciate how good I looked. Lola had done a great job.

My mom came over to us. “Oh, honey, you already look absolutely stunning! Now come on, it’s time to put on your wedding dress!”

The words had scarcely left her mouth before the door opened and Colton stuck his head in. “Ladies and Torin…”

“Get out!” everyone shouted in unison.

Colton rolled his eyes. “I have a message for the bride.” He looked at me, waggling his eyebrows like Maya had only a few moments ago. “It’s time. Don’t leave my brother waiting!”

He left, and I cursed under my breath. *I still don’t know which brother I’m marrying!* I felt absolutely awful, but I stood up and walked over to where my gown was hanging on the bathroom door, beautiful and crisply pressed. My mom and Artemis helped me into the dress, and once it was on, I revolved in front of the mirror, admiring it. It was a gorgeous dress with a keyhole back, buttons trailing down the train, and tasteful lace at the bodice. It was classic yet sexy at the same time. I loved it.

“You look so beautiful, Cali,” my mother said, tearing up. She gathered me into a hug, and I relaxed against her, though I was still horrified that I had no idea who I was going to see at the end of the aisle.

“Could I have a moment alone?” I asked.

“Of course,” my mother said, and she and Artemis left me, closing the door behind them.

I took a deep breath as I looked at myself in the mirror. “Why don’t you know who you’re marrying?” I whispered out loud.

It felt so weird, like there was this huge blank spot in my head. I closed my eyes, but when I opened them, it wasn’t my reflection staring back at me. Instead, it was someone I’d have known anywhere.

*Seluna*.

# Episode 3242

I froze, fear taking over as I stared not at my own reflection, but at Seluna’s. The demon smiled at me, andI shuddered. I took a couple of steps back from the mirror, not believing my eyes.

“It’s good to see you, Caliana. It’s been way too long.” Seluna cackled. “I don’t know if you remember, but we have a bit of unfinished business to take care of.”

I turned toward the bathroom door, ready to book it out of there. *I need to call for help—even though this all has to be in my head, right? This can’t be real. It doesn’t feel real… But at the same time, it does.*

I tried to move toward the door while holding the bottom of my heavy gown in my hands, but something compelled me to turn back. It wasn’t me choosing to do it—my body was literally being forced into it, and no matter how hard I fought, it was like my body was no longer mine to control.

Seluna had a hand up, and her fingers were moving like she was the puppeteer pulling my strings. She had a look on her face that was downright sadistic, and I had to stop myself from shaking in fear as she pulled me closer and closer to the mirror.

“Tsk, tsk, Caliana. I wanted to talk to you for a minute, and this is how you treat a wedding guest? How rude. I would’ve thought your Fae mother would have taught you better than that. Or maybe you think because you sleep with an Alpha… or two… showing a little politeness to others is beneath you.”

I struggled against whatever demon power Seluna was using on me. “You’re not my guest! You’re not welcome here! Leave! Get the hell out of here and never come back!”

I sounded fiercer than I felt, but there was no way I was going to go down without a fight. If Seluna thought that I was going to be an easy target, then she was very wrong.

Seluna frowned. “What a pity. But you don’t have any say in it, do you, poor little half-Fae?” Seluna beckoned me closer with a flick of her finger, and I was surprised and horrified when my feet obeyed. “See? Doesn’t look like you have a say in this at all. In fact, some might say that I’m the one pulling the strings here!” She threw her head back and cackled like a movie villain, except there was nothing funny about the truth behind her words.

*What is Seluna doing? And to what end?* I finally reached the mirror again and was now mere inches away from it. I tried to look beyond Seluna and into the mirror to find any clue that might tell me where or when I really was. *Am I in the spirit realm?*

“I’ve waited such a long time to do this, Caliana. How fortuitous that it’s all happening on your wedding day, of all days.” Seluna beamed at me, her slightly pointy demon teeth shining at me from the mirror.

*I don’t like the sound of that at all.* I concentrated and dug deep, deciding to try to use my Fae magic. I knew it was bad luck to break a mirror, but that probably didn’t apply if there was a demon in it. *Desperate times call for desperate measures.* I was almost more afraid of her now than I’d ever been. There was something about being trapped in this tight space with her that made the entire experience all the more menacing.

“Just say what it is that you want! I’m tired of these fucking games! Come out with it! You have no power over me!” Even as I said the words, I knew they weren’t totally true. I was shaking and trembling under Seluna’s gaze. She totally had the upper hand, and she was enjoying it.

Seluna smiled. “I’m so glad you asked. What I want is to be where you are. Standing in that glorious bathroom in that dress, preparing to marry my mate and live out the rest of my life with him.”

“Well that’s too bad!” I sneered. “No one wants you here!” I hoped that she felt the bite of my words. I was tired of this, and I wanted it to be over now—and by any means necessary.

Seluna’s expression turned intense and scary. “I’m not asking permission! Don’t you get that yet?”

Suddenly, I was yanked forward, and my face slammed into the mirror. I hit it with such force that I was surprised it didn’t shatter. I pushed against it, struggling with all my might to break free, but then a burning hot hand closed around my neck. Seluna was reaching right through the mirror and coming straight for me, her strange demonic eyes blazing as she grinned with pleasure. Seluna squeezed my neck, and I gagged and choked, trying to pry her too-hot, too-strong fingers from around my neck.

“You’re going to be the one in the mirror, now, you half-Fae bitch,” Seluna hissed. “You’re going to be the one who’s trapped, and then you’ll have to stand by and watch as I marry your mate instead of you!” Seluna grinned as she squeezed harder. “Or, maybe you’ll simply be dead. Either way, it doesn’t matter to me, as long as I get what I want.”

Seluna’s hand was hot as fire against my neck, and I could see her magic sparking in my peripheral vision. I choked out a scream, but it didn’t seem like anyone outside in the room could hear me, since no one came running to my aid. I reached for the pin that Lola had put in my hair and yanked it out, my hair tumbling around my face. I raised my hand and stabbed the demon in the arm. Seluna hissed and finally released me.

I tumbled to the floor and then scrambled to my feet, knowing that I couldn’t let my guard down for a minute, or Seluna would get the upper hand yet again.

I tapped into my magic and blasted the mirror, but it had the opposite effect of what I’d intended. The mirror shattered into a million pieces, and Seluna came crawling out of it, rivers of blood pouring down her arm. Now she had nothing holding her back.

There was literal fire in her eyes as she looked at me. “You’ll pay for that!” She yanked the pin out of her arm and threw it to the floor. “You just don’t know when to quit, do you, Caliana? You’ve lost! It’s over for you!”

I was getting ready to blast her again, but then a thought hit me. *How am I even fighting Seluna like this? She’s dead. Is this even real? It can’t be. I watched her die—I was the one who killed her. So why does it feel like she’s live and in the flesh right now?*

“I’m going to take your *due destini* power and make the world my own, just as it should be! My plan *will* succeed this time, and you won’t be around to stop me!”

I blinked my eyes quickly, and the vision of Seluna blurred momentarily. I opened my eyes wide again and stared at the demon stalking toward me, blood still gushing out of her arm. I noticed that despite the steady stream of blood, none of it was falling to the floor. The tiles were still bright white and immaculate. *Well that’s certainly not how gravity works…*

I shook my head slowly. “You’re dead. I killed you. This isn’t real. You’re not real.”

Seluna stopped. “No. You didn’t kill me, Caliana. You’re mistaken.”

I felt a certainty that I hadn’t before, and I was more confident and direct when I spoke again. “No. You’re wrong. You *are* dead, and this isn’t you. It’s just your ashes, haunting me.”

Seluna was shaking her head, and I realized that she was fading away and becoming transparent. Suddenly, I could see my own reflection staring back at me in the broken mirror, and Seluna was nowhere to be seen.

I closed my eyes and put a hand on my forehead, suddenly feeling light-headed, as if I could topple to the ground at any moment. I felt off—and weird—and not just because I was being stalked by a demon. I opened my eyes, and one moment, Seluna was there screaming, and in the next, she was gone, and I was all alone in the bathroom.

*Whatever this is, whatever that was, it’s not real. I killed Seluna, and* that’s *real. She can’t hurt me if she’s dead.*

I opened my eyes, and there she was again.

“This isn’t real!” I said as I sent a blast of magic right at her. Seluna shattered before me, just like the mirror had only seconds before.

Finally able to move freely, I hiked up my dress and moved toward the door. I needed to find my mates.

# Episode 3243

I burst out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom, nearly tripping over my dress. Everyone turned around to look at me, alarmed as the door slammed back against the wall with a deafening crack.

Lola hurried over to me. “Uh, is everything all right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

*Close, but not quite.* I nodded, trying to act natural. *Get a grip, Cali. None of that was real. It was some sort of horrible illusion.*

No matter how much I believed that, it was difficult to hold on to the thought. But even as I looked at Lola, I realized that there was something slightly off about my friend. It was Lola, sure, but something in my gut told me that it wasn’t really her at all. It was almost like this image of her was feeding off an image of her that I had in my mind.

I shook it off, trying to clear my head. *I have to figure out how to get out of this mess. I don’t have time to* *analyze the logistics of what’s happening here. Whatever it is, it’s bad, and that’s all I need to know. Nothing else really matters.*

Lola reached up to touch my hair, which was now hanging in curly tendrils about my face. “Where’s your pin? Why’d you take it out?”

I couldn’t help but think about the terrifying Seluna confrontation in the bathroom that was and wasn’t, all at the same time. “Oh, I just decided to wear my hair down. You know, it just felt more me this way.”

Lola shrugged and gave me a strange look. “If you say so. Your wedding.”

“But thank you for making me look so good. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course. I’d do anything for you, Cali. You know that,” Lola said, her expression soft.

I nodded at her, distracted. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I need to go check out something downstairs.” I turned to go.

“The cake is fine!” Maya called out. “I already checked on it. Relax!” She turned to Violet. “I don’t know why she’s being so extra about the damn cake.”

Using that as the perfect excuse, I said, “Well, you can’t be too sure, you know. This is my special day, and I just want everything to be perfect. Especially the cake.”

I flashed a tight smile, hoping that it looked like an actual smile and not a scowl, which was what it felt like. Without waiting for anyone to say anything else, I bolted from the room.

As soon as I entered the hallway, I was plunged into the same thick darkness I’d experienced before I’d come to in the bedroom. For a moment, everything was quiet. I couldn’t even hear any chatter coming from the room behind me.

I was completely alone. As my eyes adjusted, I recognized where I was. The safe house? When had we left Clementine’s? *How* had we left Clementine’s?

*That doesn’t make sense. I should be able to hear them… I’m right. There’s definitely something strange going on here. I need to find Xavier and Greyson ASAP!*

I started walking through the darkness, calling out to them. “Xavier! Greyson! Xavier! Greyson! Where are you?” There was no answer.

*Maybe I could try to tap into the mate bond?*

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on my connection to Xavier and Greyson, and before long, I started to feel something. A warm sensation spread through my entire body, almost as if our mate bond was telling me that Xavier and Greyson were somewhere nearby.

*That’s good, right? That means they aren’t so far away that I can’t connect with them.* I let out a deep breath, feeling relieved and confident that I would soon lay eyes on my mates. I was so worried about them in this strange place, and I couldn’t wait to be reunited with them.

But the second I opened my eyes, I found myself in a bright, bustling hallway. Colton was standing right in front of me, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

“Earth to Caliana. You good, girl?” Colton leaned close. “Man, you were zoned the hell out! Damn.”

“What?” I was still blinking, trying to adjust to such a drastic shift from complete darkness to the bright light of the hallway and Colton’s presence. “Oh, yeah, I’m good.”

“Good. I’m just giving you the fifteen minute warning… It’s not time yet, but we’re almost there. I don’t want my brother to see you before he’s supposed to. That’s, like, really bad luck, right?”

*Aw, that’s so sweet. Colton’s trying to help protect our special day!* Immediately, I chastised myself. *This is all fake, remember? This isn’t actually Colton!*

I smiled. “I’m just going to go check on the cake really quick.”

Colton fluttered his eyelashes. “Ah yes, your beautiful pet project. I don’t care what Maya says, I get why you’re so obsessed with the cake. The cake is an important part of any wedding. I can see why it’s got to be perfect.”

I gave him a polite smile, wondering if I’d ever really cared about a cake so much in my entire life. I doubted that I had.

“Oh, but I have something for you before you rush off!” Colton said, holding up a finger. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a box, which he handed to me with a flourish.

“What is this?”

He grinned. “An early wedding present. Go on, open it.”

I unwrapped the box and cracked it open. Inside was a small bolt lock. I laughed, thinking about all the times Colton had walked in on me in a compromising position.

Colton winked at me. “Thought this might come in handy for tonight—to keep the riff-raff out.”

“Thanks. So, when are you and Maya going to tie the knot?”

Colton shrugged and looked off into the distance. “Focus on yourself for now. You’d better go check on that cake because now”—he checked his watch—“you’re down to ten minutes until go-time.”

I shook the box at Colton as I walked away. “Thanks again!”

I turned and rushed downstairs, thinking about cakes and frosting and—shit! I was getting sucked in again. None of this was real, but I was having a hard time reminding myself of that. As I jogged down the stairs, I looked around, trying to remember what the safe house had looked like before it was covered in flowers. *What kind of choice is white roses and black orchids, anyway? Doesn’t seem like something I would pick.*

As soon as I reached the bottom of the stairs, I heard a gasp. I turned to see my father, who covered his mouth as he approached me. He was starting to tear up.

“Cali, you look absolutely beautiful.”

“Dad, don’t cry,” I said as I pulled him into a hug.

“How can I not? My little girl is getting married.”

“Yes, but you still have Artemis’s wedding to look forward to.”

He laughed. “Don’t remind me! My girls. Oh, Caliana. You look so, so beautiful, sweetheart.”

I was feeling all the feels with my dad, and then the little voice in the back of my head sparked to life.

*This is not real, and this is NOT your dad. Keep your head in the game, for goodness sake!*

This time when I blinked, I was plunged back into the darkness of the house. The warm feeling was back, too. *The mate bond. I can feel it again.* “Xavier! Greyson! Where are you? Answer me! Can you hear me?”

I heard someone groan and took off running. It sounded like whoever had made that sound was in pain. I blinked, and for a moment, I was back in the illusion, my dad calling after me as I sprinted down the hallway. I ignored it, instead running toward where I’d heard the sound.

I blinked again, and I was in the empty, dark safe house.

I blinked again, and I was right in the middle of colliding with the caterer who happened to be carrying the cake, which toppled to the floor.

I stood there stunned, looking between the ruined cake and the stunned caterer before I pushed past him and blinked back into the darkness, where I could just see the outline of a figure lying on the ground. There was blood everywhere. I stopped short, my heart hammering away in my chest.

*It’s Greyson! He’s hurt!* I rushed toward him. “Greyson! Greyson! Can you hear me?”

He was out of it. I looked closely at his wound, which was still gushing blood. *Why isn’t he healing?*

I blinked, and I was in the brightly lit room again, covered in cake. *What’s going on? Why won’t this stop happening?*

I closed my eyes, focusing my thoughts on Greyson, and when I opened my eyes I was back in the dark kitchen with him. I had to do whatever it took to snap him out of this. To snap *myself* out of this. I wasn’t sure what I could do to help Greyson, but I thought about Sleeping Beauty, where the prince kissed the princess awake.

I reached out and shook Greyson gently, but he didn’t stir. I was scared and had no idea what had happened to him, or what the hell was even going on right now.

*I have to act now.*

Taking a deep breath, I leaned forward and kissed him.

# Episode 3244

**Greyson**

I looked down at my hands, which were shredded up pretty bad.

*Why aren’t the cuts healing? Under normal circumstances, the bleeding would have stopped by now and I’d be halfway to good as new.* Clearly these weren’t normal circumstances sinceI just kept bleeding and bleeding. My blood dripped onto the floor and onto the wilted orchid lying in its broken pot, creating an eerie scene.

I looked back at my son. “Fenrir, why did you do that?”

“A great question,” Maren said, looking at Fenrir in horror. “You can’t do things like that, young man! It’s not right! You can’t just go around blasting people with your magic like that whenever you get angry, especially not your father!”

Fenrir turned on Maren with a dark look in his eyes. “I had to do it. Neither of you are listening to me. You never listen to me!” Fenrir looked back at me. “He’s not even my real father anyway!” Fenrir’s eyes were cold and dark as he looked at me. It looked like he literally hated me.

Maren gasped. “That’s not true, Fenrir! Who told you that? Why would you even say something like that?”

“Listen, son, it’s okay. I just want you to calm down. We want to listen to you. We love you.”

Fenrir’s eyes went even darker. “Well, I don’t love you! Neither of you!”

Hearing him say that was like a kick to the gut, and I didn’t expect it when Fenrir blasted me again, sending me sliding across the floor. Shards of the broken pot flew at me as I hurried to cover my face.

*What am I supposed to do? I’m not going to attack my own son. Never. But I can’t just stand around and let him use me for target practice, either.*

But when I lowered my arms, it wasn’t Fenrir standing there, but… *Shaine?* I looked into Shaine’s cold eyes. I hadn’t thought about him in so long, not since our battle with Silas-Letifer. I shuddered to think about the little boy standing by Silas’s side as he attacked us. He looked just as creepy and unsettling now as he had then.

Shaine stepped forward. “Did you miss me, Dad? Isn’t this family everything you ever hoped for? Everything you ever wanted?” His lips curled into a joyless smile.

“Where’s Fenrir?” Maren asked, looking around frantically. “Fenrir! Fenrir!” She rounded on Shaine. “What did you do with him? Where’s my son?”

Shaine looked at Maren. “Oh come now, Mom. It’s me. You should know your stepson. Fenrir’s just fine. He’s just sleeping. Nothing to worry about.”

I wasn’t sure what the hell was going on, but I pushed myself to my feet once again, the blood from the cuts dripping down my arms. I had no idea why I wasn’t healing, but I suspected it had something to do with Shaine. *There’s nothing good about this child. He’s not my son. He’s not even real.*

This sparked something in my mind, and for a moment, everything stood still. I felt something warm and soft press against my lips, and then a lightness—a goodness—surrounded me. The warmth was penetrating and familiar, and I wanted more of it. It was almost like someone was kissing me. I could hear the faint sound of someone calling my name, and I wanted to follow it, but I couldn’t. I was stuck here in this horrible place, trying to make sense of whatever was happening.

*I can’t go. I have to stay here with Maren and this hell-child. I have to find Fenrir—my son—again. I can’t just abandon them…*

I paused at the sound of the voice calling out to me again. The warmth was starting to feel even more real—much more than the scene before me. I closed my eyes for a moment so I could gather my thoughts and figure out what to do, but when I opened them, I was in thick darkness and Cali was hovering over me.

“Cali!” I cried out as immense relief washed through my body.

She pressed her lips to mine again, and I kissed her back, pulling her down to me and relishing the taste of her. I wrapped my arms around her and nuzzled my face into her neck. I was *this* close to crying tears of joy.

Cali pulled away and looked at me. “Greyson? Greyson? Are you back?”

“I am. I’m here.” I pulled her into a hug, not wanting to ever let her go again. She looked so beautiful, and just the sight of her caused butterflies to flutter around in my stomach. I was so damn happy to see her. “What happened?” I looked around. We were in what looked like the kitchen of the safe house, but it was so dark… Almost unnaturally so. Still, anywhere was better than where I’d been before.

“I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but you’re bleeding, and you don’t seem to be healing.” Cali leaned in to examine one of my gaping wounds, her brow furrowed in worry.

I was surprised to hear that. I looked down to see dozens of cuts crisscrossing my arms and hands. I flashed back to the scene with Fenrir and Shaine. *Was that real? What was that? An alternate universe? Or was it all just in my head?*

“I need to give you some of my blood. Maybe that’ll kickstart things for you.” Cali picked up a shard of a broken pot from some poor sunflowers that had fallen to the floor and cut herself with it. She dripped some blood into a few of my wounds, and I watched as they started to heal up right before my eyes. I gave Cali a look of pure adoration. She’d saved me from the horrors of that vision—or whatever it was—and now she was helping to heal me. I didn’t know what I’d do without her.

“What’s going on? Where is everyone? How the hell did we get back to the safe house?” I lifted myself up onto my elbows, finally feeling more like myself again as the wounds on my arms knitted shut.

Cali shook her head. “I have no idea. Maybe we got blipped or something, I’m not sure,” she said. “But I was in some kind of… I don’t know what. A hallucination, an illusion, I don’t quite know what it was… It seemed like it was pulling from my memory but twisting it, but I used our mate bond to find you. I somehow broke out of the illusion when I kissed you, and thank god it broke you out of it, too.” Cali stroked my hair, her gaze locked with mine. I could tell that she’d been worried about me.

I took in a deep breath, relieved that whatever I’d just gone through was over. “None of it was real. At least that much is true. It sure felt real at the time, though. Are you all right?” I reached up and stroked the side of her face, taking care not to get any blood on her.

“I’m all right,” she said, leaning into my touch. “But where are Xavier, Mikah, and Gabriel?”

“I’m not sure, but now that we’ve found each other and broken out of whatever that was, we should try to find them ASAP.” I glanced around the darkened room. “I wonder if a witch was behind all this. Harlow did say that the witches might be waiting for us at the greenhouse, but maybe they came looking for us instead.”

There was no question that they knew we were coming now, so it made perfect sense that they would level a preemptive strike at us rather than wait for us to make our next move against them.

“Could be. I know one thing—whoever did that to us is powerful as hell. They created a whole world that felt so real… I struggled the whole time to keep reminding myself that none of it was really happing. It was really trippy.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, sitting up. “Do you still have the keys?”

I didn’t even want to think about what would happen if she’d somehow lost track of them. It wasn’t like we could retrace our steps and ask the witches for duplicates.

“I’ve got them. That was the first thing I checked for once I was out of that vision.”

“Good,” I said with a sigh. “We need to go find the others quickly and get out of here… Which is probably easier said than done.” I took another look at our surroundings.

“Definitely.” Cali got up off the floor, and I stood, too, feeling a little shaky on my feet at first.

Instinctively, I lifted my nose to the air in an attempt to catch Xavier’s scent—or Gabriel’s or Mikah’s—but instead, I got a nose full of the haunting smell of… Maren? *How is that possible? She wasn’t really here… Right?* The whole Fenrir/Maren thing had to have been fake, but why had I been with Maren in that illusion and not Cali? Was what Cali said true? Was it pulling from my head somehow? Was it pulling from some form of truth and manipulating it?

A deep and unchangeable possibility came to me.

*Do I still have feelings for Maren?*

# Episode 3245

**Xavier**

My stomach dropped as I looked at Cali standing before me. Her entire body was shaking with the force of her sobs, and it was almost too much to bear, seeing her in this state.

*No. This isn’t supposed to be Cali; it was Ava. I never would have said those things to Cali. I’d die first.*

Everything about this was wrong, and it was starting to feel like an out-of-body experience. Things were spiraling out of my control, and I didn’t like it one bit. I had to reel this thing in before it got any worse.

I stepped toward Cali. “This isn’t right—This isn’t—I didn’t mean that. I’m so, so sorry, Cali. I never meant to say that to you.”

“It sure sounded like you did!” Cali said. “Why would you have said it, otherwise? You’re not making any sense, Xavier!”

“Because I thought you were Ava!” I looked around frantically, unable to make sense of where I was or what was really going on. *How could this be? How could it be Ava one minute and Cali the next? They look nothing alike—it’s not like I could’ve mistaken them.*

Cali cocked her head to the side, shocked. “*Ava?* Why would you be with Ava? She’s dead!” Cali looked absolutely horrified. “Don’t you remember that? What’s going on with you?”

She started to cry again, even harder this time, and I wasn’t sure what to do. There was no doubt in my mind that I remembered being with Ava only moments ago. She’d been kissing me and touching me, and now it was Cali. It wasn’t supposed to be Cali. I couldn’t make sense of this.

“I don’t know what’s going on, Cali, but I thought you were Ava. I swear I would *never* say those kinds of things to you—you have to know that. I love you.” I stepped forward and tried to grab Cali’s hands, but she pulled away from me, her eyes flashing with anger.

“How can that be true? This all sounds like a really bad, weird excuse. I was standing right here, and only seconds ago you said those words to me,” Cali said, shaking her head. “I don’t want to talk to you right now. I want to be alone.”

“But, Cali—”

“Please go. Leave me alone!”

I wracked my brain for something to say that would fix all this, but I was at a complete loss. *This isn’t right. None of this is right. In fact, this is all very, very wrong.* I was starting to feel sick, but there was no way I was going to leave Cali to go on a run, now. Not with her like this. I just had to get her to listen to me, to understand that there was something strange going on and that I never would have said those things to her otherwise.

“Listen, I’m as confused as you are. I’m sorry, but I didn’t mean to say what I did. It was a mistake. There’s something going on with me, and I saw something that wasn’t there… I can’t explain it, but…”

Cali wasn’t listening. She turned away to head back inside. I ran after her, grabbing her arm and spinning her around to face me. She tried to jerk her wrist away, but I wouldn’t let go.

“Let go, Xavier—or are you trying to hurt me again?” Cali hissed.

Horrified, I dropped her wrist immediately, as if it had burned me. “I don’t want that—not at all. How could you even say that? You have to believe that what I said—what I saw—was out of my control!”

“But you’re an Alpha, you’re a werewolf, and above all that, you’re Silas’s son. It’s in your blood to treat the people you love like garbage!”

I could barely breathe, I was so stunned to hear her say those things, and for a moment, I couldn’t find my voice. It was like the wind had been knocked clean out of me.

Finally, I croaked out, “Are you fucking serious? I’m not Silas. I’m nothing like him, and I never want to be like him. All I know is that I don’t want to lose you.” I walked closer to her and gently reached for her hand, bracing myself for her to rip it away again. Luckily, she didn’t pull away. “Can you forgive me? If you can, you have to know that I would never want to hurt you. Cali, you’re everything to me.”

Cali sniffled and looked away. “Xavier, you’ve broken my heart.” Her sniffles intensified, like she was about to start sobbing again.

Fuck, what was going on?

Seeing her like this was taking its toll, and I could feel myself threatening to shatter at the pain and torment in her voice. I’d never seen her this upset—not because of anything I’d done, at least. I never wanted Cali to think so badly of me that she would believe I could ever be so cold to her. Taking a big risk, I leaned down and kissed her. I breathed her in and put everything I had into the kiss so that she could feel how much I loved her, how much I cared for her.

*I can’t lose Cali. She’s my mate. My one and only. She brought me back from the brink. She reunited me with my wolf. She showed me how to be a better man. I love her, beyond anything I ever thought possible. I can’t lose her now. Not like this. I don’t know what I’ll do if this is really the end.*

After a few moments, Cali linked her arms around my neck and leaned into the kiss, deepening it.

My heart raced with pleasure, and for the first time since I’d said the words that had torn her apart, I felt like there was hope.

*Yes. This is what I want. What I need. Her. What I said before was a mistake, a complete mistake. My head wasn’t in the right place, and I felt all weird… I just wasn’t thinking straight before, but now I am.*

Suddenly, I heard my brother’s voice calling out to me. “Xavier! Can you hear me?”

I broke away from the kiss and saw that I was outside. Cali was standing right in front of me, but she didn’t look like the Cali from before. This Cali looked more like… *her*. My brother was there, too, and I was beyond confused. I swayed on my feet for a moment, disoriented, and Greyson stepped forward to catch me right before I crumpled to the ground.

“Easy, easy, brother,” Greyson said. “It’s okay, I’m here. I’ve got you. Take a deep breath. It’s okay now.”

“What’s going on? Where are we?” My head was still spinning, and despite myself, I leaned on Greyson for support, not trusting my legs to support my weight. It was rare that I didn’t even feel well enough to snap at Greyson and tell him that I didn’t need his help. *I must really be in bad shape…*

“We aren’t totally sure, but we think the witches might have done something to us,” Cali said. “Greyson and I were both lost in these really authentic-feeling illusions or dreams or something.”

Internally, I felt so relieved. *That means none of that awful stuff that happened with Cali was real.* *Thank fuck!* My heart was pounding as I slowly came back to reality. “How did you even snap me out of it? How did you two snap out of it? It all felt so… real.”

Greyson gestured to Cali. “She brought me out of it. And you, too.”

Cali blushed. “Yeah, I broke though it somehow. Maybe because I’m half Fae? Who knows? I’m just glad that I did. I found Greyson, and then soon after that, I found you. I’m so glad that you’re both okay.”

I stood there silently, taking all of this in before I spoke. “Okay… So Gabe and Mikah, any idea where they are?”

Greyson shook his head regretfully. “No idea. We haven’t seen them. But they must be in or around the house somewhere. That’s my best guess. We definitely need those two, because if our hunch is right and the witches of NOLA are behind all of this, then we’re going to need all the power we have at our disposal to go up against them.”

Cali nodded. “But once we find Gabriel and Mikah, how are we going to break them out of this?” Cali cast a worried glance around the room and wrapped her arms around herself, like she was cold. She looked tired, and so did my brother. There was no question that they’d been through hell, too.

“I guess you’ll just have to bring them out of it the same way you did with me,” I said with a shrug.

Cali’s cheeks reddened. “Wait, so I have to *kiss* them?”

# Episode 3246

**Artemis**

Reacting to Nikkos’s unexpected presence, I instantly crossed in front of Rishika so that I was standing between them. There was no way I was going to let this traitor anywhere near my girlfriend. I had to protect her.

“What the fuck do you mean, you’ve been waiting for us to show up?” Internally, I was kicking myself as I waited for Nikkos to answer. *I knew I should’ve trusted my gut and sent this guy packing. Now look at what I’ve gotten us into.*

Nikkos smiled. “It was only a matter of time. You’re quite predictable, Artemis—do you know that? I’ve only known you for a few days, and I’ve already got you figured out.”

Nikkos looked pretty pleased with himself, and it was making my blood boil.

“Nothing is clearer than the fact that you’re a fucking backstabber!” I stepped forward, resisting the urge to lunge at him right then and there, but I knew I needed to play this smart. It was no use letting my hot head get me into a bind.

Nikkos began to pace, twirling a knife in his hand as he walked. “I would say if I stabbed you, it would be a very obvious frontal stabbing, wouldn’t you agree? You really should have seen this coming. Perhaps your bounty hunting skills have gotten a bit rusty, Artemis.” He shook his head, a faux somber look on his face.

“You want to bet?” Rishika said, stepping from behind me. I put an arm out to hold her back. “Why don’t you test that theory out?”

Nikkos chuckled as he shifted his gaze from Rishika back to me. “You’ve been away from the Fae world for far too long with your little werewolf girlfriend. You’ve lost your edge. Pity. I think I can see a glimpse of what you once were.”

“Shut up! You’re being mighty smug for someone who’s outnumbered. It’s two against one, and both of us are ready for whatever you try to throw at us.” Even as I said the words, a bit of uneasiness crept up inside me. Nikkos was a skilled fighter. We’d seen him take out the Fae council henchmen with ease. He’d barely broken a sweat. I was a good fighter, there was no question about that, but I would be silly to ignore the fact that he would be a good match for my skills. I had to play this just right if I wanted to come out of this thing okay. I had to keep Rishika safe. That was all that really mattered.

“Listen,” I began, deciding to switch gears a bit. “I don’t want any trouble. I just want to get to Adair. Whatever else you’re after is your business.”

Nikkos smiled. “Oh, Artemis, if only it were that simple. You want Adair? That comes at a price. A price that I don’t think you’re willing to pay.” Nikkos flashed a wolfish smile as he did a little trick with his knife, throwing it over his shoulder and catching it behind his back without even looking.

I couldn’t help but curl my lip at him as I spoke. “Don’t pretend that you know me. You have no idea what I’m capable of.” That was true enough. I hadn’t told him about my magic, something I could very well use against him—if it decided to work, anyway.

*Granted, my magic is still a little spotty, but I might not have any choice but to risk trying it if it comes down to it.*

I glanced back at Rishika, who gave me a little nod and said, “He’s just trying to stall. He must know something about Adair. The only question is, why is he trying to keep it all to himself?”

Nikkos shook his head. “No, I’m trying to use you as bait. If you really are Adair’s niece, let’s see how much he cares about you.” In a flash, he pulled out another knife and drew his arm back to throw it.

I lunged at him as I pulled out my own knife, but I wasn’t fast enough. I watched in horror as the knife sailed toward Rishika. My heart leapt up into my throat as the knife struck Rishika, throwing her back into the wall of the warehouse. She slumped against the wall, and her eyes fluttered shut.

“You bastard!” I cried out.

I swiped at Nikkos with my blade but, in a swift movement that I barely saw coming, he kicked me in the chest with enough force to knock the wind out of me. As I stumbled backward, he threw the knife, and it pierced me in the arm, pinning me to the wall as well. Without missing a beat, I reached up to pull the knife out, not caring that I’d been struck. Adrenaline was coursing through my body, and it was only telling me one thing: get to Rishika. I would deal with Nikkos soon enough.

I yanked the knife free, surprised to see that there was only the smallest cut on my arm. I wasted no time running to Rishika, who was stunned and still slightly slumped against the wall.

“Rishika, are you okay? Did you hit your head?” I reached out to cradle her head in my palm, just as I noticed that the knife hadn’t done much damage to her, either. It had just managed to cut her arm—a surface wound for sure—and pinned her shirt to the wall. I pulled it out, grabbing Rishika to support her.

“Nikkos!” Rishika said.

I looked up to see the Fae running away. “Shit! He’s getting away!”

He always seemed to be two or three steps ahead of me, which was a sobering realization. I made a mental note to do some speed and endurance training once this was all over.

Rishika was coming around, and soon she was able to stand on her own two feet. “Go, go after him!”

“No, that’s exactly what he wants, to use me to lure out Adair.” I shook my head. “And besides, what about you?” My heart twisted at the thought of leaving her behind. I was angry at myself for not being able to protect her from this, but at least she wasn’t severely hurt.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine, but we can’t lose him! *Go!*” she insisted. “I’ll try to cut him off from down here.”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to leave the woman I loved behind, but I didn’t want to let Nikkos get away, either. He had to pay for what he’d done. He’d attacked my girlfriend, even if he hadn’t really harmed her, and there was no way in hell I was going to let that fly.

“Shit!” I said again, giving Rishika one last look before I raced off after Nikkos.

He was fast. I watched him scale a trio of heavy-looking pipes that were bolted to the warehouse walls before hopping off onto a catwalk that ran the length of the large space. I raced after him, shimmying up the pipes as fast as I could. It was a precarious climb; the only footholds were the large bolts that kept the pipes riveted to the wall, and I had to shimmy up the pipe for a few feet to get to each of them. My muscles were screaming, and I was losing steam fast.

As I was trying to get onto the catwalk, one of the pipes detached from the wall and began to bend, cracking at one of the seams and spewing steam into my face. I braced myself and then jumped from the pipe before it bent all the way and crashed to the floor, just managing to catch the rail of the catwalk. I dangled for a few moments before I was finally able to pull myself up.

I raced after Nikkos and tackled him just as he crashed through a window. We both landed with a thud on a flat rooftop full of ductwork and debris. Nikkos tossed me off him, and I fell back against a section of ductwork, but luckily the metal was soft, and I was back on my feet in no time. I lunged at Nikkos, who’d just gotten to his feet, tackling him back to the ground.

“Impressive,” Nikkos grunted as he maneuvered out from under me and pinned me to the roof, his knee on my chest as he pulled out yet another knife. “But not good enough.” He held the knife to my throat, his gaze boring into mine. “It didn’t have to come to this, but it seems that you’ve forced my hand.”

In the blink of an eye, someone appeared behind Nikkos and grabbed him by the hair. I could barely catch my breath as I struggled to twist away from Nikkos’s knife, which was still pressed against my neck. For the first time since all of this had started, I was really scared. One wrong move and Nikkos’s knife was going to slice into my throat.

Then there was a knife at Nikkos’s throat, too.

Adair held the knife steady. “That’s enough.”

# Episode 3247

I couldn’t stop blushing at the thought of having to kiss Gabriel and Mikah to snap them out of whatever this thing was that we were dealing with.

*Will I have to give them a REAL kiss? Like the ones I gave Xavier and Greyson? Or will a quick peck be good enough?*

Kissing two people who weren’t my mates certainly wasn’t on the list of things I’d thought I’d be dealing with today. Or ever. It wasn’t like there was anything wrong with them—in fact, they were ridiculously attractive—but they were mates, and I was mated, and it was all a little complicated, to say the least.

*What kind of sick witch did this to us? We absolutely have to make her pay for putting us through this.*

Greyson sighed. “If you have to kiss them to bring them out of this, then that’s what we’ll have to do. We have to save them, and we need them if we’re going to finish our mission.”

“You could always volunteer in her place,” Xavier said.

Greyson glared at him. “So could you. They’re *your* friends.”

“For all we know, the kissing might not even work. But if it’s something we need to try, I’ll do it.” I was the one who’d brought Xavier and Greyson out of their hallucinations, but it was possible that I wouldn’t be able to do the same for Gabriel and Mikah, since I wasn’t mated to them—and thank god for that. The last thing I needed was some sort of *quattro destini* curse hanging over my head.

“First things first. We need to find them in the house,” I said.

“Yup,” Greyson said, Xavier nodding in agreement.

I looked back at the house, and a shiver raced down my spine. There was no way I wanted to go back in there. Something didn’t feel right about the place anymore. *We’re definitely going to have to get another safe house after all of this.*

“We should stick together. We don’t know what else this house might have in store for us, and we need to be prepared and watch each other’s backs,” Greyson said.

“Got it,” I said as we all headed back inside.

Once we were inside, I felt a little better than I’d thought I would. It helped that I was sandwiched between the guys, which took the edge off a little. Even so, I’d had to push away the spike of fear that had hit me as soon as we’d stepped over the threshold. It was almost like the house had grown even creepier while we were in the backyard.

I calmed my nerves as best I could and tried to listen. I’d heard Greyson cry out in pain, and that had helped me get to him. Then Greyson had been able to sniff out Xavier. There was no reason why we couldn’t use the same methods to track down Gabriel and Mikah.

The house was completely silent, save for the echo of our footsteps on the floor. I didn’t want to admit to myself that it was almost too quiet. Spooky quiet, if I was being honest.

“I smell Gabe,” Xavier said triumphantly. “He’s close.”

“Yeah, I smell him, too,” Greyson said.

Both men looked up the staircase, and my stomach dropped.

I took a deep breath. “Seriously? Upstairs? That’s always where the murderer lures people so that they’re trapped and can’t run anywhere else… Namely, out of the house!”

“Maybe so, but that’s where he is,” Xavier said.

I sighed again and shrugged. “Okay. Well then, follow your noses, boys.”

Greyson started up the stairs first, and I fell into step behind him, Xavier bringing up the rear.

“Can you smell anyone else in here?” I asked them. “A witch?”

Greyson shook his head. “No, but Gabriel’s scent is mixing with Mikah’s now, and it’s getting stronger.”

That was good. I was finally starting to feel hopeful that we would find them and get out of this place alive and then try to get the fourth key, but I didn’t even want to think about how all of it was going to go down. There were too many steps involved, and too many opportunities for everything to go haywire. It was better to think about it all one step at a time.

Upstairs, I couldn’t help but notice how overwhelming the house felt, when it hadn’t before. There were just so many rooms—the guys could be anywhere, and there could be any number of surprises waiting for us behind any of the many closed doors. I felt Xavier’s hand on my back and jumped. Xavier immediately pulled his hand away, something flickering in his eyes.

*What is that? Hurt?*

“Xavier, sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.” I hated that I’d hurt his feelings, but I was so on edge that I hadn’t been able to help myself.

“No, *I’m* sorry. I just wanted to make sure that you were okay. You’re shaking.”

I realized that he was right. This place was really freaking me out, and it was taking everything I had to keep my cool. I reached for Xavier’s hand as we walked down the long, dark hallway, checking rooms as we went.

Greyson stopped suddenly in front of a door. He tried the knob, but the door didn’t budge. It was locked. “I think they’re in there,” he said to Xavier.

“Yeah, for sure. The scent is really strong here,” Xavier replied.

“I’m going to kick the door in. We should be ready in case there’s something else in there waiting for us,” Greyson said.

I nodded, calling on my magic a bit. I felt it start to course through me, and it was just the reassurance that I needed.

“On the count of three. One, two, three!” Greyson kicked the door open, and the guys rushed in with me trailing behind them. I scanned the room quickly, glad that no one had bum-rushed us. I saw that there was a fire blazing in the fireplace, and then I saw Gabriel and Mikah….

*OMG! They’re making out on the bed!*

I squealed and covered my eyes as Gabe started to take Mikah’s shirt off. This had to be the opposite of what Colton always felt when he walked in on people.

“It’s okay, Cali,” Greyson said.

“Hey, you two okay?” Xavier asked. Gabriel and Mikah kept kissing as if we hadn’t just barged in on them. “Hello… Are you guys hearing me?”

“I don’t think they are. This is exactly how it was when I found each of you. Yelling isn’t going to work.” I swallowed hard. “I think—I think I have to try the kissing method.”

I started toward the bed, and Xavier pulled me back.

“No, let me do this,” I said. I appreciated his concern for my comfort, but I had to at least try this first to see if it worked before we considered any other options. Still, I was beyond flustered as I approached the bed.

*How the HELL am I going to do this? I have to, what, squeeze on in there, I guess?*

I got to the bed and lingered there, watching them kiss and roll around like they were on a beach somewhere, rolling in the sand. Every time they calmed down a little, I would lean forward to get in on the action, only for them to start rolling around again. I was at a complete loss and felt like I was waiting on just the right time to jump in between a pair of Double Dutch ropes.

“You can do this, Cali!” Greyson called out.

“Looks like you might be able to get in there now,” Xavier added.

Gabriel had come up for air, but then he slid his tongue out and started licking Mikah’s neck while Mikah moaned. *Well, Mikah’s lips are kind of free now, I guess. Maybe this is my chance.* I leaned in only to have to shoot backward as Gabe ripped his own shirt off and threw it—right into my face. I yanked the shirt off my head and threw it to the floor, starting to worry about whether I was going to be able to pull this off. They were on each other like white on rice.

“Wow. They are *really* going at it. I’m kind of jealous,” Xavier said, tugging at his collar like he was burning up.

“Hey!” I called over my shoulder. “You’re not helping.”

After a few more near misses and a lot more of them rolling around and moaning and not seeming to even stop to take a breath, I leaned forward and quickly pecked a kiss on Gabriel’s head before hopping out of the bed and scurrying away.

Gabriel stopped kissing Mikah—finally—though he still seemed to be in a daze. Seeing my chance, I snuck back in there and pecked Mikah on the cheek before rolling skillfully off the bed.

Gabriel suddenly sat up, his eyes clearing. “Cali, did you just kiss me? On the head?” He turned and saw Greyson and Xavier standing by with sheepish looks on their faces. “Wait a minute, what the fuck is going on here? And what happened to my shirt?”

Xavier waved at the two men. “Hey! Glad someone was having a good time here, but if you’ll recall, we have a mission to complete.”

“And we’re possibly under a spell that could come back at any time,” Greyson added.

I nodded as Mikah sat up, rubbing his eyes. “That’s not good,” he said groggily.

“We can explain,” I said. “But I think we need to get the hell out of this house, first.”

Gabriel and Mikah agreed and got up from the bed to collect themselves, then the five of us rushed downstairs. We exited the house, only to see a woman standing on the sidewalk.

She turned to look at us, her face crumpled into a scowl and her hand stretched out toward us, palm up. “Give me those keys back. Now!”

# Episode 3248

“Give me those keys back!” the woman ordered.

*This is Odette*, I realized. I knew her—I’d fought her on the very first night we’d realized that magic was broken in New Orleans. I just hadn’t known who she was when I’d first met her in that basement. My stomach heaved as I readied myself for a confrontation.

Or another full-blown fight.

*You can do this, Cali!*

I was stubborn enough to stand my ground.

“Hell no,” Xavier growled at the elder witch, stepping forward. “You’re not getting these keys back, you crazy witch!”

Odette sneered. “Be careful, dog. What you just experienced is only a taste of my power.”

Xavier fell silent. What kind of scary daydream had he been stuck in? There was no time to ponder that, though—I had to fix this. Could I reason with Odette, like I had with Azalea?

*All signs point to no, but I have to try.*

“You’re wasting your time threatening us—we should all be working together,” I declared, moving to stand right next to Xavier. “We’re here to fix the problem, and when we do, you won’t have to have magic turned off at all. It’s a win-win.”

Odette laughed sardonically, pointing at me. “You silly little Fae—I told you, I *know* you’re connected to the dark energy that’s thrown off the natural order!”

Well that was new. My tie to Seluna was apparently obvious to Odette. Just how fucking powerful was this witch?

As if he could feel my apprehension, Greyson rested his hand on my shoulder, squeezing reassuringly. I could breathe better now.

“You need a charm to do magic, but I’m Fae. I’m not restricted,” I said. “Who’s really stronger here?”

I was neglecting, of course, to acknowledge last time. Odette had attacked me, my magic had reacted violently, and I’d made her fly across the basement. It had been a wonderful evening, really.

Still, Odette was seething. “I am an elder witch, you clueless child. I will always do what needs to be done, and I am willing to risk myself in order to ensure the safety of my coven and my city!”

Odette’s words made me realize that she’d sacrifice basically anything to defeat her enemies. And now, in her eyes, *we* were the enemy. That was the label she’d given us, and no amount of negotiating or wheedling was going to change that.

*Can’t say I didn’t see this coming, but I’d hoped…*

I’d just hoped there would be another way.

“My friends and I need a moment to talk,” I told Odette, “just to figure out what we’re going to do.”

“This isn’t a debate, Cali,” Xavier said gravely, pointing at the elder. “We need the fourth key, and she has it.”

“There are five of us and only one of her,” Gabriel said with a shrug.

“I wouldn’t underestimate her, Gabe,” Mikah said wryly. “She did send all five of us into some kind of nightmare hallucination, and she transported us from Clementine’s to the safe house in a matter of—”

Gabriel raised his index finger. “That was when we were unprepared. We know what her game is this time.”

Mikah sighed. “That’s not how—”

Greyson spoke up. “Gabriel is right, what choice do we have but to fight? The witch—”

“The witch can hear you talking about her, you imbeciles!” Odette shouted. “Enough! I’m ending this nonsense right now!”

She lifted her arms sharply.

In the blink of an eye, a dozen copies of herself appeared, surrounding us in a wide circle. It was like looking at the same spooky mirror over and over, and my first instinct was to fight through the fog and channel my magic.

My mates, my friends, and I hadn’t come this far to be defeated.

“If everybody just stands behind me,” I called, “I could shield—”

“Eat shit, you evil hag!” Gabriel shouted and barreled straight at the original Odette, obviously not listening to a word I said.

Odette laughed as his clawed hand swiped through air. “You’ll have to do better than that, wolf.”

Everything happened at once, then. In a blur of motion, Mikah, Gabriel, Xavier, and Greyson all growled and charged at Odette. Or at least one of the dozen versions of her. I stood there, suddenly frozen and horrified at the sight of them fighting the witch’s replicas just for more to pop up the moment they defeated the last. My ears were ringing with the sounds of fighting and Odette’s laughter.

She was laughing.

She was fucking *mocking* us.

“This is how illusion works, and you’re powerless to stop it,” said all the Odettes at once. Their chilling voices echoed across the empty street.

*How the fuck do I know who’s the real one?* I looked around frantically, trying to focus. *And why hasn’t Odette attacked me directly yet?*

The boys were trying to distract her, I realized.

This was my opportunity—the only way I could gain an advantage.

*I have to find the real Odette*, I thought. I fought to ignore my mates fighting—if I started worrying about them right now, it would be game over for my composure—and peered at all of the replicas of Odette.

There was only one Odette whose diamond earrings actually reflected the light.

She was just watching, obviously pleased. I knew that I’d just hit the jackpot.

“You can’t hide from me,” I said. My voice was a whisper in this chaos, but Odette still heard. Her head snapped in attention. Her smile died when she saw me zeroing in on her.

She glared, raising her hands as I stepped toward her. Ι felt a sudden calm come over me as I drew on my erratic Fae magic. I hoped, so fucking badly, that it would stay steady this time around.

“Why can’t we work together? It would be good for everyone.” Even though I sounded cool, I could feel the energy vibrating within me, reacting to the chaos.

“Constance told me how you used this line on her and then betrayed her!” Odette hissed.

“That’s not true! It was a misunderstanding that—”

“You won’t trick me!” A burst of white magic broke through Odette’s fingertips, hitting the ground beside me. If I hadn’t jumped away, it would’ve hit me. She would have destroyed any chance I had to save Tabitha and myself and my mates and—

*No! This ends NOW!*

My magic reacted violently, shocking me, climbing from the depths of my chest and pouring out of my hands. Odette let out a cry and leapt to the side. She crashed to the ground as my magic blast hit a tree behind the witch, exploding it into shards.

“*This is not your battle to win!*” Odette’s voice was a roar in my ears, a white glow kindling her hair and spreading all over. She waved her hands in a circle before pointing at the ground. The grass heaved and shook, and I stumbled backward with a scream, the impact of the fall rattling my bones.

“Cali!” Greyson shouted.

Panting, I turned to look at him—just as he went flying through the air.

“Leave her alone, you—” Xavier never finished his sentence. He was flung back, right after Greyson. Both my mates had been treated like objects, puppets, and suddenly all I could feel was fucking *fury*.

*Shit. She did NOT just do that!*

It was fine to mess with me. But with my mates? Now there was going to be hell to pay.

I made a noise that sounded more animal than human and stood up to run to them. I ignored the pain that rattled through my joints. But when I tried to move, I couldn’t.

My feet were rooted to the ground. Immobile.

If I had a penny for all the times a witch or a demon had forced me to freeze, I’d have been a goddamn millionaire by now.

“Are you fucking kidding me? THIS AGAIN?” I hissed under my breath, yanking at my legs. It wasn’t working, and then everything got impossibly worse, because Odette decided to stalk toward me with a knife.

A *knife*.

*Okay, this is bad!* I screamed inside my head. *This is very bad. BAD BAD BAD!*

“First of all,” I told her, “what the hell are you even doing with a knife? Witches aren’t supposed to fight with knives, Odette!”

Odette looked amused—*I know, I’m fucking hilarious*—but it was in an evil way. Obviously. My magic was thrashing inside me, begging to be released, though the freezing spell had done its job, and I felt drained. When I finally managed to raise my hands to try to send a blast at Odette, she was already in front of me.

She grabbed me by the throat, holding the blade against my skin.

“Get your fucking hands off her!” Greyson snarled.

Odette looked up at him, her eyes blazing with fury. “Return the keys to me, or your mate dies.”

# Episode 3249

**Xavier**

I was ready to charge forward when Mikah grabbed my shoulder. His grip was so strong that I was pulled backward, his nails digging into my skin to make me stay put.

“Stop,” he hissed in my ear, the force of his grasp unyielding.

“Fuck off!” I snapped, fighting to break free.

“Xavier, no!” Gabe grabbed my other shoulder, his expression grim. Gabe was never like this, never so serious, so that alone threw me off. “We have to be smart about this, Xavier,” he hissed, the fear peeking through his angry expression making me shut the hell up. “One wrong move, and she’s going to cut Cali’s throat.”

Gabe’s chilling words were a punch in the gut. He was right. I stopped fighting Mikah’s grip, but I wasn’t about to give up. I had to conjure up a scenario where I could get that fucking knife away from the witch and free my mate.

*I’m going to get you out of this*, I mind linked Cali.

She didn’t reply. Greyson’s low growl echoed in my ears. When I turned to face my brother, he seemed composed, but I could feel the rage wafting off him.

“You’re making a big mistake,” he told Odette.

“I’m doing what I have to in order to protect my city and my coven,” she snapped. “Now, give me the keys!”

She pressed the blade against Cali’s throat. Cali let out a whimper, and a thin line of blood trickled down her neck.

Just for that, I was going to make this witch pay.

“If you make one more fucking move,” I growled, “the next blood spilled will be *yours*.”

Odette laughed. She pulled Cali in front of her in a sharp motion, keeping the knife at Cali’s throat. When my eyes met my mate’s, my heart shattered. She looked furious and terrified.

*I’m not gonna let her hurt you, baby*, I mind linked.

Cali didn’t respond. The realization landed like a blow—the freezing spell must’ve affected her ability to mind link.

“Werewolves are pathetic,” Odette said, her face full of disdain. “I’ve heard the mate bond is so powerful that you’re practically servants to its pull. If that’s true, you’d never choose anything over your mate’s life. Stop wasting my time and give me the keys”—Odette gripped her knife tighter—“or this girl will breathe her last breath, and *you* will be to blame.”

I was so enraged, I could taste it. I could feel the fury thudding inside me, begging to come out. Gabe grabbed me, and Mikah tried to reason with me, but they weren’t the ones who got through.

“Xavier.”Greyson’s voice pierced through my thoughts.

I stared at my brother, breathing shakily.

“The witch is right,” he said. “We can’t risk Cali’s safety.”

Accepting defeat was a tough pill to swallow, but the alternative was unthinkable.

I nodded.

Greyson stepped forward. “As long as you release Cali, the keys are yours.” He said the words while digging into his pocket, and Gabriel gasped.

“Wait, no!” he growled, letting me go so he could lurch forward. It was my turn to hold him back.

“This is the only way,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Are you fucking serious?” Gabe snapped, spinning around to face me. “We can’t give the keys up! What about Tabby?”

“We’ll find another way,” I said.

“What would you do if it were Mikah in Cali’s place?” Greyson asked Gabe, pointing at Cali, frozen in Odette’s hands. Just looking at the scene created a visceral reaction of both fear and fury inside me.

“They’re right,” Mikah whispered. He put a hand on Gabe’s arm, looking into his eyes. Gabe’s shoulders slumped instantly.

Staring at the ground, he nodded.

I exchanged another look with my brother, and the decision was made.

“If you want these,” he said to Odette, taking another step forward, “I’m going to need you to get the fuck away from Cali first.”

Odette stared at the keys, her gaze filled with dark desire. Yet before she or Greyson could say another word, a voice started shouting from the street.

“Stop this, Odette!”

We all turned to see Harlow marching around the house.

Where the *hell* did she come from?

“This is going too far!” Harlow exclaimed. She was so composed normally that I was stunned to see her upset. “You never should have done a magic cancellation spell in the first place! All you’ve done is cause more problems for our city!” Harlow stared at Odette with a mixture of apprehension and anger.

“This isn’t a lesser witch’s concern,” Odette said, but her determined expression seemed to falter at the sight of her fellow witch. “Don’t get involved, Harlow. You’ve already crossed the line by bringing in these invaders. You’ve betrayed your coven!”

Harlow raked her hands through her hair. “Because you gave me no choice! You took magic away from everyone and kept it for yourself!” she spat. “We couldn’t stop you before; too many of you still had magic. But now that we have werewolves, a vampire, and Fae on our side? Things are looking a bit more even, aren’t they?”

Odette’s face twisted in fury. “Don’t you dare make this into something it’s not. We’re trying to keep everyone alive. This isn’t about power, it’s about safety!”

“How the hell can I believe you after all this?” Harlow exclaimed, and Odette huffed.

She was distracted, and I realized this was my opportunity. I would attack to save Cali the moment Odette dropped her guard. Judging by the way she and Harlow were arguing, I knew that would be any second now.

“Xavier,” Greyson said, his voice so low I wasn’t sure anyone else heard it.

I looked at him. His eyes were wide, cautioning. I shook my head. My brother knew better than to doubt my ability to be quick and careful. His eyes narrowed.

“Let the girl go,” Harlow said. “She truly wants to help us all, and you’re ruining everyone’s chance to be safe!”

Odette flinched at Harlow’s accusation. In that movement, the knife fell a few inches from Cali’s neck. Cali breathed sharply, her gaze darting to meet mine, and that was it.

This was my shot.

I pounced, grabbing Odette’s knife-wielding wrist with one hand and the back of her neck with the other. She let out a cry and released Cali. My mate fell to the ground, but she was free, and I would make sure it stayed that way. Glaring at Odette, I hissed, “I’m going to snap your fucking neck like—”

A shot of electricity ran through me, a tingling sensation running up my limbs.

“What the hell?” I rasped, staggering backward. My skin tingled where I’d touched Odette, and she had turned fucking… *sparkly?* “Are you an illusion too?”

Odette offered a smile full of teeth. “Of course. But that doesn’t mean I can’t kill you!”

She lashed out with the knife, slicing me across the chest. The blade and pain were all very real, and I jumped back to avoid another attack. This time, I charged while in half-shift, slamming into Odette.

She split in two right before my eyes.

One copy of her hit me with a freezing spell. While I was unable to move, the other replica tackled Greyson to the ground. He’d been trying to help Cali break free from the witch’s immobilizing magic, but it hadn’t worked. When Odette slammed into him, he went tumbling down, snarling as he dropped into half-shift. I stood there, frozen, unable to help either of them while Mikah and Gabe went back to fighting Odette’s replicas.

How fucking powerful *was* this witch?

“STOP!” Cali suddenly screamed at Odette.

I had no idea how or when she’d snapped out of her magical stupor, but it was happening. She shot a huge blast of Fae magic at Odette to push her off Greyson. He jumped to his feet with a roar, instantly reaching for Cali to steady her as Odette’s double looked between them, panting. She might’ve been a fake, but she looked like a bloody mess now.

“I’ll make each and every one of you regrets this!” Odette clapped her hands. All her replicas, those who had been fighting Mikah and Gabe included, vanished into thin air. She raced away, and her form faded, the illusion disappearing.

I was released from my invisible chains, just as Cali fell to her knees with a groan.

“Cali!” I ran to her to check for injuries—at least the slice on her neck didn’t look deep and had stopped bleeding. Thank fuck. “Does it hurt? Are you okay?” I asked frantically.

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” Cali said as I hugged her gently, careful not to crush her.

“Fucking hell,” Greyson cursed from behind me. I turned to look up at him. He was staring at the empty street, where Odette had vanished. At first, I thought he was just angry that we’d lost her. But his grim expression went deeper than that.

Cali shivered against me, and a bad, raw feeling pierced my chest.

“What is it?” I asked my brother.

“She got them,” he said through gritted teeth, still glaring into the distance.

“Got what?” Gabe asked, wiping blood from his brow.

Greyson’s jaw twitched. “Odette got the keys.”

# Episode 3250

**Artemis**

I’d never seen Adair so close-up before. Like most Fae, he looked young despite having been alive for many, *many* years. His features were delicate, yet his blue eyes were bold, his cheekbones sharp.

He held a knife to Nikkos’s throat, and Nikkos let me go. He raised his hands in surrender. His dark eyes were wild, and he was panting from the fight. “Adair—”

“This ends right now,” Adair hissed in Nikkos’s ear. “I know you two are following me. You need to stop if you don’t want to get hurt.”

I sputtered, gesturing at Nikkos. “What? I don’t even know him!”

Adair glared. “Don’t lie to me, kid. I know you’ve been working with Nikkos since you arrived in New Orleans—I’ve been watching you.”

I swallowed roughly, shaking my head. “It’s not what it looks like! I…”

Could I tell him the truth? That I was Kadmos’s daughter? That I had been trying to find him?

I didn’t get a chance to make that decision. With a snarl, Nikkos elbowed Adair in the gut and broke out of his hold. Adair grunted as Nikkos spun around for a face-off, his voice guttural. “You’d slit my throat over a silly girl? Is that how far we’ve fallen?”

My eyes darted between the two men. The furious, overwhelming emotion radiating from Nikkos surprised me, and it seemed to make Adair’s expression waver as well. But then his gaze hardened. “If you get in my way, Nikkos, I’ll have no other choice.”

Nikkos’s expression twisted into a bitter grimace. “That’s so typical of you. So self-centered—you only care about what you want!”

I didn’t have the time to process the emotions in Nikkos’s words. He attacked Adair straight on, and the two Fae started to grapple. Their moves were so fast that they looked like two tornados, twirling around each other across the surface of the flat rooftop. Nikkos snarled and punched, Adair ducked and sliced, and this was—

It was *something*, all right.

Adair was clearly the superior fighter—the cuts covering Nikkos’s skin were proof of that—and I found myself both stunned and impressed. I suppose it ran in the family. Nikkos held his own, though, and it seemed like he had rage on his side. He was full of emotion, clashing against Adair’s coldness. It felt like between the two, he was the one who was fighting because he had something to lose.

The scene felt way too intimate to watch, but I couldn’t look away.

“*This* is what we’ve become,” Nikkos hissed between his teeth. It was full of rage and a deep, personal hurt, words that seemed to make Adair flinch for a beat too long. He’d grabbed Nikkos by the nape and tipped his chip up with the knife. It was right then that Nikkos’s fury won through.

He knocked Adair down with a roar, and the knife went skidding across the ground. The two men scrambled for it, but Nikkos got there first and rounded on Adair.

“I’m not going back,” Adair declared sharply. “Nothing you do or say can make me. It’s done.”

Nikkos gestured around. “You’d really rather die here in this trash heap of a world than resume your rightful place? With me?”

Something flashed through Adair’s eyes at that last part, but he held strong. “The past is in the past, Nikkos. You need to let it go. You know I have.”

I had no idea what the hell these two were talking about, though I was guessing it involved at least one broken heart. But I wasn’t given the opportunity to think about it for long. Adair’s words were met with a scream of rage from Nikkos. He raced forward, knife raised.

For a moment, everything seemed to move in slow motion.

I could not, *would* not, allow Nikkos to harm my uncle. I had so much to talk to Adair about, so many questions to ask him. He was family.

That word might not have meant much to me for most of my life, but it did now. I had to protect him.

A second before Nikkos’s blade could slash Adair’s face, I jumped between them and raised my own knife to block Nikkos’s attack. Adair stood behind me, protected. I couldn’t see his face, but I could hear the shock in his voice when he asked, “Why?”

I wasn’t sure if the question was intended for me, or Nikkos.

Either way, Nikkos’s answer was to snarl, rear back, and slam his fist into my jaw.

The pain was instant, throbbing, but I was used to dirty fights like this. I recovered quickly, my reflexes kicking in as I kicked out and caught Nikkos in the gut.

“What the hell are you doing?” Adair exclaimed.

This time, he *was* talking to me.

“What does it look like?” I scoffed. “I’m saving your royal Fae behind!”

I faced Nikkos, just as he threw the knife he’d been holding. It zoomed right past my head. The zinging sound of it sent a rush of adrenaline through me when the blade nicked my cheek. This son of an ogre had just *cut me.*

“You are going to regret that,” I hissed, and threw my own knife. I wasn’t messing around, but Nikkos caught the knife before it could hit him in the chest.

He was very skilled, but this fight wasn’t just about skill.

It was about Nikkos’s fury.

It was unlike anything I’d ever seen coming from him.

He let out a guttural sound and lunged forward—I spun to avoid his attack, but I realized that he hadn’t been aiming at me. He was after Adair, who met his attack head-on. I jumped on Nikkos’s back, ready to scratch at his eyes and get this whole thing over with, but Nikkos was too fast.

He ducked and deflected the attack, shoving me back so hard that the air left my lungs and my feet were no longer touching the ground. Before I could realize what was happening, I went flying into a cement pillar, my whole body shaking from the pain.

Nikkos had to pay for this.

I shook my head, fighting to clear my vision, feeling dazed and dizzy. I was seeing three of everything, and the last thing I needed was another two of Nikkos. My whole body ached, but the throbbing was at its worst at the back of my head.

When I reached back and touched it, my hand came away bloody.

No matter. It wasn’t like I hadn’t fought while concussed before. Adair and Nikkos were still grappling, but there was a knife embedded in Adair’s shoulder, and that gave Nikkos the advantage. I had to help my uncle.

But when I started forward, the room spun. I could still hear them, though—hear Adair shout, “This was never about you; that was what you could never possibly understand.”

“That’s why I’m still pissed, you asshole!” Nikkos replied.

“Nikkos, no!” I called, fighting to stand still, rubbing my eyes to see clearly. “I won’t let you hurt him, and I promise you can’t take us both on at once.”

Nikkos shot me a look, scowling, still breathing hard from the fight. He pointed at Adair and said, “You have no idea what he—”

“*Enough*.” Adair shoved Nikkos back, freeing himself from Nikkos’s hold. Adair’s voice had vibrated across the space and up into the sky, sending a chill down my spine. He took a step back from a stumbling Nikkos and flicked both of his wrists.

In the blink of an eye, electric-energized whips appeared in each of Adair’s hands.

My vision had finally cleared, and I just gaped at my uncle in shock.

*Electricity* *whips?*

This was unbelievable.

“Adair…” Nikkos’s eyes were wide. He stopped moving, clearly intimidated by such a stunning show of magic.

“You might not believe me, but I truly don’t want to hurt you, Nikkos,” Adair said. His tone was calm, but the threat was obvious, along with a hint of something else that I couldn’t pinpoint. Either way, the Fae had magically charged whips on his hands, and he didn’t look scared to use them.

Nikkos didn’t speak for a long moment. He was panting, his eyes scanning Adair’s face like he was fighting to figure out a million things. He opened his mouth to speak, but instead of words, a guttural cry escaped.

I had no idea if it was made of pain or fury.

In a flash of movement, Nikkos jumped onto a crate and smashed through a half-broken window, disappearing into the dark.

“Damnation!” Adair growled and darted forward, clearly ready to follow Nikkos.

“Wait!” I called after him. “I need to talk to you!”

Adair peered at me, about to jump out the window. “I don’t have time to entertain some random Dark Fae who is *clearly* in way over her head.”

“I’m not some random stranger,” I said. “I’ve been looking for you, Adair. I’m Kadmos’s daughter.”

# Episode 3251

**Greyson**

“Are you fucking *kidding* me?” Gabriel flailed his hands around and started pacing angrily.

Times like these, he reminded me of Colton.

At least Mikah remained dignified. The man had a way of acting like a pleased cat sometimes, and honestly his restraint was impressive.

Meanwhile, Xavier mirrored Gabriel’s scowl and glared at me. “How the hell could Odette have gotten the keys, Greyson? She was a goddamn illusion!”

“I thought the keys had to be given willingly, or else there were consequences,” Cali said cautiously.

Cali broke away from Xavier’s embrace and climbed to her feet. She could move now—Odette’s freezing spell was finally gone. There were smudges of dirt on her cheeks, her clothes were torn, and a trickle of dried blood grazed her delicate throat.

My heart ached at the thought of what she had just been through. What we had all been through… and all for nothing.

I doubted I’d ever get used to seeing her disheveled after a recent fight.

“I was willing to give the keys to Odette in order to keep you safe.” I forced myself to speak evenly. “So the intent was there, and the witch clearly found a loophole when my guard was down. She used you as a distraction, and during the fight…” I offered a bitter huff, running my fingers through my hair. “She must’ve taken them. All I know is that I don’t have them.”

I felt like the biggest tool in the entire universe.

“Hey,” Cali muttered, resting her hand on my arm reassuringly. “You did your best.”

And now I felt even worse.

“My best wasn’t enough,” I said tightly, and Cali gasped.

“Don’t ever say that. You were trying to save me, and this wasn’t a walk in the park.”

Cali gestured at the chaos Odette had left behind. Having my mate acknowledge my efforts calmed my wolf’s instincts. My wolf loved being praised by her, which was fucking pathetic. But I couldn’t afford to have my focus split between myself and my wolf. Not when there was so much at stake.

“Odette’s magic does seem extremely complex,” I conceded, poking at one of my now-healing wounds. “Whatever she did wasn’t an ordinary illusion. She could inflict pain.”

“But how the actual fuck could she fight all five of us at once while using replicas?” Gabriel asked.

“Perhaps she’s more powerful than we ever imagined,” Mikah said quietly.

“She’s strategic, and crafty as well,” Harlow said in a shaky voice. “When you all disappeared from the apartment complex, I knew she was using her favorite trick: isolating her victims and placing them in nightmare hallucinations.”

Xavier snarled, glaring at Harlow. “It’s a little late for you to tell us that now. Why the fuck didn’t you tell us everything you knew about Odette’s powers? We could’ve been more prepared. Why should we trust you after all this?”

Harlow shook her head. “I’m still here, aren’t I? I didn’t leave with Odette, or—”

“But how do we know that you didn’t just help Odette take the keys?” I asked, cutting her off. “She said it herself—you’re part of the same coven. You might be more loyal to her than you wanted us to believe. Did you *want* Odette to get to all of us?”

She gasped. “That’s not what—”

“This could’ve been your plan the whole time, for all we know—making sure Odette could get to us easily!” Gabriel exclaimed, pointing at Harlow. “That’s it!”

“Oh, shove it, you don’t understand anything,” Harlow said, turning to a grim-looking Mikah. “If you’re done throwing around baseless accusations, would you, perhaps, listen to me?”

“Of course we will,” Cali said loudly, stepping between Harlow and the rest of us. “I want to hear her side of the story.” My mate looked between all four of us. “Okay?”

“And if she’s lying we could always bite her head off and let Mikah drain her,” Gabriel offered helpfully.

Harlow gasped, basically hiding behind Cali.

“Gabriel, you’re not biting anyone’s head off,” Cali declared, looking between Gabriel and Mikah. “And this is *not* vampire dinnertime.”

Mikah shrugged. “Apologies. A blood offering tends to be Gabriel’s idea of romance.”

Gabriel grinned happily.

I had a snarky reply at the tip of my tongue, but Cali’s expression said she was done with our bullshit. “Guys,” she started again, now staring at Xavier and me. “Let’s just listen to Harlow. *Please*.”

Xavier spoke to Harlow with a huff. “Fine. You’d better tell us everything you know, though. Or *else*.”

“Greyson?” Cali looked at me hopefully.

There wasn’t anything I could offer her if the witch didn’t explain herself. And fast. So, for Cali’s sake, I turned to Harlow. “Let’s hear it.”

She swallowed audibly. “We needed to disarm the other witches first, which is why we needed all of you. If my small little band and I had tried confronting Odette, or any of the other elders, we would’ve had no leverage. I had to keep the well-being of my coven in mind, the same way you do with your pack.”

“So essentially you had us do your dirty work,” I said.

“We all had the same goal. Finding your guys’ friend would also help restore the magic in New Orleans. It’s a win-win. I promise I’m only trying to fix what I see as the elders’ mistake. It wasn’t easy for me to come to you. The coven is like a family, but I’ve never blindly followed anyone’s orders. Do you always agree with all of your family members’ actions, Greyson?”

I exchanged a look with Xavier. I understood the witch—more than I’d ever admit. I’d certainly never approved of anything Silas had done, ever. I’d always tried to be a better man, a better wolf than that fucking monster. It would sting if someone lumped me in with my father.

At the thought of Silas, the hallucination nightmare came rushing back in. The accusations that Fenrir had thrown at me, about being Silas. Just as bad as Silas. Could there be any grain of truth to that?

No.

*No*, it had been a lie. I was in reality right now, and I had to focus.

Harlow was expecting an answer to her question, and I finally nodded.

“That makes sense,” I said.

Harlow breathed a sigh of relief. Cali rested a hand on her shoulder. “Thank you for your honesty, Harlow. I’m sure it wasn’t easy.”

Xavier offered a long-suffering sigh, Gabriel mumbled something to Mikah, and I was left to deal with the mess.

“You need to tell us absolutely everything you know about Odette now that she’s escaped. We need those keys back, and we don’t have time to waste.”

Harlow eyed me, fidgeting nervously. “Before I tell you, I have one favor to ask.”

“A favor?” Xavier scoffed. “Really?”

Harlow’s features hardened all of a sudden. There was still a lot of fight in her, and I could appreciate that. Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared at Xavier. “I am willing to tell you everything I know about her, because I don’t agree with her methods. But I refuse to sign her death warrant. She’s still a figurehead in my community, and killing her is not something I want a part in.”

We were at an impasse, it seemed. I doubted I could promise Odette’s survival at the moment. Not because I actively wanted to kill her—though I *did* want to kill her, after what she’d done to Cali—but because I didn’t know how the fight would go.

I opened my mouth to say just that, but Cali was already speaking.

“We’ll do everything in our power to make sure no one dies, including Odette,” she told Harlow earnestly, holding her hand.

I frowned. Cali knew the risks of what we were trying to do, and yet here she was, offering Harlow assurances. We had talked before about all of us needing to be on the same page before we agreed to demands, but I knew she would never consent to anything less than us trying to keep people alive, despite their danger. It was just who she was.

The image of Odette holding a dagger at Cali’s throat invaded my head again, though. I was still feeling raw after that, and I doubted I’d be able to deny my mate right now. Cali would say, *Greyson, we have to help Harlow!* And I’d say, *I’ll try because you’re asking me to, but I can’t promise anything.* Then she’d say, *Greyson, no. Promise!* And I’d say, *Okay, whatever you want.*

“… Odette will definitely be at the greenhouse,” Harlow was saying when I tuned back in to the conversation. “It’s her favorite place to center her magic. She’ll be at her most powerful and prepared there.”

Great. So much for an easy job.

“Then that’s where we’re going,” I said. “If Odette is there, then that means the keys will be too.”

“My guess is that the entire area will probably be laced with spell traps,” Harlow said.

“Is there any way we could break through the spells to get to her more easily?” I asked.

“If we go to the greenhouse right now, she might not have had time to put up many protection spells yet.” She turned to me. “Moreover, she was just here fighting with you guys. A mirror illusion spell requires a lot of energy—if there’s ever a moment when she’s weakened, it’ll be now. Not by much, but we can hope.”

“Okay,” I said, a plan forming in my head. “So we attack fast.”

“I’ll meet you at the greenhouse,” Harlow said right away.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Wait, you’re not coming with us?”

Harlow shook her head. “I have a quick stop to make. I think we could use some backup.”

# Episode 3252

“Excuse me,” I said, confused, “I thought *we* were the backup to begin with?”

“Who are you planning on asking?” Greyson asked Harlow.

“Not every witch in the city agrees with what the elders have done,” she said.

“But if New Orleans witches don’t have magic, how can they help?” Greyson seemed skeptical, which didn’t bode well.

“Look, I’m aware it’s asking for a lot, but you need to trust me,” Harlow said, her eyes sharp.

That triggered Xavier’s skepticism as well—not that it had ever left the chat—and he glared at her. For the millionth time. “Trusting you has set us back a lot, Harlow. Why should we do it again?”

“Xavier’s right,” Gabriel said, nodding eagerly.

“Guys, Harlow has helped us throughout this whole mess, and led us to other witches,” I told Xavier and Gabriel firmly. “There’s no reason for us to keep her on a leash.”

“I agree. Besides, what’s she going to do if she doesn’t come with us?” Mikah spoke up. “She doesn’t have any magic—technically, she’s not a threat.” He turned to Greyson. “We should let her go.”

I turned to Greyson as well and looked up at him pleadingly. *Greyson, come on! I trust Harlow—I have a good feeling about her*, I mind linked.

Greyson scrutinized my face with a frown before he mumbled to himself, something that sounded suspiciously like, “Why the hell do I even bother?”

Before I could ask what that was about, he turned to Harlow and said, “Go do what you need to do.”

I grinned up at him before offering Harlow an encouraging nod. Without another word, she took off in a jog toward the front of the house. The moment we heard the sound of an engine starting, Xavier scoffed.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this.” He arched his eyebrows at me. “We’re just going to let her go off and do whatever the hell she wants? What if she betrays us?”

“She hasn’t betrayed us yet,” I said. “And like Mikah said, she doesn’t have magic, so she can’t actually do anything to harm us.”

“At least there’s that,” Greyson agreed.

“What she did was lie by omission,” Gabriel said. “Pretty sketchy if you ask me.”

“True,” Greyson said. “But it is what it is at this point.”

“We did the same thing,” I said. “We didn’t tell her about my connection to Seluna—we weren’t completely honest with her, either.”

All of this aside, we needed to focus on the matter at hand now. “So, what do we need to do to prepare for our fight with Odette?”

Mikah shook his head. “There’s no time to prepare anything. Like Harlow said, we just need to go as quickly as possible before Odette’s power returns to full strength.”

The others agreed, and I pulled out my phone.

“What are you doing?” Greyson asked. Why did he look so alarmed? It wasn’t like I was running wild here. If anything, I’d been very respectful of everyone’s opinions. And if we ended up doing what *I* considered acceptable when it came to Harlow—well, it wasn’t my fault that I was right.

“We need backup, and Artemis and Rishika will want in on the action,” I told Greyson.

He seemed happy with that answer, so I shot a text to the two of them.

*SOS Operation Rescue Tabitha is ON! Please arrive at the following address ASAP to kick some witchy butt!*

Artemis and Rishika hadn’t responded by the time I got in the car with the boys. I was scrunched between Mikah and Xavier in the back seat, with Greyson driving and Gabriel in the passenger seat. They were all talking at the same time, but I wasn’t listening. I stared at the screen of my phone—still, no reply.

*I should’ve called Artemis instead*, I thought. *Why didn’t I call her? I should call her!*

I called her, but it went straight to voicemail.

*Oh no! What if something happened to her? What if she got lost? What if—*

I was fucking spiraling all over again.

*Cali, stop!* I scolded myself. *Relax. Artemis is with Rishika. They’re okay. They just haven’t seen your text, which means…*

It meant it would only be the five of us for now. I forced myself to focus on that—on the facts—instead of catastrophizing over my sister’s whereabouts.

“… the area around the greenhouse,” Gabriel was saying. His voice got louder, catching my attention. He’d pulled up a map of the area on his phone, and he and the guys were discussing the logistics of the attack.

“At this stage,” Greyson said, “it makes sense to split up and surround the area. That way the witches can’t focus their attack on us as a group.”

“Better to distract them from different angles,” Mikah agreed. “Perhaps there are more entrances that we didn’t see last time?”

“There’s gotta be,” Xavier said. “These witches are crafty.”

I swallowed roughly. “What if Odette uses her hallucination magic on us again?”

Greyson looked at me through the rearview mirror. “We’ll just have to trust Harlow’s information and hope that Odette hasn’t had enough time to prepare for a complicated spell like that again.”

*All of this sounds quite questionable to me!* said a squeaky little voice in my head. But that didn’t matter. Like Greyson had said, it was what it was, and we could only try to make the best of things.

“The mates should pair off,” I said with renewed determination. “If kissing was what helped us get out of Odette’s trance last time, then we can use it again to break free.”

Gabriel turned toward the back seat, winking at Mikah. “Works for me.”

Mikah rolled his eyes. Gabriel said something else that made Mikah snort, but I missed it. Xavier had taken my hand, and now my whole attention was on him.

“Your fingers are cold,” he whispered. “Are you okay?”

“Just worried that people are gonna get hurt, but what else is new?” I said, trying to joke. It wasn’t exactly working.

Xavier kissed the side of my head. “Just stay by my side, okay?”

I breathed a little more evenly. “Okay.”

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When we were close to the greenhouse, Greyson parked a few blocks away so we could move more stealthily on foot. Then we split into groups—Gabriel and Mikah in one, Greyson, Xavier, and me in the other. It had been decided that our group would take the back route. Xavier moved to lead the way. I was in the middle, with Greyson bringing up the rear.

Remaining inconspicuous was vital, so I unfortunately was not allowed to sing a sea shanty in order to boost morale.

We hadn’t seen the back of the property on our last trip here. The trees in the yard were overgrown, and I wasn’t sure if that was a help or a hindrance. It just made everything around us look unwelcoming and unsettling, and I was pretty sure the witches liked it that way.

My every step was quiet, avoiding dead leaves or small twigs. As we got closer, the foliage got thicker, like a small jungle—lots of tall grasses, flowers, and even vines twisting along the garden floor. I did my best to avoid stepping on anything, but soon the ground was covered.

While quietly kicking a particularly robust vine out of the way, my shoe caught on something. I flailed, almost tripping. Xavier was a few steps ahead, but Greyson, still behind me, gripped my waist to steady me. My palm got caught somewhere, and a thorn sliced through my skin.

I let out a tiny hiss of pain and examined the injury.

*Are you okay?* Greyson mind linked.

My heart was pounding in my ears. I watched as a single drop of blood trailed to the edge of my palm and then dropped to the ground.

It fell directly onto the vine.

And then, as if given the breath of life, the vine moved. I blinked. That wasn’t possible.

*Vines don’t move, Cali! That’s not how things work! It’s not—*

But despite my best efforts to talk myself down, I had to concede the vine was *moving*.

It slithered on the ground before it twisted up toward me like some kind of magical snake.

“Shit!” I whisper-hissed. “The vines are moving.”

“Just what we needed,” Greyson whisper-hissed back. I spun around to see him batting at vines that had completely surrounded his legs.

*The vines are fucking moving, people!* I wanted to scream, but Xavier’s grunt of pain made me snap out of it. His right arm was encased in vines. Unlike the ones that had caught Greyson, these ones were aggressive, squeezing Xavier’s skin like they aimed to suffocate.

*Don’t come any closer, Cali!* he mind linked. *I don’t want you to get caught.*

I couldn’t let Xavier get hurt—obviously—so I ignored his nonsense and raced forward. I stumbled as the vines tried to catch at my ankles. I fought to bat at them, but the thorns cut into my hands, and the more I touched them, the more they grew.

*Is my blood feeding them? Am I magical vine catnip?*

That would be just my luck.

“Cali!” Greyson hissed. When I turned to face him, I saw that he’d been totally immobilized by the foliage. Xavier was a few feet ahead of me, Greyson a few feet behind me, and I was in the middle, caught by vines that were tightening around my legs. They cut into my skin, thorns slicing through, and I could no longer stay silent.

I let out a loud cry of pain.

*My blood is making them stronger*, I thought, a coldness settling over me at the realization.

The more I struggled, the more skin broke, the more blood dripped, and the more the vines grew. In a matter of seconds, they were taller than me.

Moments later, they were everywhere, a hungry cocoon that blocked out the sunlight and threatened to swallow me whole.

# Episode 3253

**Artemis**

Adair froze in place, staring at me. Then he slowly shook his head. “What did you just say?”

“I’m Kadmos’s daughter,” I said, taking a step closer. “That’s why I’ve been looking for you.”

Adair just blinked at me, half in disbelief, half in shock. He hadn’t made a run for it yet, but he was still a flight risk, so I took another step closer and started hurriedly explaining.

“I need to know more about your side of my family. My magic has been struggling—even before the magic was turned off in New Orleans, I mean. I feel like I’ve been missing parts of who I really am my entire life, and that’s been affecting me deep down—there’s so much I don’t understand. So I was hoping…” I ended up trailing off awkwardly.

Adair stared, and I felt small under his scrutinizing gaze. My throat was scratchy all of a sudden. Lodged into it was an emotion I could only categorize as longing. I’d wanted a connection to Kadmos for so long.

I was grateful for everything my mother had given me, for Orla’s acceptance and attempts to form a bond with me, but it still felt like a piece of me was missing. Adair was part of me, part of Kadmos. And by blood, Adair was the closest I’d ever been to my father. For me, this was a quest to find Kadmos—if he was even alive. But above all, it was a quest to find myself.

I’d felt so lost for so long that I needed that to feel complete.

“I just want to know who I am,” I whispered.

Adair still didn’t move an inch. I looked at him, he looked at me, and then…

Finally, he moved away from the edge of the roof and sat on a crate. He glanced up at me, his expression blank. “Sorry, but Kadmos’s daughter died. I received the report directly. I don’t know who you are, but I know you’re a liar.”

His words struck a chord. Being called a liar and cheat had been part of life as a bounty hunter. I swallowed down the visceral reaction, though, and forced myself to remember that this meeting had to be a lot for Adair. Taking a deep breath, I walked over and sat on the crate beside him. I kept a foot of space between us.

“I’m not lying,” I said. “And I think that if you really thought I was, you’d be gone by now.” Adair didn’t react to that. He just stared down at his hands while I continued. “Everyone was told that I’d died, even my own mother, but, well…” The words were so absurd that I let out an awkward little laugh, gesturing down at myself. “Here I am.”

Adair finally faced me. His sharp blue eyes studied my face, but his expression didn’t betray his feelings. “Why should I believe this isn’t some kind of trick? How do I know you’re not actually working with Nikkos to bring me back to the Fae court?”

What the hell was I supposed to say to that? Nikkos had proven to be a crafty bastard. I wasn’t about to fault Adair’s lack of trust. At the same time, though, I needed to crack this. I needed Adair to believe me, believe *in* me, and I wracked my brain for an answer.

It landed like lightning.

“Well, you’re Fae,” I said. “Can’t you tell that I’m not fully Dark Fae?”

Adair frowned. He scanned every inch of my face even more intently, his eyes narrowed before they finally widened. “You’re half Light Fae.”

“My mother is Orla Wrenthorn, from the Light Fae court.”

Adair’s serious expression broke into a dubious smile that made him look years younger. “Orla Wrenthorn. There’s someone I haven’t thought about in years.”

He fell silent once more, resting his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward. He seemed to be thinking, and I held my breath.

And then he shook his head again. “How can this *be*?”

“That’s a question I have, too,” I said. “Everyone I’ve ever talked to says that Kadmos was very powerful, but I’m his daughter and my magic is broken, and I can’t make sense of it. Everything feels wrong, and I—I need to know what’s happening to me. I need to know if I have his power inside me too.”

Adair didn’t look at me again. He stood up abruptly. “I don’t have time to deal with this right now.”

The sting of his rejection made my stomach lurch. I thought I’d gotten used to feeling forgotten and ignored and abandoned, but it still hurt to think that Adair considered speaking to me a waste of time. I wanted to believe he was in shock instead of truly rejecting me, though.

I instantly got to my feet as well. “Why?”

He stared at me, eyebrows arched. “*Why?*”

“Yes,” I said impatiently. “I tell you I’m your long-lost niece, and you say you have no time for me instead of hugging me or something.”

Adair’s face was blank. “Hugs are for Light Fae and dwarves.”

“I’m not asking for a hug!” I huffed. “I’m just saying—”

“Do I *look* like I enjoy hugging people?” he asked.

“Do *I* look like I enjoy hugging people?” I shot back.

Gods. He really *was* my uncle.

“What are you even doing in New Orleans right now?” I asked.

Adair peered at me. “What are *you* doing in New Orleans?”

And people said witches were cryptic.

“Okay, look…” I cleared my throat. I needed to get him to listen to me. On some basic level. “Perhaps I can help you with whatever it is you’re working on.”

Adair frowned. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Because then I could… you know… spend time with you?” I sounded pathetic to my own ears, but what else could I do? The man was about to abandon me, and I definitely wouldn’t cope with that well. Now that I’d found Adair, I didn’t want to lose him again.

“What I’m doing is dangerous,” Adair said with authority. “You don’t want to get involved.”

A tainted laugh escaped me. “Oh, I definitely do. *You’re* the reason I’m in New Orleans, and I just spent the last couple of days working with a Dark Fae to find you. Nikkos is an expert fighter, and he was apparently using me to get to you, but I’m still alive, aren’t I?” I gestured down at myself.

Adair pursed his lips together. “That’s not—”

“Working with you won’t be any more dangerous than working with someone like Nikkos,” I declared, cutting him off. “You know that.”

Adair’s face twisted into a scowl. “You should never have listened to Nikkos’s lies.”

“It wasn’t like I had a choice,” I said wryly. “He was my only lead to you.”

“So what?” Adair scoffed, waving a hand at me. “Do you have any idea how dangerous he is? You’re lucky you’re still breathing. This was a trap, and you fell right into—”

“If you want to make sure I don’t fall into a trap like that again, maybe you should stick around and keep an eye on me,” I said. “He wasn’t wrong. Fighting with me lured you out, so maybe I’m not the only liar.”

Adair paused. Squinted at me.

“What?” I asked innocently.

“Maybe you really are Kadmos’s daughter,” Adair said, his tone considering. “You have a sharp wit like he did, and a penchant for emotional manipulation. That’s one of our better Dark Fae qualities.”

I was pretty sure Cali wouldn’t have approved of that last bit, but I felt a strange mix of pride and confusion at Adair’s words. They’d sounded complimentary, but I wasn’t sure if that was really the case, given all the things Kadmos had done. But did I really know anything about him? The real him? Orla had loved Kadmos once, and that had to count for something.

“Does that mean you won’t disappear on me?” I asked.

Adair opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, there was the sound of running feet. We both spun around, ready to face off with an attacker. Was Nikkos back? Could it be another Dark Fae? Either way, this wasn’t good, and I…

I gasped in surprise when I saw Rishika rounding the corner. My heart started racing at the sight of her—she was healed, her body as strong as ever, her expression focused. The relief I felt was palpable.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she called, marching toward us, “but did you check your messages, Artemis?”

Adair tensed up at the sight of Rishika. I stepped between them instantly. “We’ve been busy over here—what’s going on?” I asked. “Did Cali reach out?”

“Yes. The others need us,” Rishika said, glancing at Adair over my shoulder. “They’re going to the greenhouse to get Tabitha, and they need backup.”

Adair’s voice came out shocked and sharp. “Wait—how the hell do you two know Tabby?”

# Episode 3254

“Xavier! Greyson!” I hissed. I was surrounded by a cocoon of vines. I couldn’t even see my mates through it. The more I struggled, the more the vines tightened around me. And even though there were no more thorns in the mix, this was really starting to fucking hurt. I was NOT going to die from something as ridiculous as vine asphyxiation, dammit!

*I’ll try to shift*, Greyson mind linked. Xavier and I offered our agreement, and I waited. A moment later, I heard Greyson’s muffled grunt of pain. Shit.

*Are you okay?* I asked like an idiot, even though the answer was obvious.

*Shifting didn’t work*, Greyson said. *The vines just tightened more before I could go full wolf.*

*What about our claws?* Xavier’s words were followed by a pause and a loud curse. *Shit, the vines grow too fast after I slice through them. We need a way to get rid of a shit ton of vines at once.*

*I’ll try to blast them*, I mind linked.

*What if it rebounds on you?* Greyson asked.

One of the vines wrapped around my neck while the rest of them tightened even further on every other inch of my body. Suddenly, it was hard to breathe.

*We don’t have a choice! I’m doing it!*

I pushed through, gathering my magic as it hummed in the background of my consciousness. I’d done this so many times today, it was starting to get easier. I pushed out the energy with all my might, hoping it could be effective without making too big a blast and accidentally hitting any one of us.

All of a sudden, I could breathe again.

*Yes! OH MY GOD!*

The magic had smashed through the vines surrounding me, releasing me. The greenery fell away, singed. It started to grow back almost immediately, but I ran off before the vines could catch me. I got away from the patch, panting, looking around wildly for my mates.

*Fuck!*

Two massive vine pods had surrounded Greyson and Xavier. Greyson let out another grunt of pain, and I mind linked him first. *I’m going to try to focus on your right side so my magic doesn’t hit you in the chest.*

*Don’t worry about me*, he replied. *Just do it! I believe in you, love.*

Swallowing my emotions, I gathered my magic into a ball, pushing it forward again. It hit the right side of Greyson’s pod. I held my breath until he emerged, half shifted and hyperventilating. He pulled away from the vines and ran out of the heaving patch.

“Greyson!” I rasped when he fell on his knees by my feet, breathing with difficulty as I helped him stand. Those damn vines had tried to choke him!

*Cali!* Xavier’s voice echoed in my head, and I snapped back into attention.

*Try to get to the left side of the vine pod*, I mind linked*. I don’t want to hurt you!*

*I can’t really move*. Xavier’s voice sounded raspy. *Just blast the fucking thing!*

Once more, I had no choice. Bracing myself, I raised my hands and took the shot, my power eating through the vines until Xavier finally broke free as well. His escape was easier because I’d burned down almost the entirety of his cocoon. When he joined us, there were no thorn scratches on his body, but I saw that his right shoulder was bloody.

“Oh, no!” I gasped, examining the wound. “Did I do that?”

“I’m fine,” he whispered, waving me off. “It’s already healing.”

“Maybe use some of my blood to heal faster?” I asked. I offered him my hand, but Xavier gripped my wrist and shook his head.

“I’m fine. Let’s just go.”

“He’s right,” Greyson muttered, looking around as if he expected another attack at any second. The purple bruises around his neck had already faded. “The witches must have heard the commotion—we have to get to the greenhouse.”

Looking between my mates, I realized that we’d reached the point of no return.

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The greenhouse was eerily quiet, which didn’t exactly bode well.

*What do you think?* I asked my mates.

*I think there are definitely more traps, so be on alert*, Greyson replied.

We paused in front of the back door, and I poked at it gingerly, as if it could come to life and bite me. It clicked open instantly.

*Okay, this is way too easy*, I mind linked.

Xavier scoffed. *It’s definitely a trap. Do we still go inside?*

*Do we have any other choice if we want to find Tabitha?* I asked.

Neither of them spoke aloud, so I made a move to walk inside.

“No,” Greyson said. “I’ll go in first.”

If this were a trap, Greyson would be the one to take the hit, and I obviously wasn’t about to let that happen. I reached for him, ready to grab him, but he’d already slipped past the threshold.

Nothing happened.

There was no net falling from the ceiling, no strangling vines.

Greyson nodded and waved for us. *All clear.* Xavier nudged me, and we snuck inside. We wove through the planters, careful not to touch anything. My heart was racing. It was hot in the greenhouse—the feeling almost tropical. I was sweating from the nerves, from the heat, from just fucking *everything*.

I regretted calling the outside a jungle. The word fit this place far more accurately, the foliage thick and smeared with humidity, the flowery scent so intense that Xavier had to suppress a sneeze. I could hear my mates’ breathing, and nothing else.

We turned a corner, and I gasped.

*Odette*.

Odette stood there, flanked by Azalea and the first elder witch we’d faced—Constance. All of them looked formidable, clutching their magic charms. Mikah and Gabriel were being penned in by two alligator shifters. One of the alligator men was half-shifted, with claws that had no business being so long. His giant scaly tail swished behind him, knocking at one of the planters.

“We got caught,” Gabriel informed us with a scowl.

Mikah glared at him. “I think they can tell.”

Odette laughed. More like cackled. Very on brand for a witch. “As you can see,” she said, “we’ve been expecting you.”

“Enough games,” Greyson growled. “We want those keys, and we want our friends back.”

“You were foolish to come here and face us.” She gestured at Mikah and Gabriel. “How pathetic.”

Gabriel laughed. “Oh yeah? Say that again when I rip those charms away from you!” He spun and shifted at the same time, surprising his captor into releasing his grip.

*Go Gabriel!*

After attacking his guard, he charged at the one holding Mikah. The alligator shifters were hissing and growling, but Mikah was now free to help his mate face off against them. Xavier shifted into his wolf, let out a roar, and charged toward Constance. She let out a screech of surprise and squealed something that sounded like, “How uncivilized!”

*Odette is yours, love*, Greyson mind linked. *You’re the only one who’s managed to challenge her power. You can do this.*

And with that vote of confidence, Greyson went after Azalea. Feeling ten feet taller and emboldened by his praise, I turned to Odette and sent out a blast before she could engage in any of her usual shit-talking.

My magic was flowing freely, as if completely awakened after I’d used it so much. The suppression spell the witches had set over New Orleans seemed not to be working on me at this point, and Odette’s cry of surprise only made me feel more certain of myself. When she leapt to the side to escape my magic, I noticed there was blood on her palm.

“So you’re real this time,” I said with a grin. “That’s great!”

Odette sneered. “You little Fae brat, you’ll regret this!” She lifted her hands, and a dozen copies of her emerged all over again. But I’d been anticipating her bullshit, and I kept my eye on the original. I ran forward, ignoring the mirages while reaching to my belt for the knife that Artemis had given me.

“It’s laced with poison!” I declared as I jabbed the knife at her, as if I had any idea what the fuck I was doing. The knife *wasn’t* poisoned—I was making shit up as I went. I was apparently convincing enough for Odette, though, because she let out a cry of surprise and went falling back over a planter.

*The more regal and scary they look, the more ridiculous they are when they fall!* I thought, pretty proud of myself for pulling that off.

But before I could send another blast of magic at her, Odette rolled to her feet, very spry for her age, and then her feet were no longer touching the ground. She was floating a few inches off the ground, and I gasped in shock, jumping backward.

“You can fly?” I gasped.

“You poor, clueless child,” Odette said with a laugh that was, of course, totally evil. She shoved her hand forward, and my stomach dropped. The air before me turned solid, slamming into my chest like a wave. I screamed as my body flew back, adrenaline and fear and pain flooding me when I dropped on the ground.

My ears rang from the impact, the sounds of battle overwhelming, but I could still hear the voice in my head.

*There’s no giving up now*.

That wasn’t Greyson’s or Xavier’s voice. It wasn’t Seluna either.

It was me.

I was still here, still alive.

The pain was undeniable, and the fear was real, but I’d come so far, and there would be no giving up now. Breathing hard, I forced my aching limbs to cooperate. I pushed myself up from the ground, turning to face Odette. She had lowered her face to my level and was standing so close that a stab of terror pierced my stomach.

Her green eyes glowed when she smiled.

“*Boo*,” she whispered, right in my face.

The second her cold breath touched my skin, she lifted her fist.

Like I was dangling from strings, I was pulled into the air by Odette’s magic and swung around, spinning like I was on the worst roller coaster of my life. My stomach heaved, but I fought to ground myself and reach for my magic. The blast I sent out missed Odette, but it winged the gator shifter Gabriel was fighting.

Gabriel’s roar of triumph was loud and sudden, vibrating through the space and distracting Odette enough for the strings she had on me to falter. I went flying backward again, hitting a giant terracotta planter with a groan. Pain exploded through every inch of me.

I forced my eyes open, feeling woozy. The first thing I saw was the witch stomping toward me, her long sleeves flaring like wings, her fist raised and encased with flames.

I stopped breathing.

“Time to end this!” she growled, raising her hand to scorch me.

After Seluna, I’d sworn I’d never be burned again.

*Never.*

Out of sheer undying stubbornness, I raised my hand to shield myself and blast this goddamn witch the hell away from me—

“ENOUGH!”

A familiar voice echoed violently through the space. Harlow had burst through the front doors, flanked by dozens of other witches.

Odette glared at Harlow, who screamed, “This ends now!”

# Episode 3255

**Xavier**

I was in full shift with my teeth around Azalea’s fist, fighting to pry the charm away from her. The taste of her blood was nauseating, but I bit down harder just to hear her cry out in pain and anger.

If she didn’t let go, I was going to bite her fucking hand off.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Azalea let out a ferocious wail and eased her hold on the charm. I yanked it away, throwing it so violently to the ground that it shattered into pieces. Yellow magic burst out of it and faded, just as I heard Cali’s scream.

When I spun around, I saw her go flying across the room. Odette stalked after her like a predator. I’d show her what a real fucking predator looked like. I bunched my leg muscles and took aim, ready to leap onto Odette and tear her throat out.

“ENOUGH!”

The door burst open. Harlow was here.

“This ends now!”

Her voice was a shout. Two dozen other witches poured through the door to surround her, and I was stunned to see that Harlow had actually pulled through and kept her promise. *Damn*. Cali had been right to trust her—this was backup, all right. The witches moved past the planters to face off against Odette, and I looked around to assess the situation.

The two gator shifters lay on the ground, immobile. Greyson was holding the other elder witch, Constance, down.

“You filthy mutts!” she was screeching, struggling fiercely as Mikah wrestled her fingers open.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” he said blandly, pulling the charm away.

The witch huffed in anger, and and another rushed to help her stand.

All eyes were on Odette now.

“Now you’re the only one with a charm, Odette,” Cali said, breaking the sudden quiet of the scene. “You’re surrounded.” My mate’s voice was raspy, and she looked bruised and hurt, but that didn’t stop her from speaking. She braced herself on a planter and got to her feet.

*Baby, are you okay?* I mind linked, fighting not to sound fucked up with worry.

Cali’s eyes met mine, and when she nodded, I breathed more evenly.

“My magic is not yours to claim!” Odette hissed, glaring between Harlow and Cali. She clutched the charm close to her chest. It must’ve been hanging from a chain around her neck, hidden under her neckline. It wasn’t the only thing that lay against Odette’s collarbones, though.

The four keys hung from a second chain.

Gabe’s wolf let out a low growl. He stepped forward, his eyes fixed on the keys.

“Don’t you dare make another move!” Odette snapped, tearing the charm away with her hand and holding it out in front of Gabe. His wolf growled again, but he didn’t move.

“He’s not going to hurt you, Odette,” Harlow said. “Not as long as you give him the keys—”

Odette snarled, cutting Harlow off. “This is it, then, Harlow? You’re siding with the enemy?”

“I’m not siding with the enemy,” Harlow said between clenched teeth. “You’re wrong, and we’re here to tell you that.”

Odette’s eyes flashed with amusement. “You really think you can stop me? None of you have magic!”

Harlow’s face twisted, and then the witch shook her head. “And right now neither do your biggest allies. We’re not here to fight you, Odette. We were only hoping that you’d listen to your coven.” She gestured at the people standing next to her. “To your *family*.”

Odette’s expression sharpened. “Listen to what? I’m already doing what’s best for this coven. I’m doing what’s best for the entire magical community!”

A different witch stepped forward. She looked older, maybe as old as Odette herself. “Etta, we’ve been friends since we were kids. I know you mean well, but this isn’t the way. When you take away everybody’s choice, it’s a dictatorship.”

Odette gasped in shock at the woman’s words. Did she possess zero self-awareness or what?

Another witch—a younger one, probably around Harlow’s age—walked up to stand next to Harlow and said, “Auntie, I trust you in most things, but taking away our magic without asking is a fundamental betrayal of everything you’ve ever taught us to believe in.”

The other witches nodded in agreement, and Odette’s gaze hardened as she gestured at Cali, at Greyson and Mikah and Gabe and me. “So you believe that these outsiders will help us fix our city? That’s preposterous!”

“Just because these people are outsiders,” Harlow said, “doesn’t mean they’re our enemies. They want to help. Why can’t we let them?”

“You can’t trust them!” Odette snapped, seething. “They’re wolves and vampires and Fae!” She spat out each word like it was a curse. “They don’t respect magic the way we do! What if they’re here to sully our connection to the ancestors?”

Harlow’s lips were a thin line, the clench of her jaw obvious. When she spoke, her voice was even, but it sounded like a lash. “You mean like you did, when you took our magic from us?”

Odette flinched.

*Is she finally listening to Harlow?* Cali mind linked to Greyson and me.

*I wouldn’t hold my breath*, Greyson replied.

“Give us the keys,” Harlow said in that same tone, holding out her hand. “Let us undo this. Let these people help us. I trust them.”

Odette gripped the keys hanging from around her neck. “If you set all magic free in our city, it could hurt us all! Darkness has infected our pool of power, and this half-Fae is to blame!” Odette pointed at Cali with the hand that held the charm, and I snarled. I had to force myself not to pounce.

Before Cali could defend herself, though, Harlow spoke up again. “Whatever the problem is, we will figure out a solution. Together. We have to have a choice. You cannot make decisions for everybody in the city. That can’t be the way things work around here. Not anymore.”

In a state of fury, Odette yanked the chain free from her neck. “Is this what you want?” she snapped at her fellow witch, letting the necklace dangle as the keys rested in her palm. “Is this your final decision?”

She asked the question but didn’t hold her hand out, just stared at Harlow. The younger witch stepped forward and silently reached for the keys. Before she could take them, though, Odette closed her hand around the keys and slid backward.

“Fine,” she hissed in outrage. “Let this be your funeral. And I will not be here to save you!” She threw the keys onto the ground disdainfully, then lifted her other hand—the one with the charm. I made a move to jump forward, instinctively ready to attack.

It was too late.

In the blink of an eye, Odette blipped away.

Fuck.

I trotted over to Harlow and shifted back to human as she bent down to pick up the keys. She took a deep breath and faced me. “I’m sorry about all this.”

The truth was that Cali could’ve gotten seriously fucking hurt today. And if that had happened, Harlow’s apologies wouldn’t have mattered. If I wanted to be completely honest, Gabe’s idea about tearing the lying witch’s head off and letting Mikah drain her had never really been off the table for me. Harlow had come through at the last minute, though, and I couldn’t help but appreciate her involvement.

In the end, I just nodded at her and accepted the keys. “Do you know where the prison is in the greenhouse?” I asked.

Harlow looked confused. “Prison?”

“Or a secret room or whatever these keys unlock here,” Greyson noted. He’d shifted back to human as well, right along with Gabe.

Harlow shook her head. “I don’t think the keys are for the greenhouse.”

“What are you talking about?” Cali asked with a gasp. “It has to be here. Isn’t this where they’re keeping Tabitha?”

“Seeing them… I don’t think there’s a room on this estate that these keys would work on,” Harlow said, looking contrite.

“Then where the hell is Tabby?” Gabe demanded.

The second the question left his mouth, the door opened again and Artemis walked through. “Cali!”

“Artemis!” Cali ran to her sister. I eyed my mate, relieved to see that she was only slightly limping. Fae definitely healed faster than humans. “Oh my god, where have you been?”

“We’re here to help you,” Artemis said.

“You’re a little late to the party,” Mikah deadpanned.

I scoffed. “I’ll say.”

“Where’s Rishika?” Greyson asked tensely.

In that same second, Rishika walked in behind Artemis, along with a fancy-ass looking man. He looked like he’d spent at least an hour coifing his hair. I arched my eyebrows and turned to Gabe—I knew he’d appreciate me giving shit to a complete stranger—but Gabe was gaping at the man.

“*Adair?*” Gabe gasped out. Mikah just looked stunned.

The man stepped forward, looking between Gabe and Mikah. “Tabitha isn’t here, but I know where she is.”

# Episode 3256

**Artemis**

Gabriel and Mikah strode forward, surrounding Adair in an instant. Both of them looked shocked to see him, and when Gabriel slapped a hand on Adair’s shoulder, I held my breath. Adair did not seem like the type to appreciate that kind of gesture.

And yet, he didn’t blast anyone when Gabriel shook him a little and said, “What the fuck, man? Where you been?”

“We were looking everywhere for you,” Mikah said with a frown.

Adair sighed, looking surprisingly apologetic. “I know,” he said shiftily. “I was kind of avoiding you.”

“Oh, wow, excuse us for giving a fuck about you!” Gabriel scoffed.

Adair laughed at that—truly *laughed*—and Mikah’s frown deepened. “You know we could have helped you. You know that.”

Adair stared at the two of them. “I’ve told you that you can’t help me with this specific problem.”

Gabriel and Mikah paused, sharing a knowing look. Apart from the people I already knew, there were a bunch of others in the greenhouse—all of them witches. They were all engaged in quiet conversations, but I didn’t look away from my uncle and the other two men.

The three of them stood there for a beat, gazing at each other as if sharing some type of secret communication, and I felt a pang of jealousy. Adair had been so distant with me, but he was comfortable enough to smile at Gabriel and Mikah and engage in some sort of weird silent communication with them.

That meant he wasn’t a cold person. He was just cold with *me*, which really stung.

“So where is Tabby?” Gabriel asked, then.

“She’s in a cemetery,” Adair said.

“*What?*” Gabriel choked on air. “Why would she be in a cemetery? Is she—”

“She’s alive,” Adair rushed to add. I noticed his jaw clenching as he said the words. “The witches hid her there.”

“That makes sense,” said the witch Cali had called Harlow. “The cemetery is the safest place to hide something magical. Our ancestors can guard it for us when we’re not around.”

Adair nodded. “That’s what my research implied. I just don’t know which cemetery it would be. A witch’s guess would be much better than mine.”

Everybody looked over at Harlow and the other witches. Harlow shook her head. “I’m sorry. There are just too many cemeteries and too many witch bloodlines to know which one would’ve been chosen to guard Tabitha’s prison.”

Adair’s face remained impassive, but I couldn’t help but feel that he didn’t like this piece of information at all. Greyson stepped closer to my uncle, then, and my attention was instantly on him. The Redwood Alpha was the tallest person in the greenhouse, and Adair seemed to note that instantly.

“So, this guy is your friend?” Greyson asked Gabriel and Mikah. He spoke in an even tone, always collected. I appreciated Greyson’s level head—especially when I was about ready to start yelling in frustration. Since we’d arrived here, my uncle hadn’t spoken to me once.

“Adair was with us for a while when we were traveling with Tabby,” Mikah said.

Gabriel squeezed Adair’s shoulder again. “He can be trusted.”

I was glad to hear that, but at the same time, a weight pressed down on me. Adair could be trusted, Gabriel said, but my uncle didn’t seem to trust *me*. Perhaps I was just asking for too much too soon. Perhaps I was being childish and silly, seeking an instant bond with him. Yet I couldn’t help the way I felt, even if I wanted to call myself pathetic for it.

“It’s really Adair! You found him, Artemis!” Cali whispered in my ear. She’d approached me with a huge smile, looking disheveled but in one piece.

She rested a hand on my arm as I mumbled, “Yeah. Found him.”

Cali scrutinized my face with pursed lips. “Are you okay? How are you feeling?”

I shrugged. I didn’t want to get into all my ridiculous and complicated emotions right now. Meeting my mother had been tricky as well, but Orla had been very open and giving, whereas Adair was a very different, and indifferent, beast. Seeking a family member’s approval and attention was beyond annoying.

“But that’s him, right?” Cali muttered, glancing at Adair as he talked with Gabriel, Mikah, Greyson, and Xavier. “You completed your goal.”

I nodded. Cali smiled again, smaller yet still encouraging. “We can talk about this later if you want, okay?” she asked. When I nodded, she gave me a squishy hug that made something inside me heave. I pushed back the sting of tears at the immediate comfort that Cali was trying to give me. It was so obvious that my sister cared about me that I sometimes didn’t know what to do with it.

Cali loved me.

I’d never been loved by anyone in my family before in my entire life. Not until Cali crashed into it and brought me to my mother, too.

And even if Adair never accepted me as family, even if he never paid any attention to me, I knew I would always have Cali on my side. That was the most important thing.

“We’ve done all we can to help you.” Harlow’s voice caught my attention. She had spoken loudly and was looking between Greyson and Cali. “At this time, we need to figure out what’s next for the witches of New Orleans.”

“I understand,” Cali said, reaching out a hand to Harlow. “You have your own set of problems to sort out. We really appreciate your help. We’ll take it from here and try to turn the magic back on.”

“Thank you for everything you’ve done,” Harlow said, holding Cali’s hand between both of hers. Her expression was earnest. “Be careful, though. I have no idea what kind of traps Odette might have set up around whichever tomb is holding your friend.”

Cali exchanged a look with her mates. With a final goodbye from Harlow, all the witches started to file out. Rishika appeared by my side, giving me a warm look before taking my hand. We hadn’t talked about Adair yet, but she knew me well enough to realize I wouldn’t make a peep in front of anyone else. She gave my hand a silent squeeze, looking over at Adair.

I did the same. He seemed much more relaxed now that he was with Mikah and Gabriel. Even *animated*. It was ridiculous. He was supposed to be a mean Dark Fae with a whip, who didn’t like hugs or long-lost nieces. And yet here he was, chattering with Gabriel and Mikah as if they were, indeed, best friends.

“… of all the ancestral lines of NOLA witches,” Adair was saying when I tuned in to the conversation, “there’s a crest I’ve been trying to work out. It looks like a leaf design.”

“What kind of leaf?” Gabriel asked, looking intrigued.

Adair used both hands to sketch the leaf in the air. Something immediately clicked in my brain.

“Hang on,” I said, grabbing the notebook I’d found in the cemetery from my bag. I flipped it open and showed him the page. “You mean this one?”

Adair’s eyes widened. “Where did you find that?”

I shrugged and held out the notebook so Adair could leaf through it. He pointed to the fleur-de-lis design that had caught my eye before.

“It’s only a partial design,” he told Gabriel and Mikah, “but I know it means something.”

Gabriel took the notebook and started turning it this way and that, squinting at it as if he was trying to uncover some secret code. Adair followed Gabriel’s process, so I took the opportunity to move closer to my uncle when he wasn’t looking. He didn’t move away as I stepped up beside him, so at least now he probably no longer thought I’d stab him in the back.

That had to be progress, right?

I wished I had something to contribute to Adair’s investigation—he seemed to really want to find Tabitha. Being ignored by my only link to my father definitely wouldn’t help steady my magic. If anything, it would probably destabilize it further.

I wondered if I should let Adair know that we’d checked at the historical society, but since we’d found no clues there, it really wouldn’t help to point that out. I was wracking my brain to figure out what I could say to fix this when Cali came over and stared at the sketch in the notebook.

“Wait, I’ve seen this before!” she said.

Mikah raised his eyebrows. “Indeed. It’s on half the family crests in the city.”

Cali shook her head, eyes wide. “That’s not what I mean.” She turned to Xavier, pointing at his hand. “Can I see those?”

Xavier held out the keys that he’d been gripping, and Cali quickly flipped through them until she came to the third. She set it next to the sketch of the symbol. The fleur-de-lis design on the key was the exact same shape, and I realized that my sister had cracked the case.

Cali grinned. “I think the keys are the key!”

# Episode 3257

I went through the keys, examining them closely.

“The design in each one of them is different,” I said, squinting at the symbols.

“Perhaps it’s a stylistic choice,” Gabriel offered teasingly.

“Sure,” Greyson deadpanned. “Witches are known for their fashion sense.”

“They *are* usually very well-dressed, though.”

Gabriel had a point.

“Gabe, stop kidding around,” Xavier told his friend with a scowl.

Gabriel huffed. “What the fuck am I supposed to do when I’m feeling stressed, then?”

Xavier shot a look at Mikah, Mikah wrapped an arm around Gabriel’s shoulders, and I thought about how adorable they were.

*Cali, there’s no time for shipping right now! Focus!*

I refocused. “*Anyway*, the symbols on the keys aren’t a stylistic choice. Maybe they’re steps to follow to get to the thing they’re guarding?”

“But if they’re steps to take, in what order should they be taken?” Artemis asked.

Adair stood by Gabriel and Mikah. The Dark Fae man was classically handsome—almost as classically handsome as Greyson, though far more serious. He stared at me. “Where are you going with this?”

I turned to a potting station and put the keys down, just so everybody could see them laid out together. “This must be a code,” I said. “Right?”

Greyson nodded, and Mikah said, “If it’s a code and this is how witches communicate, we should have asked Harlow to stick around.”

“I’ll text her.” I pulled out my phone, which had by some miracle survived Odette flinging me around like a dead fish. I took a photo of the keys and typed out a message.

*Do you recognize the symbols on the keys? Perhaps they’re some kind of witchy code?*

“Message sent. Now, we wait,” I announced.

Gabriel, Mikah, and Adair were muttering at each other, Rishika was whispering in Artemis’s ear, and Greyson and Xavier were examining the keys. When I looked over Xavier’s arm at the one he was holding, I let out a gasp.

“Are those words?” I asked loudly, gathering everybody’s attention.

Xavier frowned, holding the key up so the group could look at it. “Is it Latin?”

“No, it’s French,” Rishika said.

“I’ve seen that before,” Artemis said, pointing at the notebook she’d given to Adair. Adair flipped through the pages, and I saw the words reflected in the notebook.

*Le gasp, as the French would say! What could this mean?*

“The words on the key read ‘même la mort ne peut arrêter ma quête,’” Artemis said with very believable pronunciation. Better than I could do.

“Translation?” Xavier arched an eyebrow.

Artemis shook her head. “How am I supposed to know French? I’m from the Fae world—”

“*Not even death can stop my quest*. That’s the translation.” Mikah spoke up, and we all turned to look at him, surprised. He shrugged. “Immortality can be boring. I learned French and a dozen other languages.”

Gabriel grinned at his mate and linked his arm through Mikah’s. “You’re such a nerd.”

Mikah rolled his eyes, though not without the tiniest of smiles. I beamed at their display of affection. They were really so cute.

*Cali, not again with your shipping! FOCUS!*

“Okay,” Greyson said, “so the writing is about death and quests.”

Xavier looked skeptical. “Harlow said that Tabitha will be in a tomb.”

“So the tomb represents the quest?” Gabriel asked.

“Or the tomb represents death. And death, through the open tomb, symbolizes a new pathway that could lead to our goal,” Mikah said.

“Or nothing matters and it’s all fucking nonsense,” Greyson said wryly.

“It’s not nonsense, I don’t think,” Rishika said. “But I also don’t believe it’s a riddle. It sounds like a pretty standard code of honor.”

As everybody—minus Adair—threw around theories, I listened and processed and also watched Artemis. She’d been quietly moving the keys back and forth on the table, sliding them in different directions.

Intrigued, I walked up to her and looked over her shoulder. “What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Look,” she said under her breath. I watched, amazed, as Artemis pushed two of the keys together.

*Holy shit!*

The keys’ curved edges matched exactly, and the designs on each key flowed seamlessly into each other. Artemis’s gaze lifted and met mine, the satisfaction in her face evident. “I bet this is a clue.”

“It’s a puzzle,” I said, grinning. “You figured it out!” I pulled the other two keys together, flipping them around until their edges all met in the middle. They all linked perfectly to build the fleur-de-lis, flanked by two animals, with a shield design and the motto at the bottom.

“Everyone, look!” I gestured at the completed symbol. “What does this look like to you all?”

All conversations paused for a brief moment. The group’s expressions varied from intrigued to enthusiastic. At the same time, Greyson and Xavier stared at me and said, “A family crest.”

I grinned. “Exactly what I thought!”

“Send it to Harlow,” Mikah told me with a nudge, and I rushed to take a picture and text the witch.

Gabriel eyed Artemis and me before turning to Mikah with a smirk. “You should hire these two as your assistants. While you were busy gossiping with Adair, they cracked the case.”

“Sure,” Adair said flatly. “Now all we have to do is go through all the family crests of everyone who was ever buried in the greater New Orleans area.”

My stomach dropped at the bleakness in his expression. Were there really that many? I looked over at Artemis, who winced. “He’s right. We went to the historical society the other day. There are hundreds of family crests out there.”

*You still did a great job, love*, Greyson mind linked. I warmed under his praise. Before I could say anything else, he spoke up. “Well, this symbol has to be from a witch family, right? That makes the most logical sense, if Odette wanted to use the ancestors to guard Tabitha.”

Everyone nodded at his words. Even Adair.

“The problem is that none of us know the New Orleans witch families,” Xavier said gravely. “It could take days to go through every family.”

“We can’t just stand around and do nothing, though,” I said vehemently. “We have to start searching. What if something bad is happening to Tabitha right now? What if she’s stuck in one of Odette’s horrible hallucinations?”

I noticed Adair’s frown deepening at my words. I’d been wondering about his connection to this young witch from the very moment he’d walked into the greenhouse. My assumption was that he’d probably been here looking for her as well, to some capacity. Either way, I wondered if there was something going on between the two of them.

*I wonder how old Adair REALLY is. Like if Tabitha’s Dani’s older sister, she’s probably in her twenties or something, but Adair is Artemis’s uncle, and he was alive when my mom was alive, even though he looks really young, which means… Well, I don’t know how math works. But is Adair immortal, as a Dark Fae? How the hell does Fae aging work?*

I had so many questions, but I shoved down my burning curiosity and reminded myself how high the stakes were here. We all wanted to find Tabitha—even Artemis, who was usually cool and collected, seemed invested in the situation. I suspected it had something to do with Adair. She’d been looking at her uncle while trying to look like she wasn’t looking at him.

My normally extremely badass sister was reminding me of a puppy that wasn’t sure how to ask for attention. Perhaps I was imagining it, but that was the vibe she seemed to be giving off. Especially since I knew how important it was to her to reconnect with her dad’s side of the family. Adair looked so unapproachable to anyone other than Gabriel and Mikah, though.

*I wonder what she’s thinking right now*, I thought, examining my sister’s face as she fiddled with the keys. I was worried about Artemis, but I didn’t have time for a heart-to-heart right now.

“Baby?” Xavier nudged me gently. “Your phone is vibrating.”

Xavier’s words dragged me back to reality. I gasped when I saw the name on the screen. “It’s Harlow!”

Everybody fell silent immediately and turned to stare at me as I picked up.

“Harlow, hi! Did you see the picture I sent you?” I said to the phone. My heart was racing.

Harlow let out a dubious laugh. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it myself…”

“So you recognize the crest?”

“Yes.” Harlow’s tone carried dread, and my throat went dry.

“What is it?” I asked. “Is it bad? It’s bad, isn’t it?”

Harlow paused. Nobody was speaking, and my pulse thudded in my ears.

“If that’s the witch family tomb Odette was talking about, then it can’t be good,” Harlow finally said.

“Why?” I asked cautiously. We didn’t have a choice no matter how hard this was going to be. We had to get Tabitha. I braced myself for her response.

“That family is infamous in New Orleans witch history,” Harlow said quietly. “Their magical specialty was rumored to be necromancy.”

# Episode 3258

“Okay, thanks for the information, Harlow. We’ll be in touch.” When I ended the call and looked up, I found everyone staring at me intently.

“Well? Did she tell you where the family tomb is?” Greyson asked urgently.

I nodded. “Yeah, she said it was Highland Cemetery.” I hesitated. “But she also said something else.”

“What?” Xavier asked.

“She said the family is known for necromancy,” I told them.

“*Fuck*,” Xavier breathed, rubbing his head.

“Necromancy?” Gabriel frowned. “We talking spiritual shades or the zombie variety?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Harlow said she wasn’t exactly sure how it manifested.”

Greyson ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “Okay, we need to think about this. We dealt with something similar to this recently, and it was *not* fun.”

“Well, what should we do?” I wondered, looking around. “Should we call Big Mac? Or Marta? See what they say? They might have some advice.”

“I, for one, do *not* want to deal with revenants again,” Xavier said firmly. “Or anything like them. Those bastards were impossible to kill—again.”

“Hang on a moment,” Mikah said, holding up his hands. “Can we all just slow it down for a second? We also have had our fair share of necromantic run-ins, and the best thing we can do is not jump in blindly.”

“Hey,” Xavier said, looking around. “Where’s Adair?”

“Shit,” Gabriel muttered, looking around. When he didn’t see Adair either, he sprinted out of the greenhouse.

I glanced at my mates, and the three of us shared a look.

Greyson sighed, then followed Gabriel out the door, with Xavier and Mikah on his heels. Rishika, Artemis, and I brought up the rear, jogging down the street.

Luckily, it didn’t take long to locate Adair. He was striding down the street, and by the time I made it outside, Gabriel had already caught up with him. He was trying to stop Adair, but Adair brushed him off and forged ahead.

“I don’t have time for your little group think tank,” he snapped. “You all can stand around and talk all you want, but Tabby is in Highland Cemetery, and I’m going there now.”

“Adair, I know how you feel, but we have a better chance of rescuing her if we go in with a plan,” Mikah said, trying to reason with the man.

But Adair didn’t stop. “I don’t doubt you *do* know how I feel, but that doesn’t matter. And as it happens, I do have a plan. Find the mausoleum and break open every crypt and tomb until I find her.”

It was clear that nothing we said was going to stop Adair. I had to jog to catch up with him before he bolted away for good.

“Fine, we don’t have to delay going there, but let’s at least go there together, okay?” I said.

This finally stopped Adair, who looked around. It was obvious he was looking for some form of support, but when he found none he eventually sighed, giving his head a small nod of agreement.

“Good,” I said, relieved. At least now we wouldn’t be looking for Tabitha *and* Adair. “Now, where’s your car?”

“Car?” Adair frowned. “I don’t have a car. We ran here.”

I stared at him, stunned, but then I remembered that they were two Fae and a werewolf, and it wasn’t so crazy after all.

“Okay, I guess we’ll… meet you there?” I turned to look at my mates, who both nodded.

So, Gabriel and Mikah went with Adair, while Artemis and Rishika came with Xavier, Greyson, and me.

Artemis stood for a moment, watching Adair disappear down the street with Gabriel and Mikah. She looked reluctant to take her eyes off her uncle, now that she’d finally found him.

I put a hand on my sister’s shoulder. “Mikah and Gabriel will keep an eye on him,” I assured her. “They’ll make sure he doesn’t run off again. And anyway, he seems super motivated to help his friend.”

Artemis tore her eyes away from the retreating figures and nodded, though it was with a sigh. “Yeah. Okay.”

We all climbed into the car, and Greyson started to drive us toward the cemetery. As we moved through the city, I kept stealing glances at Artemis, who was looking out the window.

Finally, I scooted closer to her across the backseat. “How are you doing?”

She only shrugged, but I could see the now-familiar signs of my sister closing off her emotions before she could get hurt. It was a defense mechanism, and it always made me sad to see it.

I took her hand. “You know, he’s probably in shock from learning that you’re still alive. I’m sure he’ll come around.”

She shrugged again. After a long moment, she sighed. “I don’t know, Cali. He doesn’t even want to *try* to get to know me. The whole way here he wouldn’t even look at me, let alone talk to me.”

“Think about it, Artemis. It’s only been a couple of hours since you found him, right?”

“Yeah,” Artemis said flatly.

“Maybe you should give it some time. We’re dealing with a really intense situation right now, and he seems pretty invested in it.”

“Yeah, maybe,” she said, though she didn’t sound convinced.

I shifted in my seat so I could put my arm around my sister’s shoulders, pulling her into a tight hug. She leaned against me, and we stayed that way until we reached the cemetery.

When we climbed out of the car, I looked up at the tall iron gates, which were securely shut and locked.

“I guess this isn’t one of those cemeteries with tours,” I noted.

“It makes sense that Odette chose it, then. It’s less likely that a wayward tourist could stumble into one of her magic traps,” Greyson said, looking around.

Rishika nodded. “Yeah, I see that. So,” she said, clapping her hands together, “should we do a circuit of the perimeter?”

“Hold off on that for now,” Greyson said. “I want to try to stick together, if we can. At least for now.” He turned to me. “Are you ready?”

I took a deep breath and nodded.

Greyson strode over to the gate and partially shifted, then used his claw to break off the padlock. The thick chains holding the gate closed fell away, and the gate swung slowly open with a creak, just as the sound of running feet grew louder.

I turned, my whole body tensing, but then I saw that it was only Mikah, Gabriel, and Adair.

“You made decent time,” Xavier said, glancing down at the time on his phone.

Gabriel leaned over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. “Yeah,” he gasped out, nodding at Adair, “because this guy wouldn’t let up.”

“Are you okay?” I asked, looking at Gabriel with concern.

He straightened and nodded, though he was still sucking down air. “I’m fine, but I’m not as fast when I can’t shift. And I figured people might not love seeing a giant wolf racing through their city.”

Mikah gave a soft chuckle and rubbed his exhausted mate’s back.

Adair—on the other hand—wasn’t at all winded and was looking around energetically, like he hadn’t just run a marathon. He stepped forward and pushed the creaky gate further open, making the hinges scream in protest. Then he strode right in.

I glanced over at Xavier and Greyson. “What do you think?”

Xavier rolled his eyes, and Greyson shrugged. With that rousing encouragement, I followed the Dark Fae into the cemetery.

It was unsurprisingly quiet inside the gates, and we made our way through the graves, looking closely at the crests that adorned each mausoleum. The crypts were old, and the stones were aged and cracked, and—paired with the absolute silence of the place—the whole thing was starting to feel pretty creepy. I wondered how far into the cemetery we’d have to go. I’d seen a few of the cemeteries in the city, and they’d all seemed well maintained, but Highland seemed… somehow forgotten. Ferns grew unchecked from the crypts, and the little paths separating the graves were rocky and poorly maintained. The whole place felt a little like an old, abandoned house.

As we moved deeper into the cemetery, I started to feel the itch of anticipation on my skin. I closed my eyes, concentrating on the feeling, but I couldn’t tell if I was sensing magic in the air or if it was just my own nerves playing tricks on me.

“Hang on,” Gabriel said, holding up a hand to signal us to stop. He still looked sweaty and out of breath from the run over. “Just give me a second, okay?”  
 We all stopped as he leaned against a mausoleum. It was one of the family tombs, with multiple crypts for a whole group of potential corpses.

“You okay?” Mikah asked, stepping closer to his mate.

Gabriel opened his mouth to answer, but before he could say anything, a hand burst through one of the stone covers of the mausoleum and grabbed him by the throat.

# Episode 3259

**Xavier**

Hearing Gabe’s cry of alarm stopped me cold. And then I finally caught sight of what was causing him to shout. A decaying hand was reaching out from a broken opening in the mausoleum. It was grey and scaly, and the scabby skin hung off of it in rotting sheets. It gripped Gabe’s throat, even as Mikah tried to pry it off.

“Fuck,” I muttered. The undead. It was already happening. I’d *really* been hoping it wouldn’t be so soon—if at all.

I lunged forward to help my friend, but just as I did, another hand burst through the marble of the mausoleum and grabbed Mikah’s hand. Then another. And another. They kept going, marble exploding and cracking as more and more hands burst forth until there was a dozen of them. Half were holding Gabe flush against the stone mausoleum, and the other half held Mikah.

Greyson leapt forward with a shout just as I reached Gabe. I started to pull on one of the hands, thinking I could break the grip—or at least the bones—but the hand wasn’t going anywhere. Where was this freakish strength coming from?

I started to shift, then pulled at the bony hand with my claws and teeth, but the hand moved suddenly from Gabe and gripped my shoulder. I let out a howl of pain as the bony fingers dug into my flesh.

Another hand grabbed me—this one from behind—and yanked me away. It was Greyson, and he got me away from the marble just as two more skeletal hands grabbed for me.

Off-balance, Greyson and I tumbled to the ground together, thankfully out of reach of the hands.

“Don’t come any closer!” Mikah shouted. “They’ll get you, too!”

“What do we do?” I asked.

“For starters, you can get the hell out of here and get to Tabby!” Gabe said, fighting against the hands.

“Gabe—” I started.

He shook his head stubbornly. “Mikah and I can hold these suckers off. Just go!”

I hesitated. It didn’t look like Gabe was in a position to take care of anything, but Adair put a hand out to help me up.

“They’re strong. They’ll be able to take care of those creatures,” he said evenly. “The sooner we end all this, the sooner they’ll be safe. The sooner we’ll *all* be safe.”

That was true as hell. I glanced over at Gabe and Mikah. I didn’t want to leave my friend, but if I could do something to save him, then fuck it—I was going to do it.

I nodded and accepted Adair’s hand, and he pulled me to my feet.

“We should split up,” Greyson said quickly, walking toward us.

I nodded. “That’s probably a good idea. Cali, you come with me,” I said, grabbing her hand.

Greyson didn’t look pleased, but he didn’t protest. “Rishika and Artemis, you’re with me. Adair, why don’t you—”

“I’ll go by myself,” he finished for Greyson.

Greyson nodded, and we all headed off.

Cali and I walked quickly up a rock-strewn path. I studied the crest on every crypt we passed, but none of them looked right.

“Is that it?” I asked, my heart rate picking up.

Cali peered up at the faded crest. “I don’t know. Maybe?”

I squinted. “No, I don’t think it is after all. It’s just another crest with a fleur-de-lis on it. *Dammit!* Why are there so many of them?”

I could feel myself starting to get frustrated, and Cali was looking at me with concern. I didn’t want to worry her, but I really hated scavenger hunts.

“Hang on,” she said, pulling out a bottle of water from her satchel and holding it out to me.

I lifted an eyebrow in surprise. Of all the things I thought she had stored in there, that was not one of them.

She shrugged by way of explanation. “Gotta stay hydrated.”

She was probably right about that, so I took the water. It was warm from being out in the Louisiana sun half the day, but my throat was dry as a desert, and I was grateful for the water.

I took a long drink and handed it back to Cali. “How are you holding up?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said automatically. “Really,” she added when I didn’t look convinced.

Despite her insistence, I wasn’t buying it. I looked her over, taking in her stance and the look on her face. She looked tired as hell, and there was still dirt on her face from the scuffle at the greenhouse.

I put my hand gently on her shoulder. “You didn’t get hurt when you fought with Odette?”

She shook her head. “No, not really. Maybe a couple of scrapes, but that’s to be expected, right?”

That was true, but I didn’t like to hear her say it. I leaned in and wrapped her in my arms. “When it comes to you, even scrapes are unacceptable.”

Cali chuckled and tried to pull out of my hold, but I wouldn’t let her go. I hadn’t realized it before, but I *needed* this. I needed to be able to just hold her. I hated every time we had to go into a fight. Every time I had to take my eyes off her for even a second. It wasn’t that I thought she couldn’t handle herself. I knew she was strong—she’d proven herself time and time again. But that didn’t mean I didn’t worry every time she faced danger.

Cali’s arms came around me and squeezed me tight, like she realized I needed reassurance.

I drank her in for a moment longer, then pulled back to look down at her. “Don’t wander too far. We don’t know what other traps Odette has set up.”

Cali nodded. “That’s true. The last thing we need is to be trapped in some kind of hallucination while there are revenants or whatever wandering around this place.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, shuddering at the thought.

Suddenly feeling like I needed to keep hold of Cali in this cemetery, I took her hand as we kept going. We walked and walked, and it was starting to feel like we’d checked every single mausoleum in our area. I was about to suggest we move to another section of the graveyard when Adair walked over.

“I checked the other half of the cemetery,” he said, looking frustrated. “It’s not there.”

“Already?” I asked, surprised. We’d been looking for a while, but not that long. “You checked all of it?”

“Of course,” Adair said with a shrug. His eyes narrowed. “You doubt my word?”

Annoyance spiked in my chest. This guy’s arrogance was really starting to grate on my nerves. But luckily, Cali answered before I could.

“Okay, well, we checked this area, and it’s not here, either.”

“Hey! Are you guys done?”

We looked over to see Rishika waving at us. Greyson and Artemis trudged along behind her, looking defeated.

“Nothing?” Cali asked.

Artemis shook her head. “No sign of the crest.”

“However, I did notice something interesting about the graves,” Rishika added.

“Yeah? And?” I asked.

“They’re all hundreds of years old,” Rishika said, glancing around the place. “And it looks like this cemetery isn’t actively used anymore. No new graves. Not since the eighteenth century. This was probably used for the original French settler families of the city.” She shrugged. “I don’t know if that helps, though.”

Adair scowled at Cali. “Are you sure you got the right cemetery?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Cali said. “Plus I’m pretty there wouldn’t be undead traps in just any old cemetery. Odette chose the specific family’s tomb because of their ties to necromancy magic. She must be able to harness it somehow, right?”

Adair frowned, but he seemed to agree, because he didn’t press the issue.

“We must have missed it,” Cali said reasonably. “Let’s just all go check again, okay?”

No one looked enthusiastic about the idea, but they nodded, and Cali and I moved back down the path we’d just been on.

I looked at the same crypts I’d just examined, and despite the high stakes of the mission, I was starting to get bored. But then Cali stopped in her tracks.

“Xavier,” she said, pulling me back by our joined hands.

I looked back to find her frowning down at a patch of dying grass. “You okay?”

“Why would there be an empty lot in such a crowded cemetery?” she asked, speaking slowly, like she was thinking out loud.

I looked at the patch of earth. It was a bare space between two large stone mausoleums, both old and overgrown with ferns and climbing ivy.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe it was destroyed in a storm or something.”

Cali looked at me. “Just this one? The others around it are perfectly fine.”

“I guess that’s a little weird—”

Cali stepped forward. “What’s that?”

“What?” I asked. “Are you sensing something?’

She shushed me and slowly reached out her hand. It looked like she was reaching into thin air, but then her hand closed around something, and she pulled open a suddenly visible door.

# Episode 3260

**Artemis**

Adair was standing near a tomb, writing in his notebook, so I stood nearby, pretending to be intensely interested in a family crest on top of a crypt in order to disguise the fact that I had no idea what to say to him. The crest looked nothing like the one we were looking for. In fact, I’d already checked the whole row, but I was pretending to recheck so I could stay close to my uncle.

I kept my eyes on him—observing him closely—though I looked away quickly whenever it looked like he was about to glance up.

“Artemis, why don’t you just talk to him?”

I looked over to see that Rishika had stepped next to me. She’d been watching me, and she was now looking at me with a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

“He’s busy,” I muttered, looking back up at the crest.

“I’ll bet he can multitask,” Rishika said briskly.

I sighed and—shamed into it—turned toward Adair. It was crazy, but my heart beat faster as I took a step toward him.

*Just ask him something innocuous*, I told myself. *Something about the design of the crest. Something banal. Maybe talk about the weather.* But just as I opened my mouth, I heard Cali’s voice.

“Hey! Everyone! Come here, quick! We found it!”

Adair’s head shot up from his notebook, and he whipped around, taking off at a run toward the sound of Cali’s voice. Rishika and I did, too. We all converged where Cali was standing. Just in front of her, a mausoleum was appearing out of thin air. It was becoming more distinct and resolved as we watched it, like it was growing out of nothing.

Adair made an irritated noise in his throat. “Of course. I should have guessed. She used some kind of illusion magic to hide it.”

Greyson took a step forward and put his hand against the solid stone of the mausoleum. “Are you sure it’s real?” he asked, looking unsure. “Her illusion magic is very powerful. We might only be seeing what she wants us to see.”

“A fair point,” Adair conceded, “So, how do we test it?”

“If it’s one of her tricks? Hell if I know. We may just have to risk it.”

Cali pointed upward, and we all looked up at the crest at the peak of the roof. It was a perfect copy of the one on the keys.

“I think it’s real,” she said.

“Good,” Adair said quickly. “Let’s go.”

He reached for the door and pushed hard, and it squeaked open. It led to what looked like a small, dark foyer, with yet another set of doors. He tried to open those too, but they didn’t budge. They were locked.

“This must be what one of the keys is for,” Cali said. She pulled them out of her bag and began to try them on the door. The third key unlocked it. There was a heavy click, and the door seemed to loosen on its hinges.

Adair pushed it the rest of the way open. There was a strange sucking sound, like a seal had been broken, and then a rush of air hit us. The air was weirdly warm, and so charged with magic it made my skin tingle as the air passed over me. I blinked in surprise, wondering if I’d imagined what I’d just felt.

“Did everyone feel that? What the hell was that?” Xavier demanded, sounding just as surprised as I felt.

“I don’t care,” Adair grunted. “I’m going in.”

He went to step forward, but there was a deep rumble that stopped him cold. My stomach clenched with fear as we all turned, looking around for the source of the sound.

The mausoleum was still, but as we looked out the doors we’d just come through, every other stone crypt around us had started to shake, like there was an earthquake rocking the ground.

“Oh no,” Cali breathed.

“Oh shit,” Xavier swore.

Then, in a deafening explosion of stone, the doors of every mausoleum on the lane surrounding us burst open, freeing the skeletal remains from each crypt. No doubt they had been awakened by that sudden burst of magic we’d just felt, and now they were coming out.

And coming for us.

As one, Greyson and Xavier moved to the door of the crypt to face our undead attackers. Most of the undead were simply walking skeletons, nothing but bare bones, but there were a few who wore remnants of what must have been their burial clothes—moldy waistcoats that hung creepily from bony shoulders, and the dregs of gowns that trailed on the dusty ground as the skeletal remains lurched toward us.

With a growl and snapping of jaws that mingled with the sound of rustling bones, Greyson and Xavier shifted into their wolf forms and leapt forward, out into the wave of undead. They pushed back the first wave of attackers, snapping and biting and ripping the skeletons to shreds. And instant later, Rishika shifted as well and jumped into the fray.

“Xavier! Greyson! Be careful!” Cali screamed. She rushed to the door to look out, clearly terrified.

I pulled out my knives, but even as I did, I had no idea what purpose they would serve. I had no idea how effective knives would be against the undead. The things were terrible—they reminded me of the revenants, and that was *not* a good memory.

One skeleton got around Xavier and came close enough for me to slash its throat. But—as it didn’t have much more than a ragged scrap of skin hanging under its chin to slash—it kept coming.

Forgetting my knives for a moment, I kicked out, hitting the thing so hard its brittle spine cracked in two. It crumbled to the dirt, and for a moment, I was relieved. Until I saw that its hollow eyes were still fixed on me, and it was now dragging itself toward me across the floor.

Great.

“Greyson! Xavier!” Cali called out desperately, running toward them.

They must have said something to her through the mind link, because she turned back to me. “They said they’ll hold them off and we should keep going! Getting Tabitha is the most important thing. If we can get her, we can get out of all these crazy traps.”

I nodded and turned. “Rishika! Let’s move!”

Rishika backed up to us, guarding our backs as we ran into the mausoleum and slammed the doors shut behind us.

Rishika had shifted into her wolf form when the undead had started to appear, but now that we were inside, she shifted back again. She shivered in the cold stone room, and I unzipped my long trench jacket and wrapped it securely around my naked, shivering girlfriend.

Adair was looking around the room, and I followed his gaze. The stone inside the mausoleum looked different than the stone on the outside. The outside looked rough, but this stone looked smoother and was white shot through with black veins, like marble. There were empty spaces along the outer walls for caskets—like empty vaults—and in the middle of the room was a giant rectangular stone tomb with a stone lid. It made me think of the documentary about Ancient Egyptian burials I’d watched with Rishika.

I stepped toward the tomb and tried to lift the lid.

“I already tried that,” Adair said. “It won’t come up. It’s shut tight.”

I stepped away, feeling somehow chastised. I’d only been trying to help, but—as usual—it wasn’t good enough for Adair.

We stepped quietly around the burial chamber, studying it carefully. It was huge, and each occupied vault had a small brass plaque next to it, identifying its occupant. There were brass sconces next to each plaque—presumably for flowers—but none of that gave us any clues.

Frustrated with our lack of progress, I started to run my hands over the plaques, looking for anything that seemed strange or out of place. My hand brushed one of the small sconces, and when it shifted a little, I felt myself freeze.

My gods, had I just tripped another witch trap?

When nothing happened, I leaned forward, frowning. There was something there—a metal plate of some kind, behind the sconce. I pushed the sconce further, turning it until it was completely upside down on a hinge, which revealed something that looked like a keyhole.

“Hey, come look at this,” I said.

Cali stepped next to me and sucked in a startled breath. “Artemis! You did it!”

She pulled the keys out of her pocket, ready to try each of them, but Rishika put her hand up to stop her.

“Hang on,” she said.

Cali looked over at her. “What?”

“Think about it,” Rishika said. “Last time we used a key, it was a trap. What if it’s a trap this time, too?”

Cali hesitated, but Adair shook his head dismissively.

“We’ll just have to deal with the consequences. Now open the thing!”

“Wait a second,” I said, frowning. “Rishika is right. This necromancy magic is strong. We can all feel it. We have to start thinking about the worst-case scenario here.”

“What’s that?” Cali asked, her voice starting to shake.

I shook my head. “What if we get all the way to Tabitha, only to find that she’s succumbed to the magic, too?”

# Episode 3261

Adair rounded on Artemis, rage lighting his face. “What did you say?” he spat.

“I just—” Artemis started, but he didn’t give her a chance to finish.

“That *won’t* happen,” he said, his authoritative voice echoing around the stone room. “Tabitha’s going to be fine. We’re going to get to her in time, and we’re going to rescue her.”

Artemis paled, but she set her jaw. “I’m not saying that something bad has happened, I’m just saying it *could* happen. Have you given any thought to what you’ll do if it does?”

Adair stepped forward so aggressively Artemis stumbled backward. He kept going until Artemis was pinned against the marble wall and he loomed over her, his face twisted with fury.

“You have no clue what the hell you’re talking about,” he said.

I put my hand on Adair’s arm. “Okay, okay. Let’s all calm down here.”

I had tried to make my voice soothing, but Adair wasn’t going anywhere. He was unmovable and furious, and his anger was all directed at Artemis. She didn’t deserve this.

She’d only been asking questions we all had running through our heads. I wanted to step in, to give him a piece of my mind, but I refrained. And given my usual ability of inserting myself where I didn’t necessarily need to be, it was really hard to stand by. But this was Artemis’s uncle she’d just met, and, ultimately, I didn’t want to do something that would threaten things between them.

After a tense moment, he turned and stepped away, retreating to a far corner of the room.

I turned to Artemis to check on her, but she had spun away from me, too, obviously needing a moment to herself as well.

I shot a look at Rishika, who looked just as confused as I felt. The silence in the room was oddly loud, and when I couldn’t stand another moment of it, I cleared my throat.

“If something has been done to Tabitha, we’ll just cross that bridge when we get to it. We can’t stop looking just because that’s a possibility. I’m going to try the keys now. We should all be on the alert for another attack, okay?”

No one replied.

“*Okay?*” I repeated. I wasn’t going to do anything until the group responded. It was important—now more than ever—that we were on all on the same page.

“Okay,” Rishika said.

“Fine,” Artemis muttered.

Adair only nodded.

With a roll of my eyes, I turned to the lock. I was starting to feel like a teacher on a field trip gone wrong. But I had a job to do, and Tabitha was counting on us, so I picked up the remaining three keys. The second one worked on the lock behind the sconce.

There was a click, then the loud scrape of stone against stone. Adair, Rishika, and Artemis all turned to see the heavy stone lid of the tomb at the center of the room sliding open.

We all stared at it for a moment, then walked forward like we were drawn to it. Stopping next to it, I took a deep breath and looked inside.

Then I let out a gasp of surprise. Because instead of the skeleton I was expecting to find, there was a stone staircase, leading down into darkness. It did occur to me that this should be impossible in Louisiana, but you know… *magic*.

Without a word or even a moment’s hesitation, Adair climbed into the tomb and started down the stairs. I followed him, and Artemis was right behind me. Rishika brought up the rear.

The corridor was immediately dark. As we descended, there was a flickering light, and we came across a lit torch, suspended from the stone wall. Adair took the torch from the wall. It didn’t illuminate much, just a few steps at a time, but at least we weren’t walking in complete blackness.

We went down, down, down, and after about ten minutes, I was starting to feel claustrophobic. We were so deep, and it was so dark, it felt like being buried alive.

But maybe that was just me letting my imagination get the best of me. After all, we were in a cemetery.

I gave my head a shake. I needed to focus on something besides the fear bunching my stomach into knots.

I looked at Adair in front of me, focusing on his strong back, which moved slightly as he descended the stairs. His reaction to Artemis’s suggestion about Tabitha’s condition had been so strange, and *so* extreme. He’d just gotten so intense so quickly. And even though I didn’t know the guy well, I’d had him pegged as someone who prided himself on his self-control and didn’t lose his temper easily. But he’d seemed so triggered by the mere suggestion of Tabitha being hurt.

It seemed like Adair and Tabitha were a lot more than just friends. I watched the Dark Fae as I turned the idea over in my mind. Could it be that he had feelings for the witch?

It was strange—the way everyone had described Adair to me, he hadn’t seemed like a guy who held any affection for anyone. No connections and no roots. But he had stuck around New Orleans just to rescue Tabitha. He had stayed even though half the Dark Fae court was after him.

And the only reason *I* could think of to stick around for just one person was if you really cared for them. Right? I had only my own experience to draw on, of course, but I knew I’d do anything to rescue my mates.

The more I thought about it, the more it all made a weird kind of sense to me.

We kept going down the stairs, and I resisted the urge to turn to check on my sister. She wanted to be left alone, and I wanted to give her the distance she needed. Anyone could see that Adair was preoccupied because of Tabitha, but I wondered if, even after we found her, he was going to be able to focus on what Artemis needed from him.

But that wasn’t worth worrying about. Not now, anyway. One way or another, we were going to know something soon enough.

We kept going down. I heard a sound like muffled shouts, and I paused to listen, trying to hear it above the shuffling sound of our feet on the steps. But because I’d stopped so suddenly, Artemis bumped into my back. And then Rishika bumped into Artemis.

Adair spun around to scowl at all of us. “What the hell’s your problem?”

“I thought I heard something,” I said, still trying to listen.

“Heard what?” he snapped.

“That!” I said. “Can’t you hear it?”

It was there again, the sound of shouting, and it was coming closer. But I was wrong about the direction. It wasn’t coming from ahead of us, it was coming from behind us.

I could feel my pulse racing as I listened, and it got even faster when I realized I recognized the voices.

“Xavier! Greyson!” I called out, ecstatic to see them. “Where are you?”

“*Run!*” Greyson bellowed. “They’re coming!”

That was when I heard the growls.

My eyes met Rishika’s, then Artemis’s, and we all exchanged looks of mingled surprise and terror. We scrambled for a moment, then headed down a long hallway shooting off the staircase.

We’d only just started running when I heard a rattling sound behind us and craned my neck to look. I tried not to scream when I saw two skeletons racing behind us.

“*Faster!*” I urged, and everyone did try to run faster, trying to keep out of reach of the skeletons.

But as we turned a corner, we met a dead end.

“Shit,” I breathed.

“There has to be a door or something here for the key to open,” Artemis said, refusing to admit defeat. She ran her hands over the smooth rock wall.

Adair, obviously in agreement, began to do the same.

I started searching the wall beside me.

We were searching frantically for any exit as the skeletons got closer and closer to us. One of them was almost on top of us when Greyson—appearing from the darkness—jumped onto its back in his wolf form. He was almost too big for the hallway, but he succeeded in pulling the skeleton back.

Rishika—still at the back of our group—turned to help him.

“I found it!” Adair called out.

I passed him the two remaining keys, and Adair fit one easily into the lock, then turned it.

The rock wall in front of us slid open, and Adair scrambled through, Artemis and me following close behind.

I turned to look at Greyson and Rishika, but they were still locked in battle with the skeletons. “Rishika!” Artemis called, stepping forward, like she was about to head back out to help her.

I looked up when I felt the ground rumble underneath my feet. And saw the rock door shaking. Reaching for my sister, I yanked her back just as the heavy rock door fell back into place, cutting us off from the others.

# Episode 3262

I gasped and leapt forward, banging on the stone door with my fist. “Xavier! Greyson! Can you hear me?”

I grasped the edge of the door, trying to move it, but it wouldn’t budge, even though I pulled until my fingers ached. We could *not* be trapped in here. This was a nightmare.

*Greyson? Can you hear me? We’re trapped!*

*Xavier? Are you there?*

There was no response through the mind link.

I shook my head, trying to breathe through the panic rising in my chest.

*If either of you can hear me, we’re going to keep looking for Tabitha.*

Artemis grabbed for the door, trying to help me open it, but even with the two of us trying, it didn’t move.

“Come on,” Adair said curtly. “It’s not going to open. We should keep moving. Maybe we’ll come across another way out after we find Tabby.”

I looked at the stone door. I didn’t want to leave my mates, but I knew Adair was right. If we could find Tabitha, we could stop the necromancy magic. And that might be the only way to stop all these attacks.

So I followed Adair as he headed deeper into the vault. As we kept going, the rock walls grew more jagged. It was starting to feel like we’d left the vault and entered a cave. The air was stuffy and close, and I didn’t like the feel of the place. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

As we walked, the cave began to slowly narrow until we were forced to walk in single file. It continued to narrow until Adair’s shoulders brushed the walls on each side.

I took a deep breath, feeling truly claustrophobic now.

Finally, Adair stopped. I looked over his shoulder to see why, and saw that he’d stopped in front of an ornately carved wooden door. It looked strangely out of place, set into the rough cave walls, and when I looked at it closely, I saw that the carvings looked like witch markings.

Adair held up the final key and moved to insert it into the lock at the center of the strange door.

“Wait!” I called out.

Adair stopped and looked back at me. “What?” he asked shortly.

“What if there’s something awful on the other side of this door?”

The man shook his head. “This close to Tabby, necromancy magic won’t work. No magic works when she’s near.”

I’d completely forgotten about Tabitha’s abilities. I wondered if that was why the last booby trap had been a physical one, rather than a magic trap—because Odette knew that her magic wouldn’t work in close proximity to Tabitha.

“Okay, then.” I nodded. “Let’s open it up. But be prepared for some *Indiana Jones*-type shit.” I gave the walls a wary glance, half-expecting to see little arrows pointing out, ready to go flying.

Both Fae looked at me, clearly confused by the reference.

Adair frowned. “Indiana *who*?”

I rolled my eyes. “Just be careful of physical traps.”

Adair nodded and put the key in the lock. Then he pushed the door open.

My heart was beating wildly, but just as we stepped forward, a wave of noxious air wafted out from behind the door, puffing directly into our faces.

I coughed hard and waved my hand in front of my face. “What is this?” I gasped out.

*Poison*. The thought flashed across my mind, and I panicked. I tried to hold my breath, but I knew it was too late. I’d already breathed it in. The gas was already in my lungs.

I started to feel dizzy, and the stone walls around me swayed. I blinked hard, trying to stay conscious, but my limbs felt suddenly heavy as lead. As my knees started to weaken—threatening to give out completely—I felt the sharp burn of the Seluna mark on my shoulder.

*God, no. Not now!*

I blinked again, forcing my eyes open. And when I did, I looked around, shocked. I was back at the site of the wedding.

*What the* hell*?*

Artemis and Lola rushed up to me, their faces alight.

“Come on!” Lola said urgently. “The ceremony is about to begin!”

I stared at them—baffled—and then, with sudden dawning realization, I began to understand what was happening.

“Oh no,” I groaned. “I don’t have time for this. I can’t be in a hallucination right now! NO!”

I turned to find a mirror just behind me and stared at my reflection. I was wearing my wedding dress. There was a part of my brain that knew this was a hallucination, but the other part of my brain was caught off-guard by the image in front of me. I smoothed my hands down the front of the dress, feeling the satin and lace, and felt tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

Lola laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re getting cold feet.”

I looked at her. She looked beautiful in her lavender silk bridesmaid’s dress. I started to smile at her—about to tell her that I wasn’t scared at all—but I shook my head.

*NO!* I needed to snap out of this. This wasn’t real! I couldn’t let myself get sucked into a hallucination!

I turned to look at the back of the dress, and my perfectly unmarked back. I touched the skin where the Seluna mark was meant to be. I felt the distant stinging sensation and smiled. Good. I wanted that. That would snap me out of this. I pressed harder, digging my nails into my skin.

Lola’s eyes widened with fear. “*Cali?* What are you doing? You’re going to hurt yourself!”

“Good! I need to snap out of this!” I screamed. I dug my nails into my flesh, watching with grim satisfaction as the outline of the Seluna mark appeared. It was faint at first, but it slowly resolved itself into a clear handprint.

I was starting to feel dizzy from the pain, but I didn’t care. The pain was what was real, not this hallucination. I had to get my mind clear and help my sister. Then my friends and my mates.

There was a safety pin on the dressing table in front of me, and I snatched it up and jabbed it into the mark. The pain lanced through me like fire, and I let out an agonized scream.

That seemed to shatter the illusion, and when I blinked again, I was back in the cave, slumped against the rough, damp wall.

Around me, I could still see the misty hallucination gas, but it seemed to be dissipating. It was also rising, so I dropped to the ground and crawled toward my sister.

She was sitting on the floor, her back against the wall. Her eyes were open, but they were unfocused and glazed over. Wherever she was, it wasn’t here with me.

I kissed her cheek, hoping it would break her out of the hallucination in the way it had with Greyson, Xavier, Mikah, and Gabriel.

Holding my breath, I waited as Artemis blinked. She looked around, confused, then finally her eyes seemed to focus on me.

“Cali?” she whispered.

I nodded. “It’s me. Come on, we have to get Adair.”

But as we crawled over to him, he was already groaning. He looked awake and alert, like he’d managed to break free from the hallucination on his own.

He eyed me as I drew near. “Do *not* kiss me.”

I scowled at him. “I definitely wasn’t looking forward to it.”

Adair started to get to his feet, but I shook my head.

“Stay low.”

“Why?” he asked.

“It’s a gas. It’s rising.”

“What is it?” Artemis asked, looking up at where the mist remained.

“It seems like a concentrated form of Odette’s hallucination magic,” I said, looking around. “She must have filled the chamber with it as a final booby trap, since normal magic is negated around Tabitha.”

“Seems like it,” Adair said. Keeping low to the ground, he started through the door and into the room beyond, which turned out to be a small, circular space.

I gasped as I entered. In the center of the room was a low stone table, surrounded by what looked like dozens of sticks of burning incense. They were releasing smoke that looked exactly like the hallucination gas, and it was so thick it covered the table like a storm cloud. On top of the table lay a girl, her long hair hanging off the side.

Adair made a noise like a wild animal and lurched forward. “Tabitha!” He started toward her, but stopped, coughing hard. “That damn incense!”

Covering his nose and mouth, he stepped forward and started stomping on the incense, knocking the sticks over and stamping them out.

Once I saw what he was doing, I pulled my shirt up over my nose and mouth and joined him, stomping out the other half of the incense. We didn’t stop until the sticks were ground to dust and there wasn’t a single spark left.

Adair must have breathed in some of the fumes, because he stumbled, but Artemis caught him before he fell.

I walked over to the young woman, whose eyes were closed like she was asleep. She looked young and bore a striking resemblance to Dani—this was definitely Tabitha.

“Tabitha,” I said softly, giving her shoulder a gentle shake. “Can you hear me?”

The girl didn’t move.

Artemis walked over, helping Adair, who was still unsteady on his feet. But he looked determined as he stepped toward the table.

“Tabby,” he said softly, leaning close to the girl. “Tabitha, wake up.” He laid a gentle hand on her cheek.

“She’s not coming out of it,” I said. “I think something magical’s been done to her.”

Adair shook his head, not taking his eyes off Tabitha. “It’s not possible. She negates magic. She’s fine.” He leaned even closer to her. “It’s Adair. Can you hear my voice? Tabby?”

She still didn’t move. It didn’t look like she was sleeping. Her chest was rising and falling, so I knew she was breathing, but she was so still otherwise, I might have wondered if she was alive.

I looked around at the room, and my eyes fell on the crushed incense beneath our feet. My own chest still hurt from the fumes of the mist, and I knew what had to happen.

I looked up at Adair. “She’s in a hallucination, and I think *you* have to pull her out of it.”

Adair looked at me quickly, clearly surprised. “What? Why me?”

I gave him a steady look. “Do you love her?”

# Episode 3263

**Greyson**

I pushed on the rock door with all my strength, trying desperately to get to Cali. It didn’t move, despite my increased strength in wolf form, so I stepped back and charged at it, trying to use force instead of strength. Behind me, Xavier and Rishika finished tearing the skeletons to tiny, rattling pieces. Once they’d finished, there was quiet for a time, the only sound Xavier’s and Rishika’s heavy breathing. But after a moment, the bones started to rattle against the stone floor as they moved, trying to find each other and reassemble themselves.

I fucking hated magic.

I took a deep breath and charged at the door again, but when it still didn’t move, I turned to see what was happening behind me. I was glad to see that the skeletons were still only bones, and not reforming. That meant that whatever Xavier and Rishika had done to them, they must have found a way to keep the zombie charge at bay by not letting them become whole again. Thank god.

*I don’t think you’re going to be able to move it*, Xavier said, catching my eye and nodding toward the door. *We need to find another way through.*

*How?* I demanded.

*I don’t know*, Xavier admitted, *but we’re wasting time here.*

Giving the door one more fruitless push, I was forced to admit it wasn’t moving an inch, and he was probably right.

*Fine*, I admitted, feeling huffy. *Let’s go, then.*

We raced back the way we’d come, back up the hallway and staircase and out into the mausoleum up top.

I glanced at the world outside the crypt’s doors, trying to orient myself again*. The cave leads north*, I said, thinking hard. *So let’s go the same way and see if we can find any markers aboveground.*

*That sounds good*, Rishika agreed. Xavier didn’t argue, so he must have agreed, too.

We headed back out into the sunshine, which should have been a relief after the stuffy darkness of the crypt, but my thoughts were still with Cali, behind the rock door. I hated leaving her trapped down there, and it went against everything in me to walk in the opposite direction. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about her. I kept telling myself that she was with Artemis, and Artemis would sooner die than let anything happen to her sister. I’d tried to mind link with Cali, but I hadn’t heard anything back through the stone door. The magic in this place had a lot of properties, and I was really hoping that was what was preventing the mind link from working, and nothing else…

But she was with Artemis. I just had to remember that. Artemis would look out for her. And I was going to find her. I *had* to.

We stepped into the rocky lane and looked around, keeping a wary eye out for more of the zombie-like skeletons, but the coast looked pretty clear. The cemetery was empty and quiet again, so we made our way north, picking our way through the mausoleums.

*See anything interesting?* I asked.

*Nothing*, Xavier muttered.

*Not yet*, Rishika said, her voice tense.

It was slow going. We had to keep stopping every few steps whenever the rustle of leaves made it sound like a zombie thing was moving around nearby.

Finally, Rishika stopped. *What about that?* She nodded toward a large, obelisk-like statue. *It seems like this is about the distance we walked below ground.*

I didn’t bother questioning Rishika’s measurements. There was a reason why she led so many reconnaissance missions for the pack. She was great with tracking, and this kind of improvisational cartography was just her type of thing.

We’d just started toward the statue when I saw two figures crouched at the base of the stone monument. I stopped and looked at them, my heart racing. They weren’t skeletons, but rather two bodies, dressed in tattered clothing. Their hair and clothing were mussed and tousled, but they must have been really well-preserved in their tombs to still look so person-like.

*Keep as quiet at possible*, I said to Xavier and Rishika.

They both nodded, and we made our way quietly toward the figures. Just as I was about to pounce, one of the figures turned.

“Greyson?”

I felt like I was going to have a heart attack, but when I looked down at the figure below me, I saw Gabriel’s bruised and bloodied face.

Before I could signal Xavier or Rishika, Xavier jumped on the other figure, knocking it back.

Mikah let out an indignant shout and pushed at Xavier.

I shifted back to human. “Stop! Everyone *stop*!”

And it worked. Everyone did stop, mid-wrestle. Mikah was holding Xavier by the throat, Rishika was gripping Mikah’s left leg in her teeth, and Xavier’s teeth were an inch away from Mikah’s face.

“Open your eyes,” I growled. “It’s Mikah and Gabriel.”

Xavier pulled back right away. Rishika let go of Mikah’s leg, looking as contrite as it was possible for a wolf to look.

“What the hell, guys?” Gabriel asked, sounding offended.

“Sorry, man,” I said. “Don’t blame them—we’re on the offensive right now. We didn’t even think it could be you. This whole place is full of tricks.”

Mikah sighed and wiped wolf spit off his jeans. “That’s fair enough, I guess. I suppose we have the same mindset, after what we just got out of.”

“We’re glad to have you back,” I said, reaching down to help Mikah to his feet.

I looked up at the statue. “We’re here because we think this statue is an entrance to an underground cave the others are trapped in.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened in surprise. “They’re *underground*?”

I nodded.

“As in *trapped*?”

“Yeah. We were all down there, but we got separated, so we backtracked.” I frowned, thinking. “Why were you two over by this thing? Why were you interested in it?”

Gabriel got to his feet and pointed at a symbol at the stone base of the statue. “Look familiar? It’s the same family crest from the mausoleum and the keys. We thought maybe this was what we’d all been looking for.”

I grinned. “This is good.”

“Yeah?” Gabriel asked, surprised. “*Is* this what we’ve been looking for?”

“I don’t know about that, but this could mean that there’s another opening for that cave system. That’s good, for sure.”

I crouched down by the symbol and examined it closely.

“We thought we felt something underneath the base,” Gabriel said, pointing. “That’s what we were digging at when you guys attacked us like lunatics.”

I jammed my fingers underneath the lip of the statue base. “I feel it!” I said. My fingers brushed against something protruding. But with the accumulated dirt in my way, the angle was all wrong. I couldn’t push it or press it. I pulled my hands out and started digging beneath the crest, trying to gain more access.

Xavier shifted back to human and walked over. “What is it?”  
 “I’m not sure yet,” I said, shaking my head. I kept digging. The rocky dirt was jamming itself beneath my fingernails, but I barely noticed. If this could get me to Cali, then I was going to have to make it work. I needed to make sure she was okay. The idea of my mate being trapped underground in a freaking cemetery patrolled by the undead was just too freakishly morbid to think about. I wasn’t going to let her be trapped for long. Not if I could help it.

After some frantic work, I was able to create a hole big enough to reach my hand under the base of the statue almost up to my wrist. I pushed through thick cobwebs until I found something that felt like a button, then angled my arm so I could press the thing with all my strength.

Nothing happened.

Dammit.

What the hell could have gone wrong? The crest was here, the button—it had to be this statue!

Just as I was working myself up into a proper rage, the ground beneath us began to shake.

“Get back!” I bellowed, jumping to my feet.

We all hurried back and readied ourselves for whatever weird shit was about to happen.

But what actually happened surprised me. The dirt I’d just been standing on shook for a long while, then began to fall away as a perfect square opened up in the ground.

When it was uncovered and the ground was still again, we all stared at the opening in wonder.

Jackpot.

“Okay,” Xavier said, breaking the silence. “A trap door seems like a good sign, right?”

I nodded and was about to step forward when a skeletal hand emerged from the opening.

“Fuck, not this again!” I scrambled back. “We have to go!”

Thankfully I didn’t have to tell Rishika or Mikah and Gabriel twice. They retreated, but my stupid brother stood stuck in place. *I know you don’t like to listen to me, but could you for once?*

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked as I grabbed him, spinning him the opposite direction.

“Those!” I shouted as half a dozen skeletons emerged from the opening I’d just unearthed.

# Episode 3264

**Artemis**

Baffled by Cali’s suggestion, I stared at her in confusion. What did she mean, was he in love with Tabitha? I looked over at him.

Adair must have felt the same way I did. “Excuse me?” he said, a hard edge to his voice.

But Cali just shook her head. “I don’t have time to explain right now. You have a *connection* to Tabitha, right?”

“Yeah, I guess—” he started hesitantly, but Cali spoke over him.

“Great, so the last time we were caught in a hallucination spell, the way I got my mates out was by kissing them. I don’t know for sure, but I think it’s based on love. I love my mates, my friends, and my family. That’s how I was able to wake Artemis.” Cali was speaking quickly now, her face flushed. “I don’t know Tabitha at all, so I don’t know if a kiss on the cheek from me is going to do a damn thing. Neither would one from Artemis. But if you love her in some capacity, Adair, just *kiss her*, okay?”

I was taken aback by the intensity of Cali’s tone. So far, she’d been giving Adair a pretty wide berth, but now she was up in his face, urging him to act. And it wasn’t lost on me that Cali was implying there was some kind of romantic connection between this girl on the table and my uncle.

Turning, I looked carefully at Adair. He hesitated for a moment, looking oddly unsure, then leaned over Tabitha. He paused an inch away from her lips and took a deep breath. He seemed to whisper something—too low for me to hear—before he pressed his lips to hers.

A few weeks ago, Torin had gotten obsessed with a children’s cartoon. He used to watch it constantly, especially when he was waiting for something to bake, which was basically all the time. He liked the story and the music and the costumes, and he’d dance around during his favorite parts. I’d never gotten around to watching the thing all the way through, but near as I could tell, the story was about a princess who’d fallen asleep and been locked in a tower for some reason, and a prince who came to wake her with a kiss. I thought of that silly story and its swelling music and happily-ever-after ending as I watched Adair kissing the sleeping Tabitha.

No one had come to rescue me.

When Adair finally pulled away from the kiss, he stayed leaning over Tabitha, watching her closely.

“Come on, Tabby,” he breathed, looking at her intensely. “Come on. Wake the hell up.”

She didn’t move. Cali sucked in a scared breath.

Then her eyelids began to flutter, and Cali gasped. Tabitha’s lashes lifted, and she blinked up at Adair.

“Adair?” she slurred sleepily.

He let out a relieved breath that was half-laugh, half-moan and gathered her in his arms, hugging her tight. “Tabitha.”

The sight made my throat feel tight, and I quickly looked away. It seemed like too private a moment to be watching.

“Awesome, we woke her up,” Cali said, looking around. “Now we have to get her the hell out of here.”

I stepped away, looking into a small alcove that I hadn’t noticed before. It looked like nothing of interest, and I was about to turn back to the group when I saw a sudden shifting of shadows.

*Shadows?*

Shadows were created by light, which meant there was a light source coming from somewhere nearby. I walked further into the shadowy alcove and realized that it wasn’t actually an alcove—it was a passageway. It was narrow, just wide enough for one person to squeeze though, and when I did, I could see a corner up ahead. I pushed myself further in and craned my head around the corner.

*Light!*

“Hey!” I called over my shoulder. “I think I found another way out!”

Cali hurried over and looked around, taking in the alcove and the passageway. “Oh my god, *Artemis*!” She threw her arms around me. “This is great!”

She looked back at Tabitha, who was being helped upright by Adair. “Do you think you can stand?”

Tabitha looked over at us with a frown. Then she looked at Adair. “Who are these people? What’s going on? Where are we?”

Cali shook her head. “I’m sorry, of course you don’t know who we are. I’m Cali, and this is Artemis. We were just passing through.” She laughed and looked around, but it was clear the joke hadn’t landed.

“You were taken by the witches of this city,” Adair said, speaking quickly to Tabitha. “Do you remember?”

Tabitha closed her eyes and pressed her hand to her forehead. “I was with Gabe and Mikah, and then…” She looked up. “Then I was here? I was looking for Dani. She was lost in this labyrinth, and no matter where I turned, I couldn’t find her. She was calling out to me, but I couldn’t find her. She was hurt. She needed me.”

Tears had started to fall down Tabitha’s cheeks, and Adair lifted his hand to wipe them away.

“That was just a hallucination,” he said gently. “You were stuck in it for days. But you’re free now.”

“And Dani is fine,” I added.

Tabitha’s head whipped around to me, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. “What do you know about my sister?” she snapped.

“She’s with us,” I said.

I’d meant to reassure Tabitha, but my words seemed to have the opposite effect. She jumped down from the table, but she was so weak, her legs wobbled beneath her. Adair put his arm around her waist to steady her, but none of that diminished the fire in her eyes.

“*What?*” she demanded

I sighed. “It’s a very long story. I’ll explain later. She’s not with us right now, but Dani is safe in Oregon. Now can we please get out of here?”

Tabitha didn’t seem reassured and looked up at Adair, as though checking our story with him.

He nodded. “They’re right. We have to get out of here. The witch who trapped you might come back.”

Tabitha nodded, clearly trusting Adair’s word. “Okay.”

I turned back and squeezed through the opening, moving toward the shaft of light. I took a breath—there was a hint of freshness in the air, which stood out after the stuffiness of the cave, and I was glad to feel it. The light was coming from above, and the cave walls were steep and narrow on each side. I was just looking around, wondering how the hell we were going to climb out, when Cali pointed to the cave wall.

“Look,” she said. “There’s a ladder.”

*Ladder* was too generous a term. There were rough wooden slats shoved into the sheer rock, but they did lead upward, like a jagged ladder.

I was first in line, so I reached up and pulled myself onto the first step. There were tree roots climbing downward, and I used them as additional footholds on the way up, but when I reached the top, I had to push the strong web of roots away from the mouth of the hole. It took some work, but when I was done I could see the sun, and I’d created a space large enough to climb out of.

I pulled myself through and out onto the rocky, dusty ground of the cemetery. I was about to breathe a sigh of relief, but the sound of shouting voices stopped me.

Rolling to my feet, I got into a defensive stance, ready to fight—just as a skeleton sailed past me through the air.

“What the hell—” I turned in shock, just as Rishika’s wolf barreled toward me.

I leapt out of the way just in time, rolling across the ground and slamming into yet another skeleton.

I really fucking hated these skeletons.

I pulled my knives out of their sheaths, just as Cali emerged from the hole in the ground.

“Cali!” I bellowed. “Heads up!”

Cali looked around, her face shocked and scared and confused, but she managed to recover quickly and turned as a skeleton sprinted toward her. She held up her hands and hit the thing with a blast of magic.

As I rushed to Rishika’s side, I wished I could speak to her, but I knew she couldn’t respond to me when she was a wolf. It sucked, but luckily, we were connected enough that we usually knew what the other was thinking anyway. We made a killer team.

I flanked Rishika as we faced off against two lumbering skeletons. One of them lunged with surprising speed and clamped its bony arms around Rishika’s neck. I flipped around and grabbed for the thing, trying to pull it off, but the other skeleton grasped my ankle, pulling with all its undead strength until it took my feet out from under me and I fell to the ground.

I screamed and reached for Rishika, but the skeleton was already dragging me away from her.

# Episode 3265

Hearing a desperate cry, I turned to see a skeleton dragging my sister across the rocky ground. My stomach dropped, and my body leapt into action without conscious thought.

“*Artemis!*” I screamed, lunging forward to pull at the skeleton. I put one hand around the ribs to try to pull it back, and my other hand went to its hands, trying to break its grip on Artemis’s ankle. I gritted my teeth and yanked with all my might. Strong as it was, I managed to get one of the hands to let go of Artemis, but when I did, the skeleton twisted, rotating its upper body so its empty eye sockets were looking right at me.

Shit. That wasn’t good.

With its newly freed hand, the skeleton reached out and dug its bony fingers into my shoulder, right where the Seluna mark was. The pain was instantaneous, and I gave an anguished scream as pain shot through like bolts of lightning.

*Cali!* Greyson called out. *Cali, hang on! I’m coming!*

I saw him try to leap toward me, but just as he did, two skeletons jumped onto him, catching him in mid-air and digging their fingers into him. They pulled at his fur and dragged him back down to the ground, where they pounced on him.

“Greyson!” I called desperately, though the cry ended with a moan of pain as yet another skeleton wrapped itself around my waist. Its arms encircled me, holding on so tightly it was hard to breathe. My head started to swim, but still I twisted toward the thing, trying to gather my magic for one good blast. I was struggling, and I could feel fear rising in my chest. What if I didn’t have enough energy left? What if I couldn’t get the thing off me?

Greyson was still struggling with the two skeletons. Beyond him, Xavier was fighting three more. Artemis was still being dragged away, and we were losing ground.

Suddenly, the skeletons holding onto me went limp. Their bones released their grip and clattered into piles on the ground.

“What the hell?” It felt like the sudden turn of events had stunned my brain, and I looked around, trying to process what had just happened. At a glance, I saw that *all* the skeletons had stopped moving. Where there had seconds ago been lurching, lumbering skeletons, there were now piles of unmoving bones.

“Okay, what the actual hell just happened?” Mikah asked into the stillness. He stepped over a pile of ancient bones, disgust twisting his face, then looked around, and when his eyes landed on me, he looked surprised. “Cali? Where did you all come from? And how? What the hell is happening?”

“We found a way out.” I turned and pointed to the hole we’d climbed out of. There I saw Tabitha, standing supported by Adair.

Mikah’s eyes widened. “*Tabby?*”

“Hey, Mikah.” She smiled weakly. “I guess my magic is good for something, huh?”

Mikah let out a stunned laugh and raced to her, grabbing her into a hug and twirling her around. “You’re okay!”

Gabriel got to his feet and brushed the dirt off his filthy clothes, then joined them in a big group hug.

*Cali, are* you *okay?* Greyson asked. He trotted toward me. *How did you get here?*

*We found that opening after we rescued Tabitha*, I mind linked back, pointing.

*Thank god*, Greyson breathed*. I was so worried.*

*So that’s Tabitha, huh?* Xavier said, joining us. *Is she the one who stopped the skeletons?*

I nodded. *Yeah, she must have*, I told him. *I think that’s what she does. She negates magic. Her abilities must have stopped the necromancy spells when she made it out of the cave.* I shrugged a shoulder. *I should’ve had her climb out first.*

I caught Greyson up to speed with what happened as well.

He pawed at the ground. *Well, whatever did it, I’m grateful.*

I stepped toward Tabitha. I wanted to thank her for stopping the skeletons, but the girl swayed on her feet as Mikah and Gabriel released her, and Adair barely caught her before she fell. She had to be exhausted. She’d been in there for *days.*

Mikah looked grave. “We should get her somewhere she can rest.”

I nodded. “And we need to get some food into her. If she was in that coma state for days, she wouldn’t have had anything to eat.” I looked around. “Should we head to the safe house?”

“As long as we get there fast,” Adair said, as everyone else nodded in agreement.

*Cali, we’re going to need to shift back to human first*, Greyson said.

I looked around at the mausoleums surrounding us. “Do you think there will be any clothes around here?”

*I am* not *graverobbing pants off a two-hundred-year-old skeleton*, Xavier said firmly. *So you can just forget that idea.*

I laughed, then shuddered at the thought.

“They need clothes?” Mikah asked, looking at Greyson and Xavier.

“Yeah,” I said, speaking for them. “Ideally, I suppose.”

“Gabe said he saw some kind of office at the south end of the cemetery,” Mikah said, pointing. “There might be some clothes there.”

“If not,” Gabriel said, “you all can pretend to be frat bros in the middle of a pledge war or something.”

Mikah gave him a wary look. “Let’s just see if there are some clothes.”

We all walked toward the south gate, and sure enough, there was a small stone building with the word “Office” posted on the door. Mikah made quick work of breaking the lock, and he and I went inside. It was dark and stuffy, but when Mikah opened a closet, we found two old coats and a couple of work jumpsuits that were worn and dirt-encrusted.

I wrinkled my nose. “They’re pretty crusty,” I admitted. “They need a wash, but naked beggars can’t be choosers.”

Mikah laughed and grabbed the clothes. We walked them outside and found that the wolves had shifted back to their human forms.

“Fashion show!” Gabriel called out as Mikah dropped the wrinkled array of mismatched clothes onto the ground.

Xavier groaned, but Rishika plucked out an oversized yellow raincoat and pulled it on.

She buttoned it, rolled up the sleeves, and struck a pose. “I think I’m pulling it off.”

Artemis laughed and linked arms with her girlfriend.

Adair—who now had the exhausted-looking Tabitha in his arms—shifted the girl. “Can we go now?” he asked, sounding annoyed.

I glanced at Tabitha and immediately felt bad for how long it was taking us to get moving. She looked so pale she was almost grey, and so tired she looked like she was about to pass out.

“We’re ready,” I said as Greyson and Xavier pulled on the jumpsuits.

We all trooped back to the car, and Adair laid Tabitha carefully in the back seat.

“I’m going with her,” he said, his voice brooking no argument. He climbed in next to her before anyone could say anything.

Tabitha was taking up most of the back seat, and Adair the rest, which only left room for Greyson to drive, as well as the passenger seat.

“Cali, hop in,” Greyson said, climbing into the car.

I looked at my sister. “We’ll see you at the safe house?”

Artemis nodded. “We’ll be there. Drive safe.”

I climbed into the car and leaned back in the seat. I’d known I was tired, but it wasn’t until I sat down that I realized exactly *how* tired. My whole body ached, I was covered in dirt from head to toe, and I was exhausted from all the fighting and climbing out of crypts and caves.

I leaned back against the headrest and allowed my eyes to close—just for a moment.

When I opened them again, Greyson was pulling the car to a stop.

I looked around in confusion and saw that we’d arrived at the safe house. “What’s going on?” I asked sleepily.

Greyson grinned at me and climbed out of the car.

Giving my head a shake to wake up, I followed him. And just as I climbed out, Harlow’s car pulled to a stop just behind us.

She had pulled in at a haphazard angle and slammed out of the driver’s seat.

I walked over to met her, and as I got closer, I could see the urgency in her eyes. “Harlow, hey. Are you okay? What’s going on?”

Harlow’s eyes were wide and worried-looking. “You turned the magic back on, didn’t you?”

I nodded, my eyes shifting to Tabitha, who was still in the back seat with Adair. “Yeah, that was the plan this whole time. Why? What’s up?”

Harlow shook her head, anxiety wrinkling her brow.

“What is it?” I demanded, my stomach clenching. I had been through too much today. I didn’t need anything else. “What’s going on? Is something wrong?”

Harlow took a deep breath. “I came here to warn you.”

I stared at her. “Warn me? About what?”

“You need to watch your back.”

“Harlow,” I said, my voice low. “You need to tell me what’s going on, right this minute.”

She bit her lip. “We have no idea where Odette has gone.”

# Episode 3266

**Artemis**

Before we’d left, Sage and Zainab had talked my ear off about how much they’d been wanting to visit New Orleans and how beautiful it was—how historic and full of culture, life, and music. All of that was probably true, but I didn’t think about any of it as I ran through the city with Rishika, Xavier, and the rest of the crew. All I could think about was how glad I was that it was flat. It usually took a lot to wear me out, but after the day we’d had, I was starting to tire. But I also knew it wouldn’t be smart to stop until we’d reached the safe house. So, as I pushed my aching body further, the thought of a hot shower and a warm bed keeping me going.

Finally, we rounded a corner, and when I spotted Cali standing in the driveway off in the distance, I could have sobbed with relief. But as we drew closer, I could see that she was speaking to someone. It was Harlow.

What was that witch doing here?

I slowed to a stop just as Harlow turned away from Cali. She hurried back to her car and pulled away.

“What was that about?” I asked breathlessly, walking over to Cali.

“Oh, nothing,” Cali said with a forced smile. “Harlow wanted to give us an update on Odette. She’s seemingly nowhere to be found and might very well want revenge on us. You know, just the normal lucky breaks us Redwood pack members always seem to get.”

I narrowed my eyes, unnerved by the idea of that old witch coming after Cali—or anyone else I cared about. “Well, now that the magic is back, maybe we can get a witch to do a tracking spell on her and beat her at her own game. She can’t do much to stop us without Tabitha’s powers.”

But Cali shook her head. “No, we have to focus. Odette’s not our problem anymore. If she stays away, then that’s good for us. If she comes for us, we’ll fight. We already beat her once.”

I wiped sweat from my forehead. As much as I hated the idea of just waiting around for something to happen to us, I figured Cali was probably right. The witch might never even show up or come for us again. And once we left New Orleans, she’d have a hell of a time trying to find us with all the spells Big Mac had on the pack house that made it unfindable. As much as I wanted to give Odette a taste of her own medicine and hunt her down, it would probably be a waste of our time to go after her now.

I turned to see Adair open the car door and climb out. He leaned back in and carefully lifted Tabitha out. She was sleeping and limp, but as he hefted her into his arms, she snuggled into him, looking peaceful.

I wondered if I should offer to help him—shut the car door, or open the front door—but I couldn’t make up my mind if I should, so I just stood there, paralyzed with indecision. And before I could make any move at all, Adair had disappeared into the house, Gabriel and Mikah trailing after him.

Another missed moment.

Looking back at Cali, I heaved a gusty sigh. “Tell me there’s hot running water in there.”

Cali nodded with a smile. “And plenty of it, thank god. Use the upstairs bathroom in the master suite. It has good water pressure.”

I shook my head. “I don’t even want to know how you know that, Cali.”

Cali’s face turned bright pink, and she pushed me toward the house without answering.

I walked inside and headed right upstairs without bothering to look around. I was way too tired to be curious about anything. In the master bedroom, I stripped off my filthy clothes as I walked toward the bathroom, leaving them in a grimy trail behind me, and turned on the water. I waited until the air around me was steaming, then stepped in.

There were so many thoughts racing through my head—about Adair and my past and my father and my own identity—and all those thoughts were getting tangled up with the emotions attached to them. The pain and confusion and loneliness and fear. And I hated it. All of it. I liked things to be straightforward. Black and white. But that was *not* how I felt right now.

Frustrated with the whirlwind inside my head, I stuck my face beneath the spray, imagining the scalding water rinsing all my feelings away. I pictured the tangled thoughts swirling at the bottom of the shower like spiderwebs and then draining away, along with the dirty water.

Behind me, the door of the shower swung open, but I didn’t even bother opening my eyes. I smiled as Rishika came up behind me, wrapping her arms tightly around me.

“I’m too tired,” I murmured. “I don’t want to do anything right now.”

“Me neither,” Rishika said quietly. “I just want to hold you.”

So we stood for a long time beneath the warm spray of the shower, wrapped around each other. We didn’t speak, but after a time Rishika kissed the back of my neck, then my shoulder, then my spine. I could feel her love wrapping around me, as warm as the water.

When I felt warm enough and my muscles had loosened, I took the bar of soap and turned Rishika around, washing the cemetery dirt from her body. When I was done, she did the same for me. And when I stepped out of the shower, I felt better than I could have imagined.

I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around myself, then handed one to Rishika.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, wrapping herself up.

“Well, I don’t feel like I’m going to collapse any second, so that’s something,” I said with a smile.

Rishika nodded, but her expression remained grave. “Really, though? You’re not trying to push down how you’re feeling about Adair?”

I turned away, uncomfortable again. I hated that she was bringing this up, but I also knew—somewhere deep inside—that I couldn’t run from what I was feeling forever.

I shrugged. “I don’t know what to do about him. He’s obviously completely focused on Tabitha. His girlfriend, or whatever she is to him. He doesn’t seem to care about me at all.”

“To be fair,” Rishika put in, “Tabitha *was* kidnapped and held hostage in a cave, which had to be… well… certainly not *fun* for him.”

I scowled. I hated being forced to examine my very complicated feelings about finding my uncle—and having found him in such an odd way. “Maybe it was too much for me to expect him to be the key to my past. I mean, for all I know, he can’t even help me figure out who I really am anyway. Kadmos was just his brother, right? They might not even have been close. Look at Greyson and Xavier.”

I looked up when I heard the sound of creaking boards and saw Adair standing in the doorway. His hand was lifted as if he’d been intending to knock on the door jam.

“The door was open,” he said, awkwardly indicating the open door. “I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop.”

Rishika glanced between the two of us for a second. “I’m going to let you two talk.” She stepped forward and grabbed a robe from the bed, then headed out of the room, closing the door behind her, leaving Adair and me alone.

I looked around, unsure of what to do with myself. I was still just wearing a towel, so I stepped toward the closet. When I opened it, I found a bunch of Cali’s clothes, so I pulled out a random assortment without looking.

“I should get dressed,” I said awkwardly, then escaped into the bathroom again.

I shut the door and leaned against it, breathing hard. The air was still steamy, but it was better than the bedroom, which had felt completely airless.

I was fine. Everything was fine. I just needed a moment to… gather myself.

What the *hell* was I supposed to say to him?

I didn’t have the answer to that question, so I took my time pulling on the jeans and T-shirt I’d grabbed from Cali’s closet. I even combed my fingers through my hair, trying to neaten it a little. I stared at my face in the mirror, wondering what Adair saw when he looked at me. Was there a family resemblance?

When I figured I’d wasted enough time, I finally emerged from the bathroom. Adair was still there, sitting calmly on the edge of the bed.

“Hi,” I said, my voice cracking.

He looked up at me. “You said you wanted to talk,” he said evenly. “So let’s talk.”

# Episode 3267

The water pressure in the small downstairs bathroom was garbage, but at least I was clean when I stepped out of the shower. Dressed, but with still-damp hair, I headed into the kitchen, craving some tea.

Greyson and Xavier were sitting on stools at the counter. They both looked like they’d also taken showers—their hair was still damp, and they had on clean clothes.

“I think I’m going to miss those cemetery jumpsuits. Maybe we can wash them and you can keep them as souvenirs,” I said with a tired grin. “You guys want some tea?”

They both nodded silently, their eyes on me.

I turned to reach for mugs and tea bags, and I could practically *feel* the heat of their gazes on my back.

“What?” I demanded, turning around to look at them. “What is it?”

Greyson and Xavier glanced at each other, sharing a look, then they looked back at me.

“How are you feeling?” Greyson asked carefully.

“You mean because the magic is back on, and I still have the Seluna mark? You’re worried it’s going to start giving me problems again?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Xavier said. “Are you having any headaches or—”

“No,” I said quickly. “No headaches, no hallucinations. Nothing. I’m good. For now.”

They both let out a relieved breath. I looked at them for a moment, wondering if they’d noticed how in sync they’d been over the last couple of days.

“What?” Greyson asked, catching me staring.

I shook my head. “Nothing. Have you checked in with the pack?”

“Haven’t had a chance yet,” Greyson said. “It’s been kind of an intense day. Well… more of an intense few days.”

“That’s true.” I chuckled and pulled out my phone. “Let’s call now. I want to tell Dani that Tabitha is okay.”

I dialed before either of them could reply and put the audio on speaker.

“Cali!” Jay answered. “Hey! Are you guys okay? You haven’t called in a while. We’ve been worried.”

“Yeah, we’re okay. I’m sorry we haven’t been in touch. We’re good, but it’s been crazy. We’ll have to give you the full story when we get back. But we do have some good news for Dani,” I said, grinning.

“Oh yeah? Do you want me to go grab her?” Jay asked.

“Can you tell her that we found her sister, Tabitha?” I said, trying—and failing—to keep the excited squeak out of my voice.

“What? *Really?*” Jay sounded thunderstruck.

“Yeah, Rishika is trying to locate her in this giant-ass house, and we’ll call back once we can get her on the phone,” I went on, “but she’s safe.”

“That’s amazing!” Jay said happily.

“How’s everything there?” Greyson asked.

“Oh, same old, same old. All’s quiet on the Dick front, so that’s good.”

“Definitely. I suppose it’s too much to hope the bastard is gone for good?” Greyson said.

“We can always hope. Other than that, Torin’s been experimenting with fondue. It’s been… interesting.”

“Any updates from the Samara pack?” Xavier asked.

“Nope,” Jay said. “I talked to Zeke the other day. Man, that guy is close to the edge. I’m pretty sure Ava’s the one who’s actually running shit over there. Zeke is a *mess*.”

Xavier didn’t look happy to hear that. “Dammit. They need to get their shit together,” he said with a scowl.

I was about to ask if Lola was around when there was a crash in the background on Jay’s end.

“Are you okay? What was that?” I asked nervously.

“Rats! Rats! *Double rats!*” Torin yelled in the background.

Jay laughed. “Sorry, it looks like there’s been a kitchen emergency. I’d better go help.”

He hung up before any of us could say goodbye.

“Well,” I said, turning to my mates, “it sounds like they’re doing fine.”

Greyson nodded, but Xavier was still looking upset, probably over the less than great news from the Samara pack.

I felt for him. It seemed like Xavier really felt responsible for the Samara pack—probably because of the role he’d played in helping them get rid of Knox as Alpha.

The kettle I’d set on the stove started to whistle, and I turned toward it, just as there was a knock on the front door.

Heart pounding, I turned to look at Greyson. “Who the hell could that be?”

Greyson looked alert and wary. “I don’t know.”

As he got to his feet, Xavier did, too. He rolled his shoulders back, clearly ready for a fight.

“I’ll come as backup,” he said. “In case.”

Greyson didn’t argue.

I watched them walk out of the room, my stomach clenched with worry. I turned off the burner, thinking about who it could be. It could be any of the witches or shifters we’d pissed off in New Orleans—which was a fairly long list.

But when Xavier and Greyson came back into the kitchen, they brought Clementine with them, and I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Hi, there,” I said with a smile, my legs practically wobbly. “What brings you here?”

Clementine lifted a questioning brow. “We had a deal, remember?”

I did remember, of course, but I was surprised to see her here to remind me about it. She’d been so reluctant to deal with me in the first place that I’d assumed I was going to have to nag the witch to get her to hold up her end of the bargain. But here she was.

“Well, I am here to collect,” she said with a shrug. “You turned our magic back on, and your sister promised her Fae blood. I’ll find this blackmailer for you.”

I stared at her, shocked that it was all going to be happening so soon. I shared a look with my mates.

Could this really be *it*? Could we be about to find the ashes and end all the things that had been haunting me?

“I need to warn you, though,” Clementine said, “even though the magic has been turned back on, that doesn’t mean everything’s going to work the way it’s supposed to.”

“What does that mean?” Xavier asked.

“Whatever was affecting it before it was turned off is still affecting it,” Clementine said.

I nodded. “I understand. Anything you can do to try to help is all we’re asking for.”

“Okay,” Clementine said. “It’s a good thing we’re in New Orleans, at least.”

I frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh.” Clementine looked surprised. “I thought you knew. I thought that was why you came down here. New Orleans is on a ley line. That’s why I’m here. I was trying to use the enhanced power of the city to fix the problem with my own magic until I realized it wasn’t just me—the problem was affecting everyone.

I stared at her for a moment, shocked, but that actually made a weird kind of sense. “That must be why so many powerful witch bloodlines have settled here,” I said, thinking out loud. “And why the magic we’ve come across has felt so powerful.”

“That does make sense,” Greyson agreed.

Even as I pulled inward and focused my own energy, I could feel something different in the air. I realized I’d felt it from the moment we’d arrived in the city. There was just something different in the air here in New Orleans.

Clementine pulled a map out of her pocket, unfolded it, and spread it out on the counter. Then she rubbed her hands together.

“Okay, give me your hand, Caliana. I’ll use your connection to those ashes to try to locate them. Or, if not the ashes themselves, then the person who has them.”

I nodded and put my hand in Clementine’s.

Clementine dropped her head and started to murmur the incantation. The way she wove the spell was low and musical—it sounded almost like a song, and I felt my eyes shutting. A tingle ran up my arm from where our hands met. It raced over my skin and into my shoulder. The Seluna mark started to burn.

I let out a hiss of pain, and Greyson frowned and moved closer to me. But I shook my head. I didn’t need help, and I didn’t want him to do anything to compromise the spell.

Clementine’s chanting grew more fevered, and her grip on my hand tightened. I closed my eyes, trying to focus all my attention on Clementine, pushing all my own energy toward the witch, just in case it helped.

Then I felt a wave of heat and saw a flash of light behind my closed lids. I opened my eyes and saw that the map had burst into flames—again.

“No!” I cried, heartbroken. “It didn’t work!”

But Clementine was calm. “Look.”

I followed her finger and saw that the entire map was on fire—*except* for one small, inch-wide piece.

She smiled at me. “I told you, magic might work differently now. I’ve never seen this, but it’s given us what we need.”

“What is it?” I asked, baffled.

“It showed us where this person is,” Clementine said.

I picked up the tiny piece of map. I was careful with it, because the edges were charred and I was worried that the whole thing might crumble in my fingers. I looked at it and realized I was looking at a location just outside of New Orleans proper.

Clementine gave me a beady stare. “I told your mate he’d been followed.” She raised her eyebrows. “Well, the vampire-witch is here.”

# Episode 3268

**Artemis**

Adair sat on the bed, staring at me with a calm, blank expression that was unnerving. He looked too young to be anyone’s uncle, but his gaze carried the kind of weight and unyielding self-assurance that only came with age. He was supposed to be family, yet the only word I could use to describe him right now was *intimidating*.

Suddenly I couldn’t remember any of the questions I’d been fretting over.

Adair got to his feet and slowly walked over to me. Then, around me, as if he were sizing me up. For what, I had no idea, but it made me nervous, like I was there to be examined and deemed worthy. Or unworthy.

Deep down, my uncle’s judgment terrified me.

“You know, originally I thought you were lying when you claimed to be Kadmos’s daughter,” Adair said in a monotone.

I flinched. “I’m not lying, I—”

Adair stopped before me, staring. “I know. I can see the resemblance now. You have your father’s eyes… my eyes, too. It’s… a little unnerving.”

This was the first time anyone besides Orla acknowledged the similarity—the connection with my father. The vision of Kadmos welled up right before me, murky but so real, and I felt a lump form in my throat.

Adair was still staring. This time, a slight smile formed on his lips. “You fight like your father too. Reckless and stupid, but stupidly good.” The smile vanished before I could rejoice in it. He took a step back, arms crossed over his chest as he said, “So. What is it that you want to talk about?”

Even though Adair was back to his businesslike demeanor, his affirmation of my resemblance to Kadmos was enough to embolden me. “I have so many questions about my father—about what happened, about you and Kadmos’s family and—”

“Slow down there,” Adair said, eyebrows arched. “You know I haven’t been around my family in a long time.”

“But you still know more about them than I do,” I said with an awkward chuckle that I immediately regretted. Clearing my throat, I added, “I know that my father and Orla married to build an alliance between the Light and Dark Fae, to bring an end to the war.”

Adair paused. Then, he said, “That was the plan. But we both know it didn‘t work out that way.” His voice lowered, an obvious bitter twinge tainting it. “The war *still* continues to this day. Nothing my brother did or could have done would have stopped it.”

Adair’s expression had darkened, so I rushed to change the subject. “What was Kadmos like? I’ve heard about him from my mom, but it would be nice to hear from his own brother.”

Adair shrugged. “He was the oldest and therefore next in line to lead our family—he had been groomed from the day he was born to become king.”

“How did he feel about that?” I asked.

“He relished it, thought he could change the world.” Adair’s gaze sharpened. “Hence the marriage to a Wrenthorn as well. That had been a choice all right.”

My stomach throbbed with unease. “Why do you say it that way?”

“What way?” he asked in a flat tone.

“Like—like marrying to end the war is cause for disdain,” I said. “Like Kadmos—”

“Kadmos was supposed to be the smart one, but not even he could have foreseen how ungovernable politics can truly be. Regardless, it is in the past. What’s done is done.”

I frowned. “Why do you seem so cynical? Didn’t you want the war to end?”

Adair shrugged again. “It made no difference to me. I never had any desire to rule, to take my place in the long line of royals—only to end up in a framed portrait on the palace wall, or dead like your father.”

Adair’s callous words stung. Was he truly so cruel, or was this just his way of surviving? I couldn’t tell, and I didn’t know if I could judge him. I’d been half-feral myself when Cali first found me.

“What about the rumors about Kadmos being alive, though?” I asked, my heart pounding with the possibility.

But Adair shook his head. “Just hopeful rumors.”

That meant that if Kadmos was alive, he hadn’t contacted his brother. And if he hadn’t contacted his brother… he wasn’t alive. The rumors were just rumors, and the reality of my father’s death hit me like an anvil on the head.

“He died fighting for what he believed in,” Adair continued. He looked bitter and so much older suddenly. “And what good did it do? The war is still going on. I told him it was all for nothing.”

“Seems like you and my father had a very different set of worldviews,” I whispered.

Adair snorted, but there was no true amusement in it. “I get that as Kadmos’s daughter, you want to hear what a wonderful, amazing man he was. He was my older brother— next in line and all. His priority was not his family—it was his people.”

I gulped. “But what about becoming a father? Surely that changed his perspective on family?”

Adair pressed his lips together. “That would be a nice way to picture things, but I wasn’t around much in the months leading up to your birth to verify it. I only returned after your father’s death. Up until today, I thought my niece died in childbirth.”

“But becoming a father—”

Adair cut me off. “I doubt becoming a father would have changed Kadmos’s worldview.” The Fae locked eyes with me, and what came out of his mouth next aimed to hurt. Or, at least, it felt that way. “You were an alliance baby, Artemis. Made to order. Yes, Kadmos loved your mother, but he always loved his kingdom more. I don’t think anything could ever change that.”

I had no idea why that statement stung so badly. I’d never even met Kadmos, yet the rejection still hurt. I felt small and pathetic before Adair, this man that I was supposed to call family. I had no idea what to say, when…

“Adair?” Rishika’s voice, followed by a knock on the door, almost made me jump. “Tabitha is asking for you.”

I was so thankful for Rishika’s interruption. If Adair felt the same, he didn’t show it. “You’ll have to excuse me,” he said and walked out of the room.

Rishika closed the door behind him and turned to me. Her dark eyes scrutinized my face. “Is everything okay? How did the talk go?” she asked quietly.

I was too overwhelmed with emotion to find the words. Rishika didn’t ask anything else, just pulled me into her arms. Some of the tension eased out of me at the contact. I squeezed myself against her, rejoicing in this piece of comfort.

I’d wished for comfort when I met Adair, but that all went downhill quickly.

“Adair’s not who I thought he would be,” I muttered, resting my cheek on Rishika’s shoulder. “He’s cold, indifferent, and I don’t think…” The lump in my throat grew, and I had to swallow down tears. “I don’t think he wants anything to do with me.”

“That can’t be true.” Rishika shook her head, facing me. “I know this must be a disappointment, but just because Adair isn’t the loving uncle you’d hoped for, it doesn’t mean that he doesn’t care about you. He spent the last twenty plus years on his own, thinking you were dead. Give him time.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so,” she said with certainty. “Once Adair gets to know how amazing you are, he’ll come around.”

Rishika’s encouragement and support were wonderful. The idea of placing more importance on Adair’s acceptance was too much to bear, though. I had to suck it up and realize that his approval couldn’t define my worth.

At this point, continuing to hope for the two of us to be real family seemed terrifying.

“I think the way he feels shouldn’t matter as much,” I said with as much conviction as possible. “I made it so far without Adair, after all. Without Kadmos either.”

Rishika’s eyebrows scrunched up. “Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“I will be,” I said. “And I have you. Anyway, I’m pretty sure I’ll be fine. No need to talk about this anymore right now.”

Rishika nodded and kissed my cheek, dropping the subject instantly.

“Come on,” she said, heading to the closet and dropping the robe on the floor. “I’ll get dressed, and we can go downstairs to grab a bite to eat. Sound good?”

I wrapped my arms around her from behind, brushing my lips over her shoulder. “Thank you,” I whispered. “For everything.”

She faced me, a small smile on her face. Stroking my cheek, she said, “Of course. Now let’s head to the kitchen before the boys eat everything.”

Rishika and I were headed downstairs, hand in hand. I was so grateful to her for just being there for me, giving me time to process. I’d never been one to dwell on feelings and emotions, and Rishika understood that better than anyone.

I was so lucky to have her.

When we walked into the kitchen, Adair and Tabitha were seated together at the table. Adair didn’t look up, but Tabitha looked between Rishika and me, offering a tiny smile.

“Glad to see you’re looking better, Tabitha,” Rishika commented.

“I wanted to thank you both for helping me escape the graveyard,” Tabitha said.

“Of course,” I said. “We’re happy to help. It really wasn’t—”

I cut myself off when Adair abruptly stood up from his chair. He made a beeline for me, grabbing my arm to pull me away from the other two. I was so startled by his action that I couldn’t utter a word.

“I need to make one thing clear here, kid,” he whispered, a cold, dark look forming on his face. “You and I may share blood, but we don’t owe each other anything.”

# Episode 3269

After everything we’d been through, fighting witches and skeleton soldiers, and scrambling through New Orleans, it had all come down to this location on the remaining piece of Clementine’s map. The vampire-witch had been here all along.

*We are so close!* I thought, my heart pounding.

Xavier looked over my shoulder, resting his hand on my arm. The warmth of his touch felt grounding. “What is this place?” he asked Clementine.

“It’s in the Lower Garden District,” the witch explained. “An area known for its historic and stately homes. It’s probably one of the mansions.”

Of course she lived in one of those old stately manor homes.

*So we’ve been out here risking our asses day in and out, and that murderous asshole has been living a life of luxury? The audacity of it all!*

“Cali, I’m sure the vampire-witch isn’t sipping mimosas in her mansion all day,” Greyson said as if he’d just heard my thoughts. Oh my god, was I so easy to read? Did I accidentally mind link him?

“If she’s sipping on anything, I promise you it isn’t champagne,” Clementine cut in.

Xavier looked so pissed, it was a wonder the room didn’t light up in actual flames. And I couldn’t fault him.

“Fire!” Gabriel burst into the room, his stance ready for battle. “I smelled fire; everyone okay?”

Mikah appeared behind Gabriel, wearing his patented blank expression. “Gabe either wants to put out the fire, or just throw himself in it for the thrill of it. Let’s see how that goes.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes and punched Mikah on the arm while Xavier told his friend, “Dude, calm down. It was just the map.” He gestured at the remaining piece on the desk.

“What’s going on?” Mikah asked.

“That’s the location of the vampire-witch,” Xavier explained.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Gabriel looked around, clapping his hands together. “Didn’t you guys come to New Orleans to get the ashes back?”

My heart was still pounding a mile a minute. Everybody had cleaned up, but there were still signs of the graveyard battle. Fading scratches and bruises against their skin, dark circles under their eyes, fatigue. I was as eager as any of them to go, but logic said that we needed to rest and rebuild our strength, eat something.

“Do you have any idea who this vampire-witch is?” Greyson asked Clementine.

She shook her head. “I can’t say for certain. All I know is that they are rare and extremely dangerous.”

I didn’t need a reminder of that. Besides, it seemed everybody we encountered lately fit that description.

“Well, we’ve got the location, don’t we? We should go and work out the details on the way,” Gabriel said, fidgeting with impatience. “What are we hanging about for?”

I was about to tell him that us charging into the vampire-witch’s home without a plan was probably one the craziest things I’d ever heard when Clementine leveled him with a look. “Approaching the vampire-witch’s home during the day is ill-advised. The one thing I know about them is that they’re mostly nocturnal. They will use fierce magic to protect themselves during the day, so the best time to attack would be the night.”

“That’s a good point,” I said, nodding. The two times that Xavier had seen the vampire-witch had been after the sun had fallen, actually.

“So we should attack during the night, when they will also use fierce magic, but at least they’ll be conscious?” Greyson asked Clementine dryly.

“Sounds like we’re screwed no matter when we try and attack them,” I said.

Clementine rolled her eyes. “Think about it—they expect attacks during the day, so they would have added the maximum amount of protection. During the night, they will be surprised that anyone had the nerve to approach.”

“Okay, yeah, that’s another fairly good point. I guess there’s no way out of this without some kind of a fight one way or the other,” I conceded.

Greyson nodded thoughtfully. “It’s settled, then. There’s no reason to take unnecessary risks. We could all use some rest, then we can regroup and hunt down the vampire-witch at night.”

“That’s bullshit!” Gabriel scoffed. “Why don’t we just—”

Dragging his mate out of the room, Mikah grumbled, “Stop being so damn impulsive, Gabe!”

Gabriel replied indignantly—he did that a lot—and made a fuss as the two walked off.

Greyson sighed and then stared at Xavier.

“What?” Xavier said defensively.

“Gabriel’s your friend,” Greyson said patiently. “You’re the one who’s supposed to talk to him and calm him down.”

Xavier rolled his eyes but nodded. I squeezed his arm in reassurance as Clementine added, “You guys should plan to head out around ten. It will give us all time to rest.”

As Clementine discussed logistics with Greyson, and Xavier went out to find Gabriel, I headed upstairs to my room. I was both exhausted and on edge, and when I flopped down on the bed, I was vibrating like a jackhammer from the nerves. There was no way I’d relax enough for that. And if I did manage to fall asleep…

*What if I’m struck by another hallucination?*

The thought was chilling. Odette’s magic might be over for now, but Seluna’s handprint was a reminder that I wasn’t out of danger yet. I shoved the thought away and wondered how Artemis was doing. Had she talked to Adair?

The man was enigmatic. I didn’t have a chance to speak to him with everything that had been going on, but Adair didn’t seem like the chatty type anyway. I just hoped he was able to answer some of my sister’s questions about Kadmos.

*It would make Artemis feel so much better…*

My thoughts were interrupted by a soft knock, and then Greyson appeared, walking into the room. “Hey, just wanted to check on you. I could tell that something was troubling you earlier.”

“There’s always something troubling me, Greyson. It’s a state of mind at this point,” I said with a wry snort.

Greyson offered half a smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He sat down next to me as I lay on the bed. “Talk to me,” he said in a low voice, squeezing my hand. There was a yellow bruise on the corner of his jaw, and the thought of him healing gave me comfort.

“I’m not sure what to say,” I mumbled, sitting up. “I have no idea how I feel. When Clementine revealed the vampire-witch’s location, I agreed with Gabriel—I wanted us to rush out and get it over with. But then I started to think…”

Greyson stared. “What?”

“Nobody seems to know much about the vampire-witch, what she’s capable of, why she took the ashes,” I said. My voice was low and shaky, and I fought to ignore the constant feeling of looming dread within me. “I feel responsible for everyone risking their lives for me when we just survived the—”

“Cali, *please*,” Greyson cut me off, resting his hands on my shoulders. “Please don’t do this to yourself.”

When I met his gaze, I felt both amazing and horrible. Amazing because *he* was amazing, and horrible because if anything bad had happened to him or any of the others today, I would probably explode into a million tiny guilty pieces. Blood and all.

*Graphic, but true.*

“You need to remind yourself that you’re not to blame here, love,” Greyson muttered. “The ashes aren’t affecting just you—remember what Vander said? The world is off-balance now. And until we return the ashes, things will worsen for everybody. This is bigger than you and me.”

I swallowed thickly. “That’s true, but I if I hadn’t killed Seluna—”

“If you hadn’t killed Seluna, we’d probably all be stone statues in her gallery.” His large palm came up to cradle my cheek, the warmth of his touch making me lean into him instantly. “The only reason I’m alive is because of you.”

The way he looked at me made my breath catch. I rested my hand on his chest, over his pounding heart. “Greyson…” My voice cracked. When he brushed his lips over mine gently, a shiver ran through me, along with a feeling of belonging that truly reminded me what I was doing here. I needed to fight for my life and be okay—if anything, just to live with the people I loved.

“Everybody who’s in this house right now,” Greyson whispered, “came along because they wanted to. They want to help. Everything’s gonna work out. It always does.”

He wrapped his arms around me, and I nestled closer. Sniffling like a dork, I rested my head on his shoulder and muttered, “Should I be sitting here when there’s still so much to be done, though?”

“Of course. You need your strength.” Greyson lifted my chin, locking eyes with me again. “We’re going to get through this together, love. All of this. I believe in you. I always have.”

He was so absolutely beautiful, inside and out, that it hurt to look at him sometimes. The intensity of his words made me feel ten inches taller. I slid my hands up his chest and leaned in to kiss him. It was a soft, tender kiss, as I cherished his warmth and taste and how perfect this felt.

“Thank you for always being there when I need you,” I murmured against his lips.

He tucked my hair behind my ear. “You’re my mate. Of course I’m going to be here. I’ll always be here.”

My eyes watered, and I wiped them with the heels of my palms with a huff. “Look at me sniffling—it’s all your fault for being so sweet.”

“I’ll take the blame,” he teased, lying down next to me and pulling me into his arms. I lay my head on his chest as he stroked my hair and kissed my forehead. I was able to finally relax, close my eyes. The sound of his heartbeat was soothing, calming me like nothing else.

But then, another sound invaded my ears.

*Wait… What the hell?*

The sound of crackling flames made me open my eyes.

I was no longer in the safe house room with Greyson.

I was standing outside one of those beautiful, historic mansions, and I was suddenly certain that this was the vampire-witch’s house. It was larger than I’d imagined it—a seemingly endless structure. There was a widow’s walk at the top, and a tall, broad figure appeared…

*Greyson?*

“Cali, run!” He shouted. “Run, save yourself!”

But I was frozen in place.

And during my moment of hesitation, the entire house went up in flames.

# Episode 3270

**Tabitha**

Adair was being… intense. Being that way was his default mode, and it got even more pronounced after his whispered conversation with Artemis.

I’d heard the others talking—apparently, somehow, Artemis was his niece. It was so weird to think that he was a grown woman’s uncle when he looked like he was maybe twenty-one at most. I reminded myself that Fae aged differently, and that was that.

I shouldn’t be thinking about Adair anyway.

Unfortunately, though, he made that very hard when he sat back down beside me. I’d been stirring my tea with a spoon, but I immediately went rigid, tingles racing up my arm, the moment he came near. I folded my arms, running my hands up and down them, tracing the goosebumps and feeling ridiculous at my involuntary reaction.

I glanced at him—he stared at the table, silent and brooding and, of course, full of tension. But so what? He was just a Fae. A man. A so-very-handsome man that made my whole body feel cold and hot at the same time.

A man who left me.

He went back home and left me behind, and I wanted to shake him and shout, *You’re not allowed to sit next to me after leaving me!*

But then he came back and saved me. He kissed me in that cave and pulled me out of that foggy, terrifying hallucination. My heart hammering, I lifted the back of my hand to my lips, recalling how disorienting it had been to wake up in that cold, dark place. I’d been afraid, but the moment I saw Adair, it felt like I had an anchor to hold onto.

Despite everything, I felt *safe* with him.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I reminded myself that whatever feelings I had for Adair needed to be over. He left before, and he was going to leave again. I couldn’t trust him, and I could never, *ever* allow myself to fall in—

*No*.

I pushed back the chair and got to my feet abruptly, my ears ringing. He immediately stood up as well, the full force of his gaze landing on me as he asked, “Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

“I’m fine,” I told him. My tone was sharp, and he flinched a little, but did I care? Absolutely not. “I’m going to find a phone and call my sister.”

I headed to the door when Rishika appeared out of nowhere. I almost slammed into her, blurting, “Sorry!” I felt so awkward around these new wolves and Fae. I knew that they had helped save me, and I had thanked them for it, but I wasn’t really in the trusting mood after being kidnapped by witches.

“You good?” Rishika asked. “You look pale still.”

“It’s fine,” I said. She was nice. “I was actually looking for you—do you have a way of contacting my sister?”

Rishika nodded vividly. “Of course! The signal is bad for a video chat in here, but I can definitely make a phone call to the pack house.” She pulled out her cell and dialed. Someone picked up after the second ring. “Jay, hey! How are you guys?”

While Rishika made small talk with a guy named Jay, I crossed my arms over my chest and fought not to tap my foot impatiently. At least Adair was nowhere to be seen, so I had one less thing making me feel like I could snap at any minute.

Eventually, Rishika said, “Hey, can you put Dani on the phone?”

I held my breath at the mention of my sister’s name. Up until this moment, there was a part of me that still doubted that Dani was actually safe. I’d started to lose hope after the lead on Silas went completely cold. I had been searching for her for so long.

When I took the phone from Rishika, my hands were shaking. Closing my eyes tight, I choked out, “Dani?”

The relief I felt was enough to bring tears to my eyes when my sister’s voice echoed at the other end of the line. “Tabitha? They found you!”

Dani.

Dani was alive beyond all measure of a doubt.

Dani was okay, and she was talking to me, and I would see her soon.

I would finally, *finally* see her soon.

I broke into sobs.

Rishika shushed me and said, “It’s gonna be okay,” and gently led me to a chair.

Still shaking and wiping my eyes, I rasped into the phone, “How are you? Are you safe?”

“I-I am,” Dani replied through her own tears and broken breaths. “Are you okay?”

I used the tissue Rishika gave me and replied, “I’ve been searching for you. I thought you were captured—”

“I was captured by Silas’s lieutenant,” Dani replied shakily, “but I escaped and found safety with the Redwood wolf pack. They’re good people, Tabby.”

A new wave of tears hit me. I didn’t resist. My sobs felt like relief, like this huge pressure had been lifted off my chest, and I could finally breathe. I could fully live again knowing that the person that I loved the most in this entire world was okay.

“Have you been eating? Sleeping? Drinking water? You better be drinking water!” I sounded like an obnoxious big sister, but I couldn’t help it. Dani’s broken laugh said she’d missed my nonsense.

“I can’t wait to see you—I’m gonna fly out there immediately!”

“Don’t,” I said right away, shaking my head as if she could see me. “There are still dangerous witches here. I’ll come to you when this is all over.”

Dani’s voice sharpened. “But that means you’re in danger as well!”

“Yes, but I’m at a safe house right now. Please stay put, and I’ll come to you.”

Dani sighed heavily. “Fine.”

“I missed you so much,” I whispered.

“Me too,” she replied. “Are you still crying?”

“Of course I’m still crying!” I scoffed. She laughed once more, but it sounded broken.

The phone beeped with low battery, and I hated the idea of hanging up. With a deep sigh, I said, “I gotta go, okay? I’ll call you again tomorrow.”

“Sounds great,” she muttered. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” I hugged the phone to my chest after hanging up. When I looked around, Rishika was gone. She’d probably wanted to give me some privacy.

Unlike Adair, who lingered in the corner.

The *nerve* of him.

“Were you eavesdropping on me?” I asked, scowling.

“No,” he rushed to say, “I literally just got here and didn’t want to interrupt as you said goodbye.”

I stood up in a huff. “Whatever. I don’t even care what you heard. There’s nothing wrong with me checking in on my sister!”

For someone so usually put together, Adair looked nervous suddenly. “I never said there was.”

His expression, how obscenely *human* it looked, aggravated me for some reason. With a groan, I spun around to storm out to the hallway and toward the bedroom that had been assigned to me. I walked in and reached for the door, ready to slam it closed.

Adair didn’t let me.

Lightning fast, he pushed the door open and grabbed my arm to spin me around. His touch scorched me, just the tiniest flash of contact, but enough to make my body react like I’d been electrocuted.

The *nerve* of him.

“Are you serious?” I yanked myself free, seething as I gestured at the door that this Fae prince had just shoved open like a freaking barbarian. “You did *not* just do that, Adair!”

“You shouldn’t be alone right now,” he said sharply.

“I’m fine!” I snapped. “So I was in a magical coma for a few days, so what? I ate food like Rishika insisted. I slept for half the day. What else do you want to make me do? Meditate over my freaking feelings?”

His voice was low and shaky. “No—what I’m saying is that you shouldn’t be alone because the witches could target you again.”

I let out a scoff, pointing at him. “*You* want to be my bodyguard? That’s rich. How does someone become a bodyguard when they leave whenever they feel like it?”

Adair’s vibrant blue eyes narrowed. My elbow still burned where he’d touched me, and I was shaking so hard it felt like I was about to vibrate out of my skin. In a gruff whisper, he said, “You *know* I had to go back to the Dark Fae court. They were hunting me down.”

*They were hunting me down.*

That was a reasonable explanation. I couldn’t see reason right now, though. I didn’t even know I meant to ask the question until my eyes burned with unshed tears, and I shouted the words in his face.

“Then why are you back? And why didn’t you tell us where you were?” I pointed at my chest. “Do you know how it felt when we heard that you were in the human world and possibly in trouble?”

He took a step closer when I took a step backward. “Is that why you were in New Orleans? To find me?”

I threw my hands in the air in frustration. “Oh my god, why else would we come to a dangerous witch central?”

He stopped moving and looked absolutely *stunned*. “Tabitha, I would never have asked you to come here for me.”

I felt like a fool for my outburst. What was I doing—just standing there vomiting feelings all over him? I turned away immediately, wiping at my eyes. I fought to keep my voice even. “We were just checking on you on our way through. It’s not a big deal.”

The quiet was unnerving.

I heard Adair’s light steps, and then—

His hands were on my shoulders.

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself from shuddering.

Gently, he turned me to face him. His hands stayed on my arms, squeezing lightly. The contact shot through me like a blaze, and the thought of him taking his hands off me right now made me ache.

“It kills me to think you were in danger because of me,” he whispered.

I didn’t dare look at him right now. “I’m okay.”

He took another step, so close now that I could smell him, the heat of his body overwhelming. “Tabitha, look at me…”

When our eyes locked, his face was so close that I could see every detail of his irises.

“I was going crazy when I couldn’t find you.” His voice sounded scratchy, raw. I couldn’t breathe with him so close, couldn’t move, and yet—

And yet, when he leaned closer, his lips an inch away from mine, self-preservation pushed through his effect on me. It violently took over.

Against his mouth, I whispered, “Does that mean you’re going to stay this time?”

# Episode 3271

**Xavier**

“You need to chill,” I told Gabe, gripping his shoulder tight. “Everybody is pumped up on adrenaline from the skeleton fighting, but they’re also exhausted. We need time to rest.”

Gabe huffed, and shoving my hand away, he plopped back into his and Mikah’s bed. “The wait is killing me!”

Mikah shook his head at his mate and said, “You *are* tired, though. You can’t deny that.”

Cali had looked tired as well. The thought of her being worn and miserable made my stomach throb.

“If this vampire-witch is half as dangerous as some of the other supernaturals we’ve encountered, we will all need to be at one hundred percent,” I pointed out to Gabe.

He crossed his arms over his chest and grumbled something to Mikah. Even though my friend was being a stubborn dick about this, I knew he meant well and wanted to help. Deep down, I felt guilty about roping so many people into this bullshit when the vampire-witch was after me before anyone else.

*I* was the problem here.

I wished that I could convince Cali to stay at the safe house where she could stay away from any danger. But I knew that would be a lost cause. Cali would always want to be part of a mission, and now that the magic had returned to New Orleans, she would have the full force of her magic to use in a fight. She had done a good job so far, though.

“… *Fuck*, dude, fine!” Gabe sat up, glaring up at Mikah. “I won’t run off on my own. I promise. Happy now?”

“Very,” Mikah deadpanned.

Gabe huffed again and stood up. “Whatever, I’ll go check on Tabby.”

“What’s the deal with her and Adair?” I asked.

Gabe paused by the door, turning to face me with a smirk. “Xavier, *tsk*. I didn’t peg you for the gossipy type, dude.”

I rolled my eyes. “I just need to know what’s going on under my roof. Scary fairy dude comes over and goes nuts over finding the girl you two call your friend. Feels like there’s more than meets the eye there.”

Mikah snorted. “You’re sharper than you look, wolf.”

I ignored Mikah’s dig as Gabe said, “Full disclosure? There was always something between Adair and Tabitha. We saw it back in Arizona. He was taken away, though. And since then, Tabitha has tried not to mention him, but how she feels about him is obvious.”

Huh. Well, at least that explained how determined Adair was to rescue Tabitha.

“How is she feeling now that he’s back?” I asked.

Gabe rubbed his hands together. “That’s exactly what I’m about to go find out.”

He made a move to march out, but I grabbed him by the arm. “Go straight to Tabitha’s room. No detours outside that could get us in trouble. The plan is to sit tight until we all go, so don’t do anything stupid.”

Gabe gave me a shit-eating grin. “Aww, if anyone’s going to do something stupid, it’s you, buddy.”

I scoffed at his bullshit, taking a half-hearted swing at him. He laughed and dodged it, when—

Cali’s scream broke the calm.

“That was Cali. Something’s going on.” I shoved Gabe out of the way and ran down the hall. Gabe’s running footsteps followed as he shouted at me, “Which room is Cali’s?”

“Use your fucking nose!” I snapped, both at myself and Gabe. The place was so big that it took a moment, but as I ran down the hall, I was instantly hooked on it, dragged in her direction.

Bursting into the room, I found her on the bed. In Greyson’s arms.

“What the fuck just happened?” I rasped. “Why did she scream?”

“Another hallucination,” Greyson replied. He kept his voice quiet. Cali whimpered in his embrace, her eyes squeezed shut as she clung to him. My chest burned at the sight. I made sure to lower the volume of my voice to mimic Greyson’s. The last thing Cali needed right now was more screaming.

“Baby,” I whispered after sitting down beside her. “Baby, what did you see?”

Cali faced me, reaching for my hand. I held it tight, helping her sit up. She looked so pale and broken. I hated every second of this. “Now that magic is restored,” she muttered, “I think the effects of the Seluna mark are turned back on…” Her eyes flickered behind me, to Gabe. “I mean, I’m so glad we saved Tabitha, but I’m scared that Seluna’s mark got repressed for too long, and now it’s back to—”

“Seluna’s hold on you is only temporary,” I said gruffly. I couldn’t bear to hear her say anything else. Especially knowing that I was the reason she was hurting right now—that the vampire-witch was targeting me, *and* Cali was just collateral.

My mate was hurting because of me, and I felt like a piece of shit.

“Let me talk to her alone,” I told Greyson.

My brother’s eyes narrowed, his grip around Cali tightening. He stood up, and we both stood by the door. “Give me one good reason why I should leave right now.”

“Don’t you fucking see?” I snapped, trying to keep my voice down so Cali wouldn’t hear. “The ashes were stolen because of me—Cali’s still hurting because of my fucked-up past, and I need a moment alone with her. Are you gonna say no to that?”

Greyson’s hesitation eased. With a curt nod, he walked back over to Cali, gave her a kiss on the forehead, muttered something in her ear, then gently let her go. “Let’s go,” he mumbled to Mikah and Gabe, who had been hovering by the entrance. All three of them vanished down the hall.

The moment we were alone, I stared at my mate.

Seeing how scared and tired she looked was a punch to the gut.

“What can I get you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I’m fine. I’m sorry I screamed. It was more out of frustration than fear. I knew it was a hallucination, and I was fighting it tooth and nail. I’m just sick of it—sick of Seluna or whatever it is that’s preying on me.”

“I know this has been hard on you.” I pulled her into my arms, and she hugged me tight. Not even her proximity and scent could soothe me right now, though. It hurt that I couldn’t shield her from all this. Part of me wished Greyson had agreed to go when Gabe wanted to. The sooner we confronted this vampire-witch, the sooner Cali’s torment would end. But I couldn’t let my emotions compromise our plan.

For Cali’s sake, I had to fix this.

I held her for a long moment until her breathing steadied. Until mine did too.

In the silence, we embraced.

And if I felt broken at the feel of her pain, nobody was allowed to know.

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“Do you want to sleep before we go?” I asked her after a short while.

“I don’t think it’ll do any good. I’m too amped up and worried that if I try to sleep, I’ll be hit with another hallucination.”

“What about a snack?” I asked. “Do you want one?”

She smiled a little. “That might be the thing.”

A moment later, Cali and I entered the kitchen. We found Artemis and Rishika arguing over the stove, the smell of hot chocolate in the air.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’re trying to replicate Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha,” Rishika said moodily.

“And it’s not working,” Artemis said, crossing her arms over her chest.

It was rare to see Rishika and Artemis at odds. Perhaps this had something to do with Adair? It couldn’t be just because of a recipe.

“I can help,” Cali piped up. “I’m pretty familiar with Mrs. Smith’s drink. I’ve had quite a few of them. I can at least try.”

The three girls chattered, and I noticed that the color returned to Cali’s cheeks as she pulled out the ingredients. I was glad this had proved to be a much-needed distraction for my mate.

“I think it’s cinnamon,” Cali was saying to the couple as Greyson appeared by the door. He nodded for me to follow.

The moment I was out in the hallway, he whispered, “I don’t think there’s any turning back now, Xavier. Cali’s hallucinations are only going to get worse. If we don’t get those ashes soon…”

My jaw clenched. “I’m well aware of how serious things have become, Greyson.”

“We need more of a plan,” my brother said in a hushed tone. “Just because we restored magic and rescued Tabitha doesn’t mean we’ll have similar success with the vampire-witch. We don’t know enough about her, or—”

“Greyson, Xavier!” Clementine’s loud voice interrupted Greyson. She rushed over to us, her eyes wide.

“What’s going on?” Greyson asked.

“I did some research into the vampire-witch’s house and found something important.” She waved us over to another room—a small, very dusty library.

When I sneezed, Greyson shot me a dirty look.

“What?” I huffed. “It’s dusty. So sue me.”

Ignoring the interaction, Clementine breezed through. “I was doing some online research into the vampire-witch’s location when I noticed these.” She pointed to a stack of old historical books on a table and pointed at one that was opened to a page in the middle. “Look at this!”

It was a picture of a grand-looking mansion.

My blood ran cold when I read the heading.

*The Duquette family house.*

# Episode 3272

Artemis and Rishika watched as I took a sip of the mocha. Their investment in this would be ridiculous if it weren’t entirely justified. It was shameful to fuck with the greatness that was Mrs. Smith’s creation, but I hadn’t been able to resist.

“It’s not bad,” I told them.

“I agree,” Rishika said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Hot chocolate is always welcome, anyway.”

“It falls short of Mrs. Smith’s mocha, obviously, but we did all we could with the ingredients on hand,” I said.

“Indeed,” Artemis said after taking a sip from her own mug. “The safe house pantry didn’t have any white chocolate syrup, so this was the best we could do.”

“We should make a grocery list for next time,” I said, “and definitely add some emergency syrup bottles in there.”

“Hopefully there won’t be a next time,” Rishika noted.

“Hah, you’re right about that,” I said with a cringe. “Right, guys?” I turned around to face Greyson and Xavier, ready to pour some hot chocolate for them as well. When I realized that they were no longer hovering in the hallway, I frowned.

“Where did they go?” I asked.

“The boys stepped out with Clementine,” Rishika replied.

“Interesting,” I muttered under my breath. “*Very* interesting.”

I gulped down the rest of my hot chocolate—I definitely needed the sugar boost—and then grabbed two mugs for Greyson and Xavier. I heard whispers coming from down the hallway and found the two men and Clementine in a small room that looked like a library. They were gathered around a table of books and looked deep in conversation.

“I brought you some hot chocolate,” I announced. “Would you like some, Clementine?”

The witch gave me a distracted shake of her head, pointing at page in a book and muttering something to Xavier. “What’s happening?” I asked Greyson in a whisper, offering him his mug of hot chocolate.

He took it and thanked me with a kiss on the cheek. I turned to Xavier, then, but when he took the cup from my hands, he barely met my gaze. His brows were furrowed, lips pursued, and his jaw set. Something had obviously shaken him, and my stomach dropped.

*Oh no!* I thought. *What did I miss? I literally left these two alone for five minutes!*

“Seriously,” I said awkwardly, “what’s going on right now?”

“Do you wanna explain to Cali, Xavier?” Greyson said.

I gulped, growing anxious as Xavier took a deep breath. He still hadn’t looked at me, which was far from good news. *Oh my god*, I wanted to say, *just spit it out!*

“It’s about this,” he finally said, picking up a book. He pointed to a picture of a historic-looking house. Very fancy. “This is the mansion where the vampire-witch is staying.”

I looked at the page for a moment, and a sharp pang hit the back of my head.

*Fuck.*

This was the house from my hallucination. The one where Greyson was trapped in the widow’s walk when it burst into flames. I ignored the way my eyes felt scratchy at the memory. Greyson was here—alive and well, looking between Xavier and me with an expression that said he was here to help both of us.

*Breathe, Cali. None of it was real.*

*Except apparently some part of it is.*

“Do you remember me talking about the Duquettes?” Xavier asked.

“Of course,” I mumbled. “How could I forget something so awful?”

Xavier pointed to the header, and I gasped. “This is their house?”

“It belongs to the family,” Xavier said gruffly. “Clementine just found it.”

The witch nodded, adding, “The Duquette family has owned the estate for several generations.”

Xavier slammed the book shut hard enough that I jumped. “The Duquette family is using a vampire who’s also a witch to get back at me.” He finally met my eyes. His gaze felt like a physical weight on me, because Xavier…

Xavier, my mate, one of the most powerful men I’d ever met, looked *devastated*.

“It’s all my fault,” he rasped.

“Xavier, no,” I said sharply, gripping his hand in mine. “It’s *not*!”

“Don’t go there, brother,” Greyson said gravely. “We all have things in our past that we regret or wish didn’t happen, but it doesn’t change anything.”

Xavier shook his head, trying to push my hand away, but I just held him tighter. “I mean it, Xavier. I won’t let you blame yourself.”

“Right now, we need to keep our eyes on the ashes,” Greyson said. “That’s what we need. Nothing else matters.”

Xavier yanked his hand away from my grip as if he felt he didn’t deserve the comfort. Pointing at his brother, he scoffed, “That’s easy for you to say, Greyson. It’s clear as fucking day that the Duquette family holds a grudge and has dragged all of you into it right along with me!”

Xavier and I had been through a lot. I’d seen him furious, I’d seen him sad, I’d seen him bitter. But this emotion on his face was brand new, and it was the most jarring of all.

*Guilt*.

Xavier, my brave, strong mate, felt so guilty over what was happening right now that he looked sick.

“No matter how you spin it, Greyson, whatever bullshit diplomacy you may employ, this is still *my* fucking fault,” Xavier said between gritted teeth, slamming his fist on his chest.

I gasped. I was NOT going to let him do this to himself.

“What about me?” My voice was loud, vibrating through the room.

When Xavier looked at me, he was shaking. “What are you—”

“You’ve all been telling me not to blame myself for Seluna’s death,” I said. “It’s time for you to take your own advice. What happened when you were a mercenary wasn’t something you intended. And even if the Duquettes blame you, that *still* doesn’t mean it’s your fault.”

Xavier fell silent. It seemed like he accepted this train of thought. At least for now. His chest was still heaving as he stared at me, as if he fought to figure something out. When he spoke again, his tone was lower. More even, but still thunderous.

“At least now I understand the connection,” he muttered, “the common thread. The Duquettes are taking out their thirst for vengeance on me by hiring the vampire-witch to steal the ashes and hurt *you*, Cali.” His eyes flashed with anger. “This time, when a Duquette is killed, it will be intentional.”

“I get your anger, but I hope it won’t come down to another death.” I took Xavier’s hand in mine. This time, he didn’t pull away. In a whisper, I asked, “Haven’t enough lives been lost, Xavier? All we need are the ashes back.”

“I can’t make any promises,” Xavier said, grabbing my hand with both of his.

I groaned. “Xavier! Stop being so—”

“Dramatic?” Clementine offered casually.

Xavier glared at her. “I’m not fucking—”

“Okay, stop!” Greyson said loudly. “Finding out who the house belongs to doesn’t change our plan. We will go at ten as Clementine suggested.”

“What did you do to the Duquettes?” Clementine asked Xavier. Her dark eyes were piercing. Xavier’s silence was heavy.

*I am not going to let him go down the guilt road again*, I thought and pushed through.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, answering for him. “It’s in the past.”

Clementine dragged her sharp gaze from Xavier and faced me. “I’m not so sure, Cali. New Orleans is steeped in its past. You can’t separate it from the present.”

Greyson and Xavier exchanged a loaded look that made my stomach twitch. Greyson shook his head and said, “I’m calling a meeting. Right now.”

Mikah, Gabriel, Tabitha, Adair, Rishika, and Artemis joined us in the library a moment later. The air in the room was filled with tension. I didn’t leave Xavier’s side. As people started asking questions, I whispered in Xavier’s ear, “You might not be able to separate history from the present, but it doesn't mean you have to be stuck in it either.”

Xavier’s jaw clenched, but he nodded at my words and kept my hand in his.

I could breathe more evenly.

“Thank you, everyone,” Greyson said loudly, looking around the room. “I wanted to make sure that everybody understands what they’re up against. We don’t know much about this vampire-witch other than that she’s dangerous.”

“*Very* dangerous,” Clementine added.

“As much as we could use everyone’s help, you’ve fulfilled your part of the deal, Clementine,” Greyson told the witch. “You may go if you wish.” His eyes flickered to the door. “Gabriel, Mikah, you don't need to be part of this either.”

Gabriel actually laughed at that. “There’s no way I’m going anywhere.” He pointed at Xavier. “That’s my buddy over there. We’ve been through worse.”

A wave of gratitude overwhelmed me at Gabriel’s words. He was always so sweet.

“Besides, I’ve never decapitated a vampire-witch before,” he added. “Sounds fun.”

I choked on nothing.

“Tracking and catching monsters is one of my specialties, so I’m not going anywhere either,” Mikah said with a shrug. “Plus, I’m not going to let Gabe go without supervision.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “*Please.*” But he still wrapped his arm around Mikah’s shoulders.

At the same time, Rishika entwined her arm with Artemis’s and spoke. “Obviously we’re not going anywhere.”

*Aww, look at them! They’re all so amazing!*

And then, Tabitha cleared her throat.

“Alpha,” she told Greyson officially, “you and your pack saved me, and my sister has been staying at your home. I owe you, and I want to try and use my magic to help you.”

My heart swelled at her calm, weighted words. The room was full of people who had our backs. I looked up at Xavier, squeezing his hand encouragingly while Tabitha continued. “I know this won’t be easy, but it will be best for all of us if we stick together.”

She turned to Adair suddenly. The serious Fae hadn’t uttered a word so far.

“What about you, Adair?” Tabitha asked, pinning him with her gaze. “Since you’re allegedly staying, are you going to help?”

# Episode 3273

Literally everybody in the room stared at the Dark Fae. Allegedly staying? What did that mean? That he was actually going to stay or that he was leaving?

I glanced at my sister. *What is Artemis thinking? I bet she wouldn’t want Adair to leave…*

But of course, Adair didn’t seem like the type who could be told what to do. He looked mildly bored yet mildly annoyed all the time. Though when he met Tabitha’s gaze, all that vanished. Intensity was the only thing that remained, and once more, I was 100% certain there was something going on here.

*If I didn’t have other, life-or-death things to worry about right now, I’d definitely be snooping around Tabitha and Adair’s backstory.*

“Normally,” Adair said, his gaze locked with Tabitha’s, “I would never get involved in such a thing. But since Tabitha is going, I will join your mission. Just this once.”

So he *was* staying. But for Tabitha, not for Artemis.

Tabitha didn’t utter a word. Her face was unreadable, and when I turned to face Artemis, her expression was equally blank. Was my sister relieved that Adair would stick around? Or worried about his link with Tabitha and him leaving again? I had no idea what Artemis was thinking—was I the only person around here whose face was an open book?!

“Thank you all,” Greyson said, his voice pulling me out of my thoughts. “With everybody helping, I’m certain we’ll stand a much better chance of defeating the vampire-witch.”

Gabriel nodded. “So, are we leaving right now, or should I eat a snack first and then—”

“We’re still leaving at ten,” Greyson cut Gabriel off. “That hasn’t changed.”

Gabriel frowned. Mikah patted his shoulder. “That means you can go eat your snack in peace.”

“Peace is for the weak,” Gabriel grumbled while Greyson said, “*Anyway*, Mikah—I want to talk with you. Do you have any experience fighting someone like a vampire-witch or any other kind of hybrid?”

As the conversations all around me started up again, I turned to Xavier. “We’ll be okay,” I whispered. He nodded with a deep breath. Thankfully when I hugged him, he hugged me back. At least he seemed calmer.

Feeling better about everything, I made a beeline to Artemis, who was in the corner of the room. Looking super serious, Rishika was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest. Artemis was looking through a random dusty book.

“What are you reading?” I asked.

Artemis raised the book to show me the cover. “*Types of Knives and How to Use Them*,” I read the title out loud. “Wholesome, huh?”

Rishika snorted. Artemis shrugged. Cutting to the chase, I whispered, “How’re things with you?”

Artemis shot a look at Adair. He was leaving the room with Tabitha just then.

“Gotta talk with Greyson. Catch up with you two later,” Rishika said, walking off. I wondered if she’d sensed the conversation would lead to Adair, and she didn’t want to be a part of it for some reason. Either way, Artemis didn’t look happy at all at the moment.

“I hope you’re not going to start asking questions about how I feel, or anything like that right now,” Artemis deadpanned in a low voice. “I have to stay focused on the mission.”

I stared at my sister. “Artemis, you can’t ignore this forever… at least not when I’m around. You know how I am.”

She huffed. “I’m not—”

“No, no,” I said in a sing-song voice, wagging a finger in her face. “I know that meeting Adair after all this has had an effect on you, and it’s better to talk about it than to keep it inside. I’m just saying.”

“Especially if we’re all gonna die tonight, right?” Artemis said flatly.

I gasped, smacking her shoulder. “Artemis!”

She huffed. “What?”

“Just talk to me about your feelings, dammit!” I demanded.

She glared before letting out a defeated sigh. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t drop this.”

I pressed my lips together. “Yes, you should’ve. So,” I said, “did something happen?”

Artemis looked uncomfortable. “Adair and I have reached an understanding. After he helps us, I’ll probably never see him again.”

I gaped in shock. “What? Why?”

Artemis didn’t meet my gaze. Her face was blank, and her voice was low but even. “He made it clear he doesn't want anything to do with me.”

*Dammit, Adair! What the hell is wrong with you? Why won’t you stick around?* I thought, both irritated and so sad for Artemis. I ached for her—for the little girl she’d been and all the years she’d spent alone with no family.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, pulling her into a tight hug.

Artemis didn’t say anything, but she didn’t push me away either.

“I guess…” I gulped. “Maybe he’ll change his mind once he gets a chance to know you.”

“That’s what Rishika said,” Artemis told me with a small smile.

It didn’t reach her eyes.

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A few hours later, we all gathered outside the safe house. I eyed everybody in our company, pretty amazed and proud of it. Four werewolves, a vampire, and three Fae, along with Tabitha. I felt a huge boost of confidence, my heart pounding with excitement instead of dread for once. We didn’t know what to expect from the vampire-witch, but there was also no way she would be prepared for a team like ours.

*We might just get out of this in one piece and victorious, right? RIGHT?*

“… don’t forget, everybody,” Greyson was saying, “you have to be smart. Don’t take unnecessary risks…” He shot a look at Gabriel, who pointed at his chest like, *Who? Me?* “And remember that we are a team, so we should act like one. No need for heroes.” Greyson shot a look at Xavier this time, who remained serious.

At least Xavier didn’t deny he had the tendency to run amok on occasion. That was growth, people!

“If we want the ashes,” Greyson continued, “we will have to capture the vampire-witch. Alive.” That one went to Xavier as well, and when he met Greyson’s gaze, Xavier simply nodded. Xavier knew what was at stake here, and I trusted both him and Greyson with my life. He’d already promised me he’d do anything to retrieve those ashes, even keeping a witch around, and I could only believe him.

“Good luck to you all,” Clementine called as we piled into the cars. She seemed to mean the words. I thanked the witch one last time and waved through the window as we drove away.

Within minutes, we were out of the neighborhood. Xavier was sitting next to me, squeezing my hand. He looked so far away, so focused as he stared outside that I doubted he even realized he was holding me.

For the longest time, there was quiet in the car.

Until, after what felt like so long, Greyson spoke up.

“Check out the houses on your right,” he said. “They’re getting bigger and fancier.”

I gulped, staring through the window. It was dark, and all I could make out were the dark shadows of the tall houses, some with lights on. I realized that Greyson could probably see much more clearly right now.

*Remember when I wanted to be turned into a werewolf?*

Hah, the last time I thought of that felt like forever ago. The notion hadn’t entirely left me, though. It was such an enticing idea to be able to see, smell, and hear things that only werewolves could. It was definitely still something to think about, but not now.

*Not now…*

Now, we turned a corner, and the car slowed down as a large house came into view.

Xavier’s voice was hoarse. “That’s it. The house hasn’t changed since that picture in the book was taken over a hundred years ago.”

Xavier was right. It was as if the estate had been frozen in time, a massive structure of matter that felt like a ghost. The thought made my shoulder ache, and a shudder ran through me. Was that the Seluna handprint, or just a bruise from the day’s battles?

Could be either.

“So,” Xavier spoke up in the silence of the car, “what’s the plan? Do we knock and say, ‘Excuse me, we’d like our ashes back’?” His tone was sarcastic. It made me wince, even if I knew that his anger was directed at the vampire-witch instead of Greyson.

The thing that sometimes worried me about Xavier was that he was like this, really.

When he got angry, it felt like it would never leave.

*Stop worrying, Cali*, I told myself. *Stop. Worrying!*

“I wish it were that easy,” Greyson said to Xavier. “Clementine said that trying to break in would be a waste of time. So after knocking, we should prepare for anything.”

Xavier didn’t say a word.

I held his hand tighter, wondering if there would be more of those skeleton creatures in our future. My stomach dropped at the thought of those cold, bony hands on me. I definitely did not want to feel that ever again.

“Here we go,” Greyson said after pulling to a stop a few hundred feet past the house. The headlights from the car with the others appeared behind us. Greyson met my gaze in the rearview mirror. “I’m going to talk to them, and then we’ll approach the house.”

I nodded, thankful that he walked us through every step of the way. Once we were outside the car, both Greyson and Xavier came on either side of me, scanning the area. Gabriel and Mikah climbed out of their car just then, with Gabriel letting out a huff.

“Can you just stop fucking poking me?” Gabriel told Mikah. “It’s annoying.”

Mikah frowned. “I’m not poking anyone—what are you talking about?”

“You two better leave the lovers spats for later,” Xavier said sharply. “We don’t need this right now, it’s—”

“Fuck’s sake, you just did it again!” Gabriel snapped, jumping away from Mikah.

Xavier glared at the shocked vampire, who patted himself down. “Gabriel, I didn’t do anything. I swear, I—” Mikah’s mouth snapped shut when he looked down. His brows furrowed. Under his breath, he said, “What the *hell*?”

And then, he reached into his pocket and revealed a skeleton finger twitching in his hand.

# Episode 3274

**Greyson**

Mikah recoiled and dropped the twitching finger bone on the ground. “Fuck!”

The thing tried to crawl away, but Xavier smashed his foot on it.

I couldn’t fucking believe this was happening.

“Why the actual hell did you bring that with you here?” I asked Mikah with a glower.

The vampire glared back, eyes flashing. “It was unintentional, Greyson.”

I fought to keep my cool. “How did it get in your jacket, then?”

“It must’ve fallen into my pocket during the fight,” Mikah said.

My voice was low and drowning with sarcasm. “And then it just decided to come to life the second we arrived near the vampire-witch’s mansion?”

“That’s it,” Cali spoke up, her eyes wide with realization. “The bone is probably reacting to whatever magic the vampire-witch has set around this area. That’s why it came to life? Or the tomb’s magic is still residually on it.”

I paused, breathing through my nose slowly, processing. Mikah gave me a *You failed, but at least* she’s *got some brain cells left!* kind of look, nodding toward Cali. Mikah was a fucking smartass, but I loved that for Cali.

“That’s a great theory,” I said, something in me easing at the realization. “More possible than anything else.”

Cali squeezed my arm. “Thank you, but, uh, what are we supposed to do with it?” She eyed the thing as it fought to crawl out from beneath Xavier’s foot.

My brother gritted his teeth together. “I know exactly what to do,” he said, grinding his heel into the ground and crushing the bone.

Utter silence all around. Xavier had always had a thing for the dramatic.

Unfortunately, though, when he lifted his foot, the bone continued to twitch.

Fucking hell.

“I’m not going to stand in the middle of the road and play ‘smash the finger’ with that thing. One tiny skeleton bone can’t harm us, so forget about it,” I said impatiently. Gabriel, Mikah, and Xavier agreed. Cali squinted at the finger and didn’t say anything, but I was pretty sure she’d tell me if she had something else in mind.

After that was settled, I gestured for the whole group to come together. We had to get back on track. No distractions.

“Keep your eyes open,” I said once we were all in a circle. “There’s no telling what the vampire-witch is fully capable of.”

There were nods all around. As we all started toward the looming house, I instinctively moved closer to Cali—only to see that Xavier was already there, an arm protectively around her. I’d say that was overkill on his part, but—despite him being fucking annoying—the idea of Xavier working as some sort of body shield for Cali was fine by me.

“Oh god!” Tabitha’s quiet voice echoed in the silent street, cutting off my thoughts. When I turned to face her, she was pointing at the asphalt.

The finger had followed us, and it was glowing.

“Fuck this shit!” Gabriel growled, kicking the thing and sending it flying onto the street.

I could swear I heard it wheeze like a goddamn dying cockroach.

So that was a pleasant visual.

Either way, the bone was still glowing.

“What does that mean, Greyson?” Cali asked, looking up at me. “Greyson—it’s glowing, why is it glowing? That looks questionable to me, Greyson!”

Fucking hell, this was the last thing I wanted to worry about right now. But Cali had just said my name like thirteen times, and she was right.

“One of us could stay and keep an eye on it,” I said, gazing around the group before my eyes stopped on Adair. I had no fucking idea about this guy—other than the fact that he was related to Artemis. Seeing as Artemis could be nice but also deadly, that could be a mixed bag. Gabriel had said we could trust him, but the jury was still out for me.

“Well?” I said.

Adair’s expression was so unimpressed it put Mikah’s to shame. And that said a lot. “You want *me* to babysit the skeleton remains?” he asked haughtily. “What am I? The help?”

“He *is* a prince, sort of,” Mikah offered awkwardly.

“Be nice, buddy,” Gabriel said with a smirk and a pat on Adair’s shoulder.

Adair turned to Tabitha. She arched an eyebrow. The witch was very short, actually, but she *felt* very tall. If that made sense.

Adair broke eye contact with her, let out a breath, and took position.

“Everyone, stand back.” He took two steps forward himself, slammed his wrists together, and summoned an energy whip, unfurling it at the bone and smashing it into pieces.

Okay. I’d give the guy that. That was impressive.

“Thank you,” I told Adair.

We all continued walking toward the house silently. As we neared the front, I noted that the house was well maintained. Which meant that someone must be living here consistently—whether that someone was the vampire-witch, I couldn’t know.

There was no gate to guard the house.

A stone path led past a flower garden, and we all followed it. Mikah paused to look at the plants, muttering, “This is wolfsbane.”

“That’s not a good sign,” Gabriel joked wryly. “Hey, maybe werewolves should stay back! Save themselves!”

Xavier huffed and smacked his friend. I could feel his and Gabriel’s nervous energy—*everybody’s* nervous energy. I eyed Cali while she walked right next to me. I wished to all hell that she didn’t have to be part of this. I wished that I could just be with her somewhere safe, stay with her and kiss her and laugh with her.

None of that could ever happen until this was over.

I got to the front of the house finally, ready to climb the porch stairs, when—

*CRACK!*

The sound was loud, jarring in the quiet. We all turned toward the street at once.

The fragments of the finger bone were reassembling again, even after being struck with Adair’s magic. What the fuck?

“I’m gonna run that thing over with the fucking car,” Xavier hissed, about to march toward it when Rishika grabbed him by the arm.

“Wait!” she said. “Look!”

The finger stretched a few times and then rose on its knuckle.

Cali gasped. “It’s pointing at us!”

I stepped in front of Cali in a protective stance as I realized that she was right.

The finger seemed to be counting us, pointing to each, one by one.

“Is it *counting*?” Artemis asked. “What the fuck for?”

Gabriel gritted his teeth. “I’ve had enough of this shit! I’m gonna drop kick that thing into the next yard.”

He marched a few feet forward, and I didn’t stop him. Nobody did.

“Motherfucking skeletons,” Gabriel grumbled, glaring at the bone. “This is ridiculous is what it is, I—” He bent down to pick up the finger when suddenly…

*CRACK!*

Another crackling sound, and suddenly a skeleton burst through the street and grabbed Gabriel by the hand, pulling him down beneath the ground.

*What the fuck?*

Before I could speak or do anything, Mikah let out a cry and raced toward Gabriel. Gabriel struggled to break free as he let out a string of obscenities. As for Mikah, the second he got closer, his feet sank into the ground.

It was as if the street had become a pool of quicksand.

“Nobody walk onto the asphalt!” I shouted just as Xavier reached for it—what the fuck was he doing?

“We’ll make a chain!” he shouted, reaching for Mikah as Mikah grabbed Gabriel.

At the same time, more and more skeletons burst through the ground.

“Cali, stay back!” I brought myself in front of my mate and sliced through a skeleton that charged at us. Cali let out a cry of shock. The sound was mixed with Adair’s growl. He attacked with his energy whips two skeletons that had aimed at a stunned Tabitha. All the skeletons shattered into a bunch of bones, but within seconds they reassembled.

This looked like it was gonna be a never-ending battle.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“Greyson!” Xavier’s voice forced me to look back at the street—he’d taken hold of Mikah, who was holding Gabriel. He needed my help, but Cali…

When I checked on my mate, she, Rishika, and Artemis were fighting a group of skeletons. She looked fierce, prepared, and I realized that her magic was probably a far better defense against these things than brutal strength.

I forced myself to prioritize, grabbing Xavier’s arm—he grabbed at Mikah, who then pulled Gabriel free through our combined efforts.

“Holy shit,” Gabriel said. He was panting, looking around wildly. I did the same.

Cali, Rishika, and Artemis were still fighting skeletons, Adair was still protecting Tabitha, and we were surrounded by a sea of these things. How the fuck were we gonna get out of this?

*Fuck*, I should’ve been more careful.

A skeleton came at me, then another, and as I punched through and broke them, I made my way back to Cali. I grabbed one of those things by the throat, slammed it into the ground while Cali blasted another one, and Artemis and Rishika made a wishbone out of another.

All four of us went through the motions again and again, with Mikah, Gabriel, and Xavier fighting all the same. But no matter how quickly we got rid of them, the skeletons reassembled and continued to attack.

“What the hell are we gonna do?” Xavier called.

And then there was another scream.

“Tabitha, no! Stop!” Adair was shouting at the young woman, fighting two skeletons at the same time.

But Tabitha didn’t listen to him.

She stepped before a row of skeletons and called to us over her shoulder. “Everybody, follow me!”

# Episode 3275

*What the fuck is Tabitha doing?!* I screamed inside my head. *She can’t face all those skeletons by herself!*

“Stop this right now!” Adair shouted at her, basically agreeing with me. But Tabitha stood still, her spine straight and fists at her sides as the skeletons moved toward her. When I raised my hands to blast those monsters to protect her, I realized that she was in the direct line of fire.

*Holy crap!*

“They can’t hurt me!” Tabitha called over her shoulder. “Use me as a shield!”

The memory of Tabitha at the graveyard flooded back into my head. The skeletons had fallen when she’d showed up.

“She’s immune to those creatures’ boney magic, remember?” I said to Xavier and Greyson. “But if that’s the case, why the hell aren’t they crumbling to the ground right now like they did at the graveyard?”

Greyson and Xavier looked at me before exchanging an alarmed look.

“Cali’s right. We should stop Tabitha before she hurts herself,” Xavier said, but Greyson shook his head.

“Wait,” he replied. “Let Tabitha do this.”

I stared at Greyson, breathing through my nose, fighting to calm down. His eyes locked with mine, and his certainty helped me calm down.

“Holy fucking shit,” Gabriel rasped in the background as we all stared at Tabitha.

The girl slowly walked forward, putting herself between us and the living skeletons. She moved toward the house, and at her every step, the skeletons backed away. One by one, they seemed to fall before her, disappearing into the ground much the same as they appeared.

The only noise heard right now were the bones rattling before they vanished.

Every single person in the group fell behind Tabitha—Adair, then Greyson and Xavier, Gabriel and Mikah, Artemis, Rishika, and me. We all looked around, just to make sure those creatures didn’t pop up out of nowhere again.

With Tabitha in the lead, step by step, we reached the porch.

I’d been holding my breath the entire time.

I looked back, and there were no more bones. The dark, quiet street looked like any other. My heart pounded so hard that I felt it in my throat, my eyes burning like I’d forgotten to blink. The scenery looked so normal that I started to question my reality.

Was any of that even real?

*Or is it a hallucination?*

“What if this was part of Odette’s magic?” I asked. “And it was never part of the tomb to begin with?”

Gabriel heard me. “This was no illusion. It was real.” He gripped Mikah by the shoulder, staring into his eyes as he said, “Next time you want to go grave robbing, leave the skeletons behind. If anything fucking happened to you—”

Cutting Gabriel off, Mikah grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulling him closer and whispering something in Gabriel’s ear. Gabriel’s eyes flashed with an emotion I couldn’t interpret, but he stayed quiet.

“Thank you, Tabitha,” Greyson said. “We owe you one.”

She only offered a nod, and Greyson moved forward to the door.

“Should some of us stay back?” Xavier asked. “In case more of the skeletons appear?”

“Splitting up isn’t the way to go,” Greyson said. “We have to deal with this vampire-witch all together.”

Nobody disagreed with that. My head and heart pounded as I watched my mate step closer to the door. There was a creepy brass knocker of a claw on it. What could that claw represent? A werewolf? Another kind of shifter? A vampire? What kind of hellish creation could it—

“Wait, don’t touch it!” I hissed at Greyson, but it was too late.

Greyson had grabbed the claw and instantly recoiled. The knocker moved, reaching for him. I gasped, grabbing him by the arm to pull him back, but he didn’t move too far from the door. The knocker stopped and returned to its original position the moment Greyson withdrew a few inches backward.

He looked down at me, one eyebrow arched. “I’m fine,” he said.

“Do *not* touch that thing again. *Please*,” I whispered. “Just knock on the actual door—there’s no telling what kind of magic is connected to the knocker.”

My words were met with silence, but before I could literally drag my mate away—or at least try—Greyson followed my advice. He knocked on the large, sculpted wooden door, and then we all waited.

*Is this it, then?* I thought. *Is this where it all ends?*

The seconds ticked, and nothing happened.

“Try again,” Xavier said to Greyson gruffly. I realized he’d come to stand right behind me and Greyson. “Only this time really hit it.”

Greyson, still silent, turned his hand into a fist. He raised then pounded it on the wood, the *BANG BANG BANG!* consecutive and jarring. The third time his hand came into contact with the door, though, it simply creaked open. The sound was so chilling I felt the hairs at the back of my neck stand.

*Did someone open the door? Or was it left open? What the fuck is happening?!*

“Everybody, step back,” Greyson said.

I felt Xavier’s steady hand on my elbow, pulling me away from Greyson. I could breathe more evenly with him touching me, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t about to start blasting this house down. Adrenaline coursed through every inch of me when I watched Greyson push the door open the rest of the way.

A large foyer appeared before us.

The silence was so heavy I felt it like a weight on my shoulders, and not even Xavier’s proximity could help right now. A long, tense moment passed as we all strained to listen. Nothing. It was quiet.

Way too fucking quiet for my tastes.

Either nobody was home…

*Or someone is waiting, hiding, ready to attack.*

It was always the latter, really, wasn’t it?

My nails dug into Xavier’s forearm, but he didn’t even flinch. Meanwhile, questions started running wild around my head.

*If the vampire-witch is in there, will she attack as a witch? Or a vampire? Oh my god, what if she has a THIRD FORM?*

I realized my train of thought was perhaps ridiculous when Greyson spoke up again.

“Everybody wait outside,” he said in a low voice. “I’m going in first.”

I choked at the sound of those words. I let Xavier go and aimed to reach for Greyson. The idea that he’d be putting himself into danger yet again just to protect us all made my stomach twist and drop.

*This is my mate! This is—*

The Alpha.

Greyson was responsible for this mission, and nothing I could do or say would stop him. Same went with Xavier. “I’m right behind you,” Xavier said, moving closer. Greyson didn’t argue with his brother.

I reminded myself that Xavier felt that everything that was happening today was his fault, and he was always pissed at Greyson anyway. Both of those were hell of a motivator, knowing him. These two powerful men would do everything in their power to retrieve those ashes, though, and that was the common goal.

This was the moment of truth.

The only sound in my ears was the pounding of my heart as I watched, holding my breath, while my two mates stepped into the dark interior. My hands were raised, ready to attack, ready to protect. If anything happened to Greyson and Xavier today…

*I don’t think I’d be able to live with myself.*

“Your mates know what they’re doing. Don’t worry,” Artemis whispered in my ear, her hand squeezing my arm in reassurance.

And then, Greyson’s voice broke the silence in the mansion’s dark foyer.

“Hello?”

His voice echoed, but after that—

*Nothing*.

He took a step back—Xavier, too—then he gestured for us to follow. I went in first, then Artemis, Rishika, and everybody else, one by one, our footsteps lightly thudding on the wooden floor. I could barely see anything in the dark, but I’d definitely watched this horror movie before.

*The door is going to suddenly close behind us! We’ll be trapped, and something will eat us or stab at us!*

To my shock, the door remained open.

“Here,” Mikah muttered. A second later, he flicked on a light switch. The crystal chandelier above us turned on, and dim yellow light flooded the room. I looked around, grateful to see finally, but then confusion settled.

The outside of the house had looked so well maintained, but the inside looked like nobody had lived here for hundreds of years. The furniture was covered in sheets. Cobwebs draped the chandelier. A smashed vase with dead, dried flowers sat in one corner.

“Hello?” Greyson called out louder.

My shoulder prickled.

It was as if Seluna wanted to make herself known, to remind me why I was here, to say that this house was the one. Could the mark sense Seluna nearby? This whole nightmare would be over if we could just find Seluna’s ashes before whoever put them here returned.

I would never be happier to see that bitch.

“Perhaps we should explore the house?” Gabriel said casually when we passed by a massive winding staircase. Why was I even surprised by his comment? Here I was, trying not to trip in the dark, but *of course* Gabriel wanted to go off on his own.

“Nobody should separate from the group,” Greyson said curtly. “We’ll explore it together.” There were murmurs of agreement from the others. Greyson stepped closer to me, taking my hand. At the same time, Xavier took the other.

With my mates on either side, I felt more grounded than ever.

*You can do this, Cali*,I told myself.

I’d fought many battles, and even if this was perhaps the most important, I would never back down. The group moved all together, Xavier and Greyson and me in the front. The silence continued until we entered a space that looked like a dining room.

A strange noise caught my attention.

*Humming.*

“Someone’s humming,” I said.

“Not me,” Gabriel said, followed by Mikah’s exasperated huff.

“We’re moving forward,” Xavier said, jaw clenched.

Greyson nodded, and off we went.

Every hair on my body stood at attention as we moved toward the sound.

It led us to a narrow staircase at the rear of the house.

Again, Greyson called out, “Hello?”

The humming paused…

And started again.

*I officially DO NOT LIKE THIS.*

The creepy factor tonight had started at a solid 60/100. Right now we were nearing a 90/100, and I *didn’t* fucking appreciate that kind of energy, okay?

“Everybody wait. I’m going first,” Greyson muttered, taking a step forward. But the second he let go of my hand, something shadowy appeared at the foot of the stairs.

“Watch out!”

My terrified shout escaped just as a flash of light rippled through the space, and then—

A small child ran toward us with a knife in hand.

# Episode 3276

**Xavier**

A small boy bore down on us with a fucking knife.

“Watch out!” Cali screamed, pulling me back.

What the *hell*?

Growling, I let Cali’s hand go, leaping in front of her to block the child’s attack…

Only to crash into Greyson, who’d also tried to intercept the kid.

My brother and I fell into a heap on the ground, groaning and snarling as the child jumped over us and sped right toward Cali—knife raised, undeterred and unscathed.

The sight made me taste blood.

“Cali!” I shouted, fighting to get Greyson the fuck off me while that feral creature attacked my mate. Her eyes wide were and horrified as—

The kid slammed into her and passed right through her.

Leaving her completely unharmed.

What the *fuck*?

“What the fuck?” she choked, her words echoing my thoughts. Her chest heaving in shock, she spun around to face the kid who turned and hissed at everybody. Adair jumped in front of Tabitha, Rishika grabbed Artemis to pull her back, Gabe squawked, and Mikah—

“Everyone calm down!” Mikah called. “The child is just a ghost. It can’t hurt you.”

I was motherfucking *boiling*.

“It may not have physically hurt anyone, but it scared the shit out of us!” I glared at the child. It hovered, its eyes fixed on me. It was so damn eerie. “Keep out of our way, kid,” I snapped, waving the ghost off.

“Wait!” Cali said breathlessly. She stared at the little boy. “Maybe he knows something about the house? About the ashes, maybe?”

My stomach clenched at her words. Greyson gave her a nod, and she eyed the kid cautiously. “Has someone hidden a container in this house recently?”

The child ignored her.

He still stared at me only, his eyes piercing through me. I felt a chill down my spine, a pang of recognition haunting the back of my mind. I felt like I knew this young boy, but how the hell could that be?

“Sorry, did you hear me?” Cali asked, eyeing the boy. “Have you seen anyone come here with a container filled with a demon’s remains? Do you know anything about Seluna and her ashes?”

Nobody spoke for long moment. The boy shook his head, then raised his hand.

To point his finger at me.

“I know only *him*.”

The words sounded like an accusation, and my heartbeat spiked.

“Have we met before?” I asked slowly.

The child shook his head again. “No. But we know each other, don’t we?”

I didn’t understand.

“How’s that possible?” I asked.

The boy moved closer.

The temperature dropped as he hovered just inches away now. Mikah was right, this kid was a ghost. And I didn’t know any ghosts.

“What is it that you want?” Cali’s voice was gentle. “Maybe we can help you—do you have a name?”

The boy smiled.

It was a dark, unnerving grin that he fixed on me only.

“Tell your friends who I am,” he demanded. “I *know* you haven’t forgotten me. You never will.”

The others watched us, silent, unmoving. Cali’s eyes were the heaviest, her expectations vibrating through the air, but I didn’t know what the fuck to say. How could I identify a boy that I’d never met?

“What the hell kind of game are you playing, kid?” I snapped. “I don’t know you, and we don’t have time for this.”

I turned my back on him and headed to the stairs.

In a flash, the boy was in front of me again.

“You know *exactly* who I am.”

The ghost flickered with anger. It was jarring, alarming in a way I’d never felt before in my entire damned life.

“It would help if you could tell us your name,” Cali suggested again. Gentle, always, while I wanted to smash everything around me in frustration.

The boy’s answer only made matters worse.

“Xavier Evers’s conscience holds the answer.”

Again, nobody spoke. Not even Greyson. Not even Gabriel. Cali turned to me. She looked pale, but her quiet voice was even. “Does any of this make sense? *Think*, Xavier.”

I took a deep breath and studied the ghost boy.

He stared back, bold and daring, a challenge in his gaze.

A conviction.

*My* conviction.

And then, I felt the answer like a punch in the chest. I *did* recognize this kid. Shit.

“You’re René Duquette,” I said.

My voice sounded strange in my ears.

The boy smiled. It wasn’t a true one. “See? You did know.”

Cali’s eyes burned holes in my skin. In a hoarse whisper, she said, “Is he…”

I knew what she’d say next. I knew what the rest was, as much as I despised it.

As much as, sometimes, I despised myself.

“He’s the Duquette child that was killed,” I finished Cali’s sentence.

I’d never met the young boy in person.

The silence in the room was deafening. My stomach twisted so bad I felt like throwing up. And my heart pounded so hard I thought it would break, and that was probably the only fucking thing I deserved.

I certainly didn’t deserve Cali’s support.

“Xavier would *never* knowingly hurt a child,” she said quickly, stepping closer to the child. “He didn’t have anything to do with your death, no way!”

The boy tilted his head to the side. Calculating. I wondered how long he’d been a ghost. I wondered if he was older than he looked, and he’d grown bitter and hateful for the injustice of it all.

“Xavier would never hurt an innocent,” Cali continued. “He’s not—”

“*He’s* not innocent,” the boy spat. “Think about it, why would Xavier feel guilty if he was?”

Cali opened her mouth to reply but closed it. I stood there like a fucking statue, numb and ready to break if anyone touched me. And then Greyson did. He grabbed me by the shoulders, forced me to look at him. “Don’t listen to him. You didn’t know what was going to happen to him, and if you had, you wouldn’t have allowed it to happen. His blood is on someone else’s hands.”

I hadn’t realized I was panting until something in me eased and my breathing settled. I’d needed to hear those words right now—but from Greyson of all people? Perhaps something about that was also needed, but I didn’t know what the fuck—

I didn’t know what the fuck to say to this kid when I was the reason he was dead.

But I had to find something to say.

I had to be honest, if it was the last thing I did.

I shook off my brother, turned to the boy, and said, “I’m sorry. I was sorry the day I found out. I’m still sorry. I know it doesn’t matter because you’re still dead, but…” My voice was a breath. “I’m sorry.”

The boy stared at me.

The boy seemed to be thinking this over. In the end, he said, “I believe you’re sorry.” He shrugged. “Maybe someday I’ll even forgive you.” That was the last thing he said before gliding toward the stairs.

I wished I felt some kind of relief, but I didn’t.

“René!” Cali called behind the boy. “*Please.* We really need your help. What can you tell us about this house?”

I exchanged a look with Greyson before fixing Cali with a stare.

“What?” she whispered, wiping her eyes quickly. “Can you blame me for trying to get info? We have no leads!”

“Since you asked so nicely, what do you want to know?” the boy said. He’d actually paused at the bottom of the stairs and was staring at Cali. She stepped toward me and took my hand as she came to stand next to me. Her eyes were dry now, but guilt had already hit me like a fucking boulder.

This was what remained.

“Are you sure you don’t know anything about a demon named Seluna?” Cali asked.

The boy scowled at her. “I’m a ghost, stupid, not a demon. What would I know about demons?”

Cali replied something, but I was only half listening. I was still processing, even when I fucking couldn’t. I knew that what happened to René wasn’t my fault, and the child did allow that he might forgive me, but that was very little solace. That didn’t change the fact that a child had died.

*Silas* wouldn’t have cared. *Silas* hurt his own kids. *Silas* would’ve found this kid inconsequential.

But I wasn’t my father.

I couldn’t be.

I couldn’t fucking allow myself to break right now. I didn’t have the time or the fucking luxury. We’d come here with a plan to capture the vampire-witch and find out where she had the ashes. Or better yet, get those ashes without anyone noticing, and get the fuck out of here.

I had to pull myself together.

If not for myself, then for Cali.

sIt was her well-being on the line, and that was the only reason I managed to force my mind to focus back on the conversation. Cali was still speaking to the kid.

“Do you…” She cleared her throat. “Do you inhabit, er, live here by yourself?”

The boy offered another eerie smile. “No. We *all* live here.”

# Episode 3277

*We* all *live here?* My heart was racing inside my chest. I wasn’t sure I’d heard René right. Or I did hear him right, but his response had been too disturbing to process, so I just had to dig deeper.

“Who else lives here?” I asked calmly even though I wasn’t sure I wanted the answer.

The boy arched his eyebrows. No answer. Then he turned away, whistling as he climbed up the stairs. “René!” I called again, but he ignored me, disappearing into the air by the time he reached the top of the staircase.

My stomach dropped.

*NOW what the hell do we do?*

“The kid knows more than he’s telling,” Gabriel said, breaking the silence. “I’ll go find him!”

He made a move to march up the stairs behind René, but Greyson grabbed him by the shoulder. “You stay with Mikah. And Mikah? Keep Gabriel out of trouble.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “As if *I’m* the one who’s going to cause trouble. Look at your own brother, dude.”

The three of them started a hushed intense argument while Artemis, Rishika, and Tabitha talked about the ghost, and a stone-faced Adair looked on. Did *nothing* rattle this man?

Whatever.

*More important matters at hand.*

“How are you feeling?” I asked Xavier, squeezing his shoulder. Right now, he was expressionless. But he’d looked so devastated earlier. Seeing the kid, knowing he was dead and that Xavier felt it was his fault… It was a lot. I’d forced myself to stay composed, literally only shed a tear or two and no more, and totally kept going after that. For myself, and for Xavier too.

*I’m not sure if this is my own kind of growth, or if I simply have no other choice right now*, I thought.

“I’m not okay,” Xavier said, staring at me. “But I will be—as soon as we find the ashes.”

My mate’s face was severe, businesslike, but I knew that he was putting on a front. I’d seen him with that boy earlier—René’s words had touched a raw nerve in him. To the point where he’d apologized in front of everybody without hesitation.

I knew that Xavier felt guilty, horribly so, but I also knew that he wasn’t about to talk openly about it. Not with a mission in play and right this moment, when everyone watched us.

“Xavier…”

“Cali, we have to do this right now,” he said, gripping both my hands in his. “Let me find those ashes for you and end this nightmare for all of us.”

I could only nod. I normally would make a random joke, but I didn’t even feel like it right now.

Xavier let my hands go and turned to face his brother who’d been talking with Artemis and Rishika, Tabitha and Adair listening in. Mikah and Gabriel were quietly arguing a couple of feet away.

“I know you want us to stay together, Greyson,” Xavier said, “but from what it looks like, Gabe and Mikah are ready to start exploring.”

Mikah nodded with a sigh. Gabriel turned to Greyson. “We need to split up if this is going to work. We cover more ground that way—doesn’t take a genius to see how that’s important.”

Greyson considered it. “Fine.”

Gabriel grinned, looking between Xavier and Mikah. “See? I’m always fucking right in the end.”

“Okay, let’s split up—”

“It’s my plan, so I say in pairs,” Gabriel said, cutting Greyson off. “This place is huge, so the more the teams, the more rooms we’ll go through. Let’s see—” He started counting out fingers, teaming people up. “Tabitha and Adair, Artemis and Rishika, Cali and… Xavier? Greyson?” Gabriel frowned. “How is this supposed to work?”

I blushed furiously, my cheeks heating up. Mercifully, Greyson cleared his throat. “I’ll go with Xavier and Cali.”

Xavier nodded, not even reacting to the momentary predicament. “We’ll take downstairs,” he declared and turned his back, starting down the hallway.

He hadn’t even shot a look at Greyson or me.

*It’s not just the outside demons that are dangerous*, I thought. *It’s those on the inside too that we should probably worry about.*

Okay, that got a little too deep for my tastes, and now my worry started to flare once more. Not that it had ever gone anywhere, obviously—it just simmered under the surface.

Then, Greyson walked over. Catching up to me as I followed Xavier, he muttered, “Is Xavier okay? That looked rough.”

I glanced at Xavier’s back. “He’ll talk about it when he’s ready—and not a minute before.”

Greyson nodded curtly. “Like always.” He eyed me, reaching for my hand. “We’ll find those ashes, Cali, and everything will be over soon. Then Xavier can process.”

I really hoped so.

We found him standing in a den, looking up at a large family portrait—two parents and an infant. My stomach clenched.

*God, is that the family? Is every room going to have a haunting reminder of the family’s murder?*

I realized the clothes were from long ago, though. The woman was in a long hoop skirt, and the father in a vested suit.

“Those must be the great-grandparents,” Xavier said, eyes fixed on the portrait. “Clementine said this house was in the Duquette family for generations. Maybe it’s even the great-great-grandparents.”

“Could be,” Greyson agreed.

The infant had the same eyes and hair as René.

Xavier’s gaze flickered on the baby, but then he looked away, clearing his throat. “So. Any idea what we’re looking for? It’s obvious the vampire-witch isn’t in here. Maybe this whole thing has been a wild goose chase.”

There was a hint of defeat in Xavier’s voice. It was so very unlike him that it hurt to witness. But I knew that pressing him right now would only make things worse, so I pushed through.

“If I were a vampire-witch,” I said, “and I hid something like ashes in this big house, where would I hide them?” I looked around, spotting the library and desk. I started to rummage through them, and very quickly started coughing. The dust was out of control.

“It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Greyson grumbled. “The ashes could be anywhere—or nowhere. Without the vampire-witch to guide us, it’s going to be tough.”

“I wonder if Gabriel and Mikah had any luck tracking down René,” I said, looking between my two mates. “Perhaps the kid does know more than he says.”

“How are we going to make him cooperate, though?” Xavier asked. He was looking at the portrait again, his voice low.

My heart felt heavy. “We can only try, Xavier.”

A brief silence fell, one that carried way too many fucking things left unspoken. Greyson broke it smoothly. “We should head back to the foyer. I don’t want to leave people split up for too long.”

Xavier avoided eye contact with Greyson. “Fine.”

When I turned to look at Greyson, he mind linked, *Xavier will be fine, love*. *He’d survive anything—even the apocalypse. You know that’s how he is.*

Greyson’s words of comfort did work, as always. I gave him a brief nod and a small smile, ready to follow him out of the room as he stepped into the hallway. Xavier took a last look at the portrait. “That baby is a dead ringer for René,” he said.

I thought so too, but I didn’t say anything. Just hooked my arm in his. He instantly kept the grip tight, and I loved knowing that this felt good to him. He needed all the support he could get. Together we followed Greyson into the hallway. “Greyson, what about—”

*BANG!*

The door behind us slammed shut.

“What the hell?” Xavier’s eyes were wide.

Mine were too, because the door wasn’t there. What had been the doorway was now just a smooth, doorless wall.

*Holy shit.*

I rushed to trace the structure and looked around, my heart beating in my throat. “What the fuck is happening? Where’s Greyson?”

“Greyson!” Xavier called.

We were met with silence. Stuck in a fucking *obviously* haunted hallway.

“How is this even happening?” Xavier demanded.

“No idea,” I said, gesturing ahead. “Wasn’t the foyer this way? Maybe Greyson went there?”

“Stay close to me,” Xavier said gravely.

I was pretty sure he wasn’t in the mood for me to argue about who was going to protect whom, so I shut up.

He led me down the hall. We walked and kept walking, but no matter how far we seemed to go, we couldn’t reach the end.

The realization hit me hard, apprehension mixed with fear.

*This house is not only haunted by a murdered child ghost, but it’s also obviously alive with magic! This is just GREAT!*

“What happened to Greyson?” I whispered, gripping Xavier’s hand tighter. “How the hell will we get out of here?”

“Let’s try another room,” Xavier said gruffly. He swung open a door on our right, and I smothered a cry of surprise when I saw that it was a gallery filled with hunting rifles and other weapons mounted on the wall.

“We could get out through the window and come back around to the front of the house,” Xavier said, pointing at the window.

I nodded, and we stepped in. “How are you gonna open the—”

Xavier grabbed an armchair and raised it menacingly.

“—window. You’re just gonna break it, then, okay,” I said as Xavier charged forward.

But suddenly, the door slammed behind us again. We both spun around to face the commotion.

“What is happening?” I gasped when I saw that the door had been replaced by another wall. One full of pistols.

“Screw this bullshit,” Xavier snapped, slamming the chair against the window.

Right before my eyes, before my brain that was fucking reeling, the chair shattered.

But the window stayed intact.

*Oh my god, what is happening in here? What kind of magic is this?*

I didn’t have the time to say my questions out loud. There was a creaking sound, the room shook, and the walls…

The walls started closing in on us.

We were going to be crushed alive.

# Episode 3278

**Greyson**

I looked around, suddenly realizing Cali and Xavier hadn’t followed me out of the den.

“Cali?” I called, frowning. “Xavier? Where are you?”

There was no response. Had they found something else in the den? Or maybe the portrait had been too much for my brother, and he and Cali had stopped for a moment so he could collect himself.

I headed back toward the den… then stopped and turned. Then turned again, looking down the long hallway.

Where the hell was the room? I thought it had been close, but now I couldn’t find a door. Could it be one of the hidden doors? It was a possibility, so I ran my hands along the wall, searching for a hidden hinge or handle. But there was nothing there. Just the gentle hills and valleys of the old plaster beneath the faded wallpaper.

*Cali? Can you hear me? Are you there?*

Nothing. No response.

I looked around the dim hallway. I didn’t know what it was, but something was very wrong about this house. It wasn’t like I couldn’t handle a ghost or two—I could—but this was more than just a creepy ghost child. Now Cali and Xavier were missing. Disappeared into thin air.

“Fucking creepy,” I muttered as I headed back in the direction of the foyer, hoping to find someone else along the way. I should have never agreed to break up the group.

I walked for a while, then stopped and looked around. I thought I had been heading for the foyer—but was I? Was I even going the right way? A moment ago I’d been sure, but as I looked around, I felt less confident. It was like the house was a living, breathing maze with dark intentions. It felt like it was changing itself for the express purpose of confusing its guests.

*Great.*

I turned back the way I’d been going and started again, faster this time. I paused every few minutes to look around and get my bearings, and I had to remind myself again and again to ignore the morphing walls and passageways. I just had to keep heading in the same direction.

“Cali! Can you hear me?” I kept calling her name, but there was never any response, and each time I didn’t hear her answering voice, my anxiety ratcheted up.

Xavier was with her, which made me feel slightly better, but I also knew that my brother wasn’t in top form at the moment. The appearance of that kid had really shaken him—more than he was willing to admit.

The grand staircase appeared at the end of the hallway and, finally recognizing something, I hurried toward it. I rushed into the foyer and looked around, hoping to see Cali and Xavier looking for me, but they weren’t there. Instead, it was Gabriel and Mikah who were coming down the stairs.

“Has either of you seen Cali? Or Xavier?” I asked without preamble.

“No.” Mikah frowned. “They’re missing? You lost them?”

“Dude, we split up like ten minutes ago, practically,” Gabriel said.

“I know, I know, it’s just something about this house,” I said. “I don’t know… I can’t find them. Something might’ve happened to them.”

Gabriel’s expression shifted. “Shit. Well, we haven’t seen them. Where did you see them last?”

I turned to point to the way I’d come, but the hallway had changed. Now it turned sharply left where once it had run straight into the house.

“Dammit,” I murmured, running a hand through my hair. I turned to Gabriel and Mikah. “I need to collect everyone and get us all the hell out of this place. You two stay close to me, okay? I don’t want to lose anyone else in this hell house. Do you have any idea where the others went?”

“I thought I heard Rishika in one of the bedrooms on the second floor.” Mikah pointed upward. “The room right at the top of the stairs.”

I charged toward the staircase and took the stairs up two at a time. But just like the hallways, the stairs began to twist and turn. The steps flowed like waves beneath my feet, and the three of us stumbled, clutching the banister for support. But then the banister turned hot beneath my hand, and slippery. I looked down as it undulated, like some kind of snake from hell.

Was this *really* happening? Was I hallucinating, or was this actually happening? I didn’t know the answer to that, but I did know that I wasn’t going to let this damn staircase beat me. I was going to make it to the top.

The effort used all my remaining strength, but I kept pushing—fighting to keep my balance—and finally pulled myself to the top of the stairs. Then I turned back to help Mikah and Gabriel do the same.

The three of us tumbled onto the floor and sat still for a moment, trying to catch our breath. I turned and looked back at the stairs, but now they were still and looked like a regular staircase, exactly how they’d looked when I’d first seen them.

Gabriel was the first to get to his feet, and he put out a hand to help Mikah up. “This is the worst funhouse I’ve ever been in. I want my money back.”

I stood and looked around. “Which bedroom was it?”

Gabriel studied the doors around us carefully. “I thought it was the second one to the right,” he said slowly. “But now I’m not so sure.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The colors of the doors have changed.”

“Fuck it,” I said, frustrated. “We’ll just try them all until we find them.”

I grabbed the first door and ripped it open, practically pulling it from its hinges. A cold wind blew me backward, and I stumbled.

“Rishika!” I called, trying to shout over the wind. I struggled back to the doorway and—squinting—looked around the room. “Empty,” I announced, slamming the door shut again.

Gabriel took the next door, and when he finally managed to pry it open, he was nearly sucked inside by a tremendous vacuum. Mikah and I lurched forward and grabbed for him, then Mikah kicked the door shut again.

It felt like the *house* was fighting us, but this was one fight I wasn’t planning to lose.

Mikah took a deep breath and reached for the third door, but he took a startled step back when it opened on its own. Rishika and Artemis stood in the doorway, looking equally startled.

“Where the hell have you been?” I demanded, fear making my voice sound angry.

“We’ve been trying to open this damn door for ten minutes,” Artemis shot back. “Didn’t you hear us calling for help?”

I shook my head. “No. Have you seen Tabitha and Adair? Or Cali and Xavier?”

“No to Cali and Xavier, but yes to Tabitha and Adair,” Rishika said. “They were going to check out the basement.”

I groaned. “The *basement*? Who knows what kind of creepy shit we’re going to find down there?” This was getting better and better.

Artemis looked around. “Wait, you don’t know where Cali is?”

“No. Something’s happened, and I haven’t been able to pick up her scent or my brother’s,” I said shortly. I was worried enough without getting cursed out by Artemis.

Gabriel and Rishika scented the air, breathing short, investigative breaths.

Rishika shook her head. “I’m not getting anything.”

“Me neither,” Gabriel said.

“Let’s go back downstairs,” I said. “We can all look.”

But when we got back to the staircase, the stairs were at it again, shifting and rolling like waves.

“Do you think we can jump?” I said, gauging the drop to the first floor.

“Sure,” Rishika said.

Mikah and Gabriel nodded, but Artemis looked unsure.

“I’ll jump down and catch Artemis,” I suggested.

“No way,” Rishika said quickly. “*I’ll* catch her.”

“As long as someone does,” Artemis grumbled.

Bracing my hands on the ancient wooden banister, I leapt over it, landing easily on the marble of the first floor. Gabriel followed, then Mikah, and finally Rishika. She recovered instantly and held out her arms.

“Go ahead!” she called up to Artemis.

Artemis looked a little wary, but she jumped without hesitation, and Rishika caught her effortlessly.

“Hey!”

I looked over to see Adair and Tabitha running toward us.

“Hey yourself,” Gabriel said.

“Where were you?” I asked.

“Basement, but we heard a commotion up here,” Adair said. “We came up to check it out.”

“Did you see anything unusual down there?” I asked.

Tabitha shrugged. “Not really. It was just dusty.”

I frowned. “You didn’t see *anything* strange? Nothing weird happened while you were down there? Jars? Boxes?” Though as soon as I asked the question, I knew the answer. Of course they didn’t experience anything strange in the basement. Whatever had been there waiting for them must have been negated because of Tabitha’s magic.

Which was great news, because that meant she could help us navigate the house more quickly, which meant finding Cali and Xavier and stopping whatever dark magic had turned this house into a fucking maze.

“Let’s go. We have to find Cali and Xavier,” I said, waving the group forward.

“Hang on,” Mikah said, putting up his hand to stop us. He looked around. “They’re here,” he whispered.

“What?” Gabriel asked. “I don’t see Xavier and Cali, or smell them.”

“No, not them.” Mikah looked at me. “The vampire-witch is *in* the house.”

# Episode 3279

I looked around as the walls closed in, tighter and tighter. Fear was making my mind race, and my thoughts went randomly to that scene from *Star Wars* where Luke, Han, Leia, and Chewy are being crushed in the trash compactor.

“What are we going to do?” I shouted, my heart racing. “How are we going to get out of here?”

Xavier didn’t answer. He only wrapped his arms around me, like he was trying to protect me, but I knew that wasn’t going to do any good. The walls were pushing in, and we were about be squashed like bugs.

My eyes darted around and finally happened upon a lance, mounted on the wall. “We can use that!”

Xavier didn’t even hesitate. He lunged for it, yanked it from the wall, and held the tarnished spear out sideways, using it to push against the crowding walls.

Amazingly, it seemed to work, and the movement of the walls slowed.

I sucked in a breath, realizing I hadn’t really been breathing. “I think it’s working.”

Xavier was using all his might to keep the wall back, so he didn’t answer. His eyes were on the lance, and he frowned as the steel began to bend with the pressure of the walls. I held my breath as the spear arched up like a rainbow, then snapped with the pressure of the walls closing in.

“*Fuck!*” Xavier yelled, flinging the pieces of the lance to the ground. “We have to find a way out of this room!”

I darted around the room, searching everywhere—walls, bookcases, behind the furniture—anything to find a way out. But I didn’t find anything.

“There!” Xavier yelled.

I looked over to see him pointing toward the fireplace. I looked at the stone opening and nodded. He was right—it was our only chance.

We hurried toward it, and Xavier began to run his hands along the mantle.

“What are you doing?” I asked breathlessly.

“Opening this shit,” he said hurriedly. “There’s no use crawling inside if this thing is closed. We’d just be trapped in there.”

I thought of getting trapped in the small, narrow chimney and shuddered. The mantle was large, and I took the opposite side, searching for the mechanism that would open the flue.

But the walls seemed to be moving faster. My heart felt like it was beating in my throat, and I had to fight to think past the panic. We were going to be crushed before we could escape.

Xavier grunted as the south-facing wall bumped into his shoulder. He tried to anchor his feet on the wooden floor, but it was no use. The wall was driving him into the fireplace.

“Xavier!” I screamed and threw out my hands. I hadn’t intended to do it, but Fae shield magic burst from my hands. The walls shuddered and stopped, though I could see them straining against my shield.

Xavier’s eyes widened. “Nice one, baby,” he said with a grin. I couldn’t help it when a nervous giggle escaped my lips. I’d done it. I’d stopped the walls from crushing us. For now.

“I think I found it,” he said. Xavier pulled a small metal ring in the wall, and there was a metallic clink from inside the chimney. “Climb in.”

I was straining to hold the shield in place. “But if I drop this, the walls will move!”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. *Go!*”

I pulled in a deep breath, gathered my strength, and pushed out my magic with all my might before letting go. The shield expanded for an instant—like my magic was a living, breathing thing—and the walls were pushed back a fraction of an inch before the shield bubble burst and the walls slammed toward us.

But I had already scrambled into the chimney, pulling myself up the inside using the mismatched bricks as handholds.

I could feel Xavier pushing me from below, to speed my ascent. I glanced down at him and saw the crack of light coming in from the room beneath us narrow, then disappear as the walls closed behind us. We were plunged into complete darkness, and I tried to steady my breathing. It wasn’t going to do anyone any good if I started to hyperventilate. I had never thought I was claustrophobic, but I had never tried scaling a tiny chimney in a haunted mansion before, so this was a voyage of discovery in every way.

I kept going, but my fingers were starting to slip. I was getting tired, and when I reached up, I nearly lost my grip as the brick began to crumble beneath my fingers. I let out a cry, and Xavier caught me from below, holding me up until I could grasp onto a new, steadier brick.

“Sorry,” I panted into the darkness.

“It’s okay,” Xavier’s reply came. He sounded a bit out of breath himself. “We have to find the top, or at least push ourselves out of here somehow. Keep looking for any light.”

I peered upward, and my heart leapt when I spied a crack of light peeking through some bricks above my head. I reached up, and when I pushed on the brick, it was loose.

“I think I can push some of these bricks out!” I said excitedly.

“Be careful,” Xavier warned. “We don’t want the whole chimney collapsing on us.”

I nodded, though I knew he couldn’t see me, and pushed more bricks away from where the light showed through. They slid out like Jenga pieces, and finally there was an opening wide enough for me to fit my head through.

I pushed myself through it and looked around. The space I had found a way into looked like an attic—old and untouched and covered in dust. But I breathed in the stale air of it, feeling relief washing over me. I pushed out more of the bricks, but as I did, the ones above me started to wobble. I held my breath, worried that they were about to come crashing down on me.

But they stayed in place, and I pushed myself through the opening.

I collapsed on the dusty attic floor, but behind me the chimney gave a strange groan. When I looked over, I could see some of the upper bricks staring to sag, and I jumped to the opening I’d made, trying to hold it up.

“Xavier!” I called desperately. The weight of the chimney was a lot on my already tired arms, and I could feel the structure shifting. It was not going to hold. “Xavier! *Hurry!*”

There was silence for a moment, then he appeared, punching more bricks out of the way so he could widen the opening. He pushed himself through and dove onto the attic floor just as the rest of the chimney toppled down in a hail of bricks and mortar.

He grabbed me by the waist, and we rolled across the floor, away from the avalanche of bricks. We kept going until we bumped against the far wall. I curled up, coughing dust out of my lungs, then pushed myself to sitting.

“Xavier, are you okay?”

He sat up as well. He was covered in dust and soot, but otherwise he looked okay. I moved toward him and wrapped my arms around his neck, grateful that we had both made it out of that chimney—and that room.

Xavier pulled back and cupped my face in his hands, looking at me closely. “Are *you* okay?”

I smiled. “I’m okay.”

He pressed his lips to mine, and even through the layer of soot and dirt, I could feel his relief in the kiss.

When we pulled back, I looked around. “This attic looks like the most normal place in this whole house,” I said. I got to my feet, and when I looked down, I was surprised to see that we hadn’t bumped into a far wall, but rather a row of antique trunks. I looked carefully at them and saw that each of them had a brass lock with something engraved on them in flowing script.

*Duquette.*

I looked up at Xavier, who had been examining the trunks as well. As we shared a look, I felt a thrill of fear.

He shifted so his hand became a wolf’s paw, and he used his claw to rip open the lock. When I pushed the lid up, the smell was musty. There was small bundle at the top, and it was wrapped in lace, yellowed with age.

Unwrapping the lace, I found a stack of slim, leather-bound albums. I opened the first one, and Xavier reached for the one just below it.

Inside, we found a series of old-fashioned photos, pasted to the black cardboard pages. The first photo was a couple in clothing that looked like it was from the end of the 1800s, or maybe the very beginning of the 1900s. The couple was young, and they were both beautiful, standing in front of a weeping willow tree. Beneath the photo someone had written *Ayn and Gregor Duquette* in calligraphy.

“This must be a record of the family,” I murmured. I flipped further back in the album and found what looked like more recent photos. There was a photo of a young couple on their wedding day, standing in front of a large white church. It was newer than the first photograph, but still old, and the edges were curling up. The script below the photo read *Henri and Adéluce Duquette*.

“That’s who I was hired to find,” Xavier said, checking out the photo.

I took that in, staring at the photo. It looked like some of the artwork from downstairs. I flipped a few more pages and found another photo of the couple with a young baby. The baby looked exactly like the portrait downstairs. This had to be René.

My eyes widened as I looked at the other faces in the photo… and *recognized* them. There was Odette, Azalea, Sariah, and Constance. All the elder witches were there, which meant…

I looked up at Xavier. “The Duquettes were a New Orleans witch family.”

# Episode 3280

**Greyson**

“Are you sure?” I asked, staring at Mikah. “The vampire-witch is *here*? How can you know that?”

“I have very keen senses,” he said.

Gabriel scowled and pointed to himself, then to Rishika and to me. “Congratulations, Mike. So do we.”

I looked around, feeling deeply unnerved. I knew I had keen senses, too, but if Mikah said that the vampire-witch was here, then I believed that she was here. “Then let’s all be on guard,” I said. “But nothing else changes. The plan is still the same. We have to find Xavier and Cali and find a way to get the hell out of this house.”

The others nodded in agreement.

“That way,” Mikah said, pointing down the long, dim hallway.

I gestured for Mikah to lead the way, and we followed him slowly down the passageway. I kept my eyes roaming around, tensed for another magical attack. Something told me this house wasn’t finished with us yet.

“Do either of you know what kind of magic is being used to booby-trap this house?” I asked, glancing over at Adair and Tabitha.

“No.” Tabitha shrugged. “I’m not really a witch, am I? I don’t think I could sense the kind of magic you’re talking about even if I tried.”

“What about you?” I asked Adair, hoping some of the research he’d been doing would pay off for us.

But he shook his head. “This isn’t normal, that much is certain.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The witches of New Orleans are using a kind of magic that’s hard for me to sense as a Fae. Maybe it has to do with their connection to their ancestors. I don’t know, but either way, I can’t detect it the way I can with other magic.”

I frowned at that. I was trying to put all the puzzle pieces of this place together, but there were still some facts missing, and it didn’t look like they were going to be easy to find. If this was the old Duquette mansion, were these ghosts and spells here before we got here? Or was this the doing of the vampire-witch, and she’d set them up to attack us? Were the ashes really here? Or was this whole thing just some kind of trick to distract us? And if it was, then what the hell was *really* going on here?

*Cali! Cali, love, can you hear me? Are you there?*

There was still no answer through the mind link, and I grew even more worried. Wherever she was, it was somewhere either too far away for her to hear me, or where the mind link was somehow blocked. Where the hell could she be in this giant mansion?

Mikah stopped just in front of a pair of grand French doors. They were glass paneled, and the woodwork was intricate, all arches and scrollwork. They were beautiful, and I had never seen anything like them before. The glass was dusty and rippled in that way old leaden glass was.

Mikah reached for the doorknob of one door, which was bronze and ornately engraved, but Gabriel put a hand on his arm to stop him.

“Hang on. What’s that smell?” Gabriel asked.

Mikah frowned. “What smell? What are you talking about?”

Gabriel started at him in disbelief. “Are you kidding me, Mr. Keen Senses? You don’t smell that?” Mikah shook his head. Gabriel took another deep breath. “It’s strong—like decay.”

Mikah closed his eyes, concentrating, and so did Rishika and I. And finally I got a whiff of what Gabriel was talking about. It was like the smell that had come from the graveyard, but it was more diffused.

“That’s not a vampire,” I said, opening my eyes.

Mikah finally opened his eyes, and when he did, he looked worried. “I think you’re right. I can smell it too. It’s the smell of death, but”—he took another breath—“different.”

I looked around. “Something about this doesn’t feel right.”

Rishika and Gabriel nodded in agreement, but before we could say another word or take a step to investigate, the French doors burst open, and a wave of cold air blasted out so hard we all tumbled to the ground.

In an instant I was moving again, fighting back to my feet as I pushed against the power of the air. I squinted though the wind and into the room, and I could see that it looked like a sitting room. The windows across the room were large, and covered with long, tattered curtains that twisted and gusted in the strong wind. The wind had the power of a cyclone, and it pushed at me so hard I could barely keep my balance. But I braced my feet and pushed against it, starting toward the doors.

I *had* to close them.

I gathered all my strength and charged toward them, but just before I reached them, the wind stopped suddenly. But I was still moving, and my momentum powered me into the room, and I slammed hard into one of the ornate sitting chairs. The thing smashed beneath me.

“Shit!” I heard Gabriel shout, and in a moment he and Mikah were at my side, helping me to my feet amid the shards of broken chair.

“Are you okay?” Mikah asked.

I nodded, brushing the chair splinters off of me. “I’m fine,” I muttered, but when I turned, I was shocked to see that all the others had followed me into the room.

“No!” I bellowed. “Get out of here!”

But it was too late. The doors slammed shut behind them, and a low, rumbling laugh echoed throughout the room.

“Great,” Mikah said flatly.

“My thoughts exactly,” I said with a sigh. I looked grimly around the room, taking in the high windows. We were only on the second floor, and a two-story drop wasn’t that bad.

But before I could suggest this exit strategy, the air just in front of me began to waver. My body tensed, and I half-shifted, ready for a fight as a spectral figure appeared before me.

The figure was nearly transparent, but I could tell at a glance it was a man, though he didn’t look like any kind of ghost I had ever seen before. His face was grey and almost melted. His eyes were the only solid thing about him, and they were coal-black—like the eyes of a demon. His long, thin fingers were curling into claws.

Mikah groaned. “It’s a poltergeist.”

I crouched into a defensive position. This was fucking *great*. Poltergeists weren’t that hard to defeat—so that wasn’t what bothered me. I just did *not* need this right now. Not in addition to everything else we were dealing with.

“Try to find a way out of this damn room,” I growled to the others, not taking my eyes off the poltergeist for a second.

Which was smart, because quick as a flash of lightning, the poltergeist zoomed at Mikah and me. We jumped to the side, barely making it out of his path before he attacked.

“Mikah!” Tabitha shouted. “Greyson!”

When we looked over, she was holding up the fireplace pokers. For a moment I was confused—you couldn’t *hit* a poltergeist. But then the penny dropped—they were made of iron.

I held out my hand, and she tossed the pokers to each of us. The poltergeist zoomed toward Tabitha, and I swung out, swiping through him. The specter let out a squeal that made my ears throb, then zoomed backward.

I rushed toward Tabitha and pulled her behind me. Mikah stepped next to me, and together we formed a shield, protecting Tabitha.

Adair was on the far side of the room, looking desperately for a way out. Apparently finding nothing in or around the bookcase, he moved toward the windows. “They’re all fused shut!” he shouted, sounding angry as hell.

“*Fuck*,” I breathed.

“I think I found a hidden door!” Rishika called out.

I turned to her just as she pushed on a seemingly unextraordinary stretch of wall. But the wall creaked open to reveal a staircase, leading downward. How she’d found it I couldn’t even begin to guess.

“Adair! Artemis! Gabriel! Let’s go! Come on!” she yelled.

Grabbing Tabitha’s arm, I pulled her toward the stairs. Rishika had already started down, and Mikah came just after me. Gabriel, Adair, and Artemis were still busy, fighting the poltergeist on the far side of the elegant room. They were using everything at their disposal to fight him off—glassware, chairs, the small statues that crowded the side tables—and were leaving a path of utter destruction in their wake.

I turned at the top of the stairs. “Gabriel! Adair! Artemis! Come on! *NOW!*”

They had just turned toward me, ready to run, when the ground beneath my feet started to shift. I looked down just as the stairs slid downward, creating a smooth stone slide. I stared at it in shock, but when the ground rumbled, I lost my balance and fell on my ass.

An instant later I was sliding downward along the stone shaft into darkness.

# Episode 3281

Xavier looked up from perusing the photo album in his hands and glanced over. “What? What do you mean they’re witches? What did you find?”

“*Look!*” I said, pointing to the photo of the gathered New Orleans witches.

Xavier studied the photo with a frown. “Shit. You’re right. I guess that makes sense. That must have been why they were on the run.” He thought for a moment. “Something one of them did must have gotten them on the wrong side of the wrong witch. That could mean trouble. Those ladies don’t seem to be the most forgiving folks I’ve ever met.”

I thought about that. “You think the family was on the run because Henri was a warlock? I guess that makes sense,” I said slowly. “Do you think the vampire-witch is also a Duquette? If it’s a family of witches?”

Xavier thought about that. “Maybe,” he said, nodding slowly. “I don’t have any idea how vampire-witches come to be, but a witch becoming a vampire makes sense. And if they’re, like, an aunt or a cousin of this Henri guy, then they’d have a blood reason to want revenge on the people who killed him, and to use their revenge magic.”

I looked into Xavier’s face, searching his expression. I knew this whole thing with the Duquette family had been upsetting for him, and he looked deeply troubled by all of this new information.

I took his hand in mine. “You can’t keep blaming yourself for all of this, Xavier. You know you can’t. There was no way you could have known what was going on when you took the job.”

Xavier gave me dark smile. “I knew that there was a kid involved, Cali. And I knew that the people hiring me for the job weren’t the most savory of people.” He shook his head sadly. “When I was a mercenary, I always told myself I would never cross a certain line. That’s how I justified all the other shit. I always said I would never kill a kid with my own hands. But I should have known that turning over the Duquettes to whoever was looking for them was going to put that kid at risk. I didn’t kill René with my own hands, but it didn’t really matter, in the end. He’s dead, and I was a part of making that happen. That will always be something I have to live with.”

I nodded, and though my heart broke for him, I knew that there was nothing I could do or say to ease Xavier’s guilty conscience about the death of a child. He didn’t like to admit it, but he felt things so deeply. It was part of why I loved him so much, but I hated seeing him hurting like this.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “If I had known they’d take out the whole family, there’s no way I would have…” he trailed off, his voice tensing. He looked into the darkness of the attic in silence.

I reached for his hand and squeezed it. “Xavier, you know that if you hadn’t given them the location of the Duquettes, they would have found someone else who would have.”

He shrugged, not looking over at me.

“Come on,” I urged. “Think about it. The people who hired you were hell-bent on taking out this family. They would have found a way to do it.”

Xavier lifted his eyes to mine, and I could see the worry reflected in their sea-blue depths.

“Let’s just work on getting out of this situation for now, okay?” I asked.

Xavier nodded, and I could see his eyes hardening with resolve.

“If this vampire-witch really is part of the Duquette family or a close friend, then that doesn’t change anything. We’re still getting those ashes back, no matter what,” he said, his voice hard with determination.

I nodded grimly. I knew what we had to do. I carefully shut the photo album, avoiding looking again at the smiling parents clutching their baby between them, and placed it gently back in the trunk. Then I got to my feet.

“Let’s get out of here.” I looked around the attic and—seeing the door—walked toward it. But when I tried the knob, I found the door was locked tight.

“Shit,” I muttered, rattling the doorknob more forcefully, but it didn’t budge an inch.

“Let me try,” Xavier said, joining me at the door.

I stepped back, and he tried to use his shoulder to force it open, but after one hit, he winced and pulled back. The door hadn’t so much as shaken when he hit it. That wasn’t good.

Xavier examined the door. “Maybe it’s spelled shut.”

I heaved a sigh. “Yeah, maybe it is. And maybe that’s for the best.”

Xavier looked at me curiously. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t really want to go back through that magicked funhouse, do you?”

Xavier gave me a grim smile and shook his head. “I really don’t.” He looked around, his eyes landing on the narrow, dusty windows. He walked over and looked out at the buttress pitched against the outside wall, then beyond it to the ground.

“You know,” he said, still gazing out the window, “these ledges are made of plaster and stone. Maybe we can scale them.”

“I’m sorry, ‘we’? Who is we?” I asked.

He nudged me. “Come on, you can do it. You used to love jumping out of windows.”

I sighed again. I didn’t love heights, but I guessed that being outside the house might mean that we wouldn’t be so much at the whims of the magic inside the house. “Okay,” I said finally.

Xavier pulled at the window sash and—after a moment—managed to get it up, though the ancient wooden mechanism gave an ear-splitting squeal. He pulled himself out onto the ledge, then leaned over and held his hand out to me.

I gritted my teeth, didn’t look down, and took his hand. When I climbed out, the wind whipped around me, plastering my hair across my face. The wind was strong because of the soaring height of the house, but I tried not to think of that. If I pressed my back against the window frame behind me and only looked straight up, it wasn’t really so bad.

Ahead of me, Xavier began to inch along, and keeping hold of my hand, pulled me with him. The stone ledge was holding up our combined weight for the moment, but I could feel bits of it crumbling beneath my feet as I walked, so I tried to keep my steps tight and light.

We moved for a long time in silence, the only sound the whipping of the wind around my ears and the sound of ancient stone dropping from the ledge onto the roof below us.

I didn’t look down.

“I see a widow’s walk,” Xavier said. “I’m going to try to get us there.”

I was too scared to do anything more than grunt in agreement. The widow’s walk seemed to be miles away, and I was drenched in nervous sweat before we finally made it there.

Xavier pulled ahead of me and helped me up, climbing over the low railing to the widow’s walk. I blew out a breath of relief as I stepped onto the rotting wooden flooring of the widow’s walk and clung to the railing on either side. I was just glad to be on relatively steady ground, and it made me feel brave enough to look around as Xavier joined me.

And to my surprise, the view from this vantage point was incredible. It was expansive, taking in the whole of the valley, and there—in the distance—a winding river. I looked down at the house beneath my feet. It must have been majestic once, but now it was a ghost of what it had once been. It was crumbling with disuse. Its roof had been stripped by the wind, the wood was rotting, and its paint was peeling. It was sad, really, and I might have felt bad if it wasn’t for the ghosts and spells in the place trying to kill us at every turn.

Xavier squinted into the wind. “There’s a small walkway over there. I think it goes into the house. Let’s use it to find our way down.”

It sounded like a good plan, and I had just turned to find the walkway when the breath was stolen from my lungs. I screamed and clutched the rail of the widow’s walk, hanging on to the splintering wood until I felt it crumble in my palms. The view had disappeared—the world had gone dark, and shadows were rising all around me. The Seluna mark burned with searing agony, and when I turned to find Xavier again, I let out another scream.

He had just burst into flames.

# Episode 3282

The world went black like someone had blotted out the sun, and Xavier was on fire. *Xavier was on fire.*

Somewhere, deep in my brain, I knew what I was seeing wasn’t real. I knew it was a hallucination. And I kept repeating that to myself, but knowing that didn’t stop the sobs that welled up in my throat.

I squeezed my eyes shut as tears began to run down my face.

*This isn’t real.*

*This isn’t real.*

*This isn’t real.*

*Please, god, don’t let this be real.*

But when I opened them again, the world was still dark, and Xavier was still engulfed in flames. He was writhing in agony. I didn’t know what I was going to do to help, but I knew I had to do something, so I stepped toward him.

The Seluna mark was throbbing now, but I could feel that it wasn’t the same kind of pain I’d felt before I’d come to New Orleans. The pain wasn’t as constant as it used to be. It was more like stabs of pain interspersed with a low throb.

My fried brain fought to think this through. Now that Tabitha’s negating ability wasn’t encompassing all of New Orleans, it seemed that the Seluna mark was back. And with a vengeance.

I needed to do something to break out of this hallucination.

As I turned toward the railing of the widow’s walk, I remembered something Big Mac had once told me—that the connection I had to the mark was symbolic, which could mean that *it* needed *me*. So would that mean that if I put my life in danger, the mark would let go of the hallucination? I didn’t know for sure, but it was worth a try. I was running out of options—and coherent thoughts.

I started to climb over the railing when two fiery arms encircled me.

“Cali! *CALI!*”

Xavier was shouting my name, but his voice was strange—deep and demonic—and the sound chilled me to the core.

“Just trust me!” I shouted, pulling free from him.

Finally I managed to haul myself over the railing. I still held onto it, but my grip was light, and I dangled as close to the edge as I dared. My toes were off the edge, and I leaned forward threateningly.

A stabbing pain shot through the mark, making me cry out. It was almost as if the mark was protesting.

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Let go of this hallucination, or I’ll jump! I swear to god I will! Let me go!”

The mark throbbed again—hard and sharply painful—then slowly calmed. When the pain had faded, I opened my eyes and saw that the darkness had receded. I could see the valley again, the faraway river. I could see the clouds overhead. The world had returned to normal.

I heaved a sigh of relief and turned to Xavier, who was staring at me with wide, unblinking eyes.

“Cali—” he breathed, reaching out to grab me. “What. The. Hell.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “I’m sorry. I had to try it.”

He held my arms and looked me dead in the eyes. “Don’t you *ever* scare me like that again. Do you hear me? Don’t you dare.”

I nodded, and he pulled me into a bone-crushing hug, the railing still between us.

“I was so scared,” he breathed.

“I was scared too,” I said in a shaking voice. “It was another hallucination. It looked like you were on fire.”

Xavier kissed the top of my head. “It wasn’t real,” he murmured. “I’m okay, baby.”

*It wasn’t real*, I repeated to myself. I was trying to get my brain to believe it, but my heart still pounded, and adrenaline was still pumping through my veins. How was this going to continue to affect me? Now that magic had been turned back on, it seemed like the Seluna mark was getting bolder and bolder with its hallucinations, and with its attempts to control me. What *wasn’t* it willing to do to me? It felt like nothing was off-limits.

My head was pressed against Xavier’s chest, but I gave it a hard shake. I needed stop waiting around for things to happen to me and make my own play. My little experiment indicated that the mark did *not* want me to die. At least not yet. And that was good information to know. But I didn’t know if I was keen on the idea that in order to end every hallucination, I was going to have to try to kill myself. A little too reverse-Bella from *Twilight* and a little too dangerous overall. There were risks involved. I wasn’t always myself during a hallucination, and mistakes could be made.

One way or another, we had to get off this roof, and I had just pulled away from Xavier so I could climb back over the railing when I saw something zoom over Xavier’s head. It was fast and almost transparent, but when I looked up, I could see the apparition of the ghost child. His eyes were as black as ever, but he wore a mischievous grin on his face.

*Shit.*

I clutched the railing as fear made my heart rate quicken. “Wait! Stop! What are you doing? Xavier!”

As Xavier started to turn, the ghost boy’s grin widened, and when he spoke, his voice was a haunting singsong. “Mommy says you’ve overstayed your welcome.”

He laughed—a sound that made my bones shake—and flew at Xavier. In one quick motion he shoved Xavier, and Xavier tumbled over the low railing. And, as he was still holding me, I went with him.

The breath was knocked out of me as we hit the steeply sloped rooftop, and—acting purely on some hidden instinct I didn’t even know I had—I reached out, grabbing the edge of the roof just a second before I went over the rotting gutters.

The way Xavier had fallen, he was still half-lying on the roof itself, and he reached for me—trying to help me—but we were too far away for even our fingertips to touch.

I gripped harder on the edge of the roof, but I could feel my fingers starting to cramp.

“Oh god!” I shrieked as my left hand lost its grip. I was now hanging from the roof by only my right hand, and that was starting to slip, too.

“Hang on!” Xavier commanded and started toward me, army crawling on his elbows to get to me while trying to retain his balance on the roof.

He reached out his hand, and I felt his fingertips brush the top of my hand, but he couldn’t get a grip.

My right hand cramped and started to slip. My heart beat wildly as my pinky lost its grip, then my ring finger. The rest of my fingers ached with the strain of holding up the rest of my body weight.

“I’ll get closer,” Xavier grunted, but as he edged nearer to me, the downward pull of gravity increased his momentum, and he slipped. There was the scrape of body against shingles as Xavier lurched forward, finally stopping with his legs dangling from the roof.

“*Xavier!*” I screamed. “Xavier! Be careful!”

He gritted his teeth and reached for me, and he had almost reached my wrist when my fingers went numb and lost their grip entirely. I slipped in an instant and was plummeting toward the fast-approaching ground. I screamed and felt my body tense, bracing for the impact. Which came a lot faster than I thought it would, and I dropped onto a floor of stone, instead of dirt, landing with a grunt.

I lay for a long moment, dazed. Above me, the roof didn’t look far enough away. It didn’t make sense. How had I survived that fall?

My whole body ached, but I managed to pull myself to sitting, and when I looked around, I realized that I had fallen onto a balcony on the third floor, instead of onto the rocky ground, three stories below where I now lay.

“Cali! Cali!” he called out. “Where are you? Can you hear me? Answer me!”

I could hear the anguish in Xavier’s voice as he called my name, and it nearly broke my heart. I looked up to where he still dangled off the roof.

“I think I’m okay,” I said cautiously. “Xavier! Can you hear me? I think I’m all right!”

I could see him nod. “I’m coming down! Stay there!”

He had just started to shift his weight to move downward when the ghost boy appeared again, materializing out of thin air.

I screamed as the little boy laughed and flew right at Xavier.

“Watch out! Xavier!”

It was too late, and Xavier rolled off the roof. I screamed and rushed forward, trying to reach for him. But the blast had been too powerful. I was helpless as I watched him miss my balcony and drop toward the ground three stories below.

# Episode 3283

**Artemis**

“Greyson!” I shouted as he dropped out of sight. I rushed to the hidden door and managed to barely catch it before it swung shut again. “Hang on! I’m coming!” I shouted down the chute.

I was about to fling myself down after him when I felt a hand grip my arm, yanking me back from the edge. I looked up to see Adair next to me.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“Don’t do this,” he said steadily. He looked down the long, dark shaft. “You have no idea where that leads.”

“That doesn’t matter!” I said angrily as I pulled my arm free from his grasp. “Our friends are down there!”

Adair gave me a cold look. “And you think that throwing yourself into the same danger will help them?”

As I stared back at him, it felt like I was being turned inside out by fear. I wanted to scream in frustration. *Rishika is down there, for gods’ sake!* I wanted to scream at him, but I didn’t have time to do any of that, because at that exact moment, the poltergeist appeared again. One instant he wasn’t there, then the next his silvery-grey ass was flying directly at us.

Acting on pure instinct, I pushed Adair out of the way as the thing zoomed right for him—though I probably pushed him a *little* harder than I normally would have—and threw myself in the other direction to avoid the specter’s attack.

I rolled across the dusty carpet, staying low to the ground and out of its way until I got to the long, narrow windows at the other end. The fireplace poker Greyson had dropped lay on the ground, and my hand closed over it. I stood up, ready to wield the weapon against that absolute dick of a poltergeist when I heard something bang hard on the windows behind me.

I spun around, ready for an attack at my back.

But nothing came at me. The banging continued, and now a voice joined it.

“Help! Someone help! Can anyone hear me? *HELP!*”

I frowned. That voice was familiar. I yanked back the long, dusty damask curtains covering the windows and was shocked to see Cali standing on the other side of the glass. At least I *thought* it was Cali. It was slightly hard to tell. She was filthy—covered in soot and dirt from head to toe. Her hair swirled wildly around her head, and her eyes were wide and terrified as she banged on the window.

“HELP! Hel—” she stopped screaming when she saw me and stared back at me in complete shock. Then, “LET ME IN!”

I gripped the window sash and yanked with all my might. “Come *on*,” I muttered, pulling until my shoulders ached. And then I remembered that the windows were fused shut.

*Shit.*

“Stand back!” I shouted at Cali, and luckily she didn’t hesitate to obey.

Swinging the poker like a baseball bat, I smashed the glass of the window. The leaded glass was thick as hell, and it made a sound like a bomb going off when it exploded.

Cali stepped through the shattered glass and wrapped her arms around me, her breath coming in short, terrified bursts.

“Oh my god, Artemis. Thank you!” she said, burying her face into my shoulder.

Relieved that my plan had worked, I hugged her back. I was glad to see that she was safe, and trying to ignore the fact that she was super dirty and getting her mystery sludge all over me.

“How did you get out there? And where’s Xavier?” I asked her.

“Oh god,” Cali sobbed, her pale face losing even more color. “Oh, Artemis, he was thrown from the roof by that ghost!”

I glanced quickly around, wondering if Cali meant that the poltergeist we had been fighting had thrown Xavier from the roof, but that didn’t make sense. He’d been too busy messing with us to be on the roof with Cali. Then I remembered the little boy we had seen.

I put my hands on Cali’s shoulders and tried to sound reassuring. “Okay, listen to me, Cali. That sounds pretty bad, but try not to worry. He’s an Alpha. He’ll be okay.”

Cali didn’t have time to respond before the poltergeist reappeared in the corner of the room. He darted a look around with his coal-black eyes and gave a strange, maniacal laugh before he zoomed at Gabriel.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Cali wailed.

“Um. Artemis? I could use a little help here!” Gabriel bellowed as the poltergeist closed in on him.

I leapt forward, and as I slashed through the thing with my poker, it retreated slightly, giving Gabriel time to move quickly away.

Cali gasped. “Oh my god, I’ve seen that man!”

I spun toward my sister, shocked. “Seen who? What are you talking about?”

“The poltergeist,” she said, pointing toward the silvery wisp as it darted around the room.

That didn’t clear anything up. “What are you talking about?” I demanded. “How can you recognize a ghost? Or anyone with that melted face?”

But Cali was staring at the poltergeist with interest. “It’s the shape of his chin, I think. I think it’s him. He looks like the dad. Henri Duquette!”

And just like that, the poltergeist materialized in the air right in front of us, his dead black eyes now focused on Cali. He wasn’t doing anything—not laughing or attacking—just hovering there, looking at her. It was beyond creepy.

But Cali didn’t look scared as she looked up at him. “That’s you, right? That’s your name? Henri Duquette?”

The poltergeist was silent, which felt like a strange kind of answer.

“You’re here because you were murdered, right?” Cali went on. “Is that right?”

The way the thing was staring at her made me certain that my sister was right.

“Cali, keep talking to him,” I urged her quietly. “I think he’s listening to you.”

Cali nodded and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry you died in such a horrible way, Henri. I can’t imagine what that must have been like. Is there something you want us to do for you? Something we could do to help you? Maybe to move on?”

Henri tipped his head to the side, as though he was listening closely.

“Holy shit, I think it’s working. Maybe there is something to that *Ghost Whisperer* bullshit,” Gabriel said from the other side of the room. Even Adair was watching the moment unfold with surprised interest.

Cali stared bravely up at the apparition. “You are here because you have unfinished business, right? We can help you resolve it, Henri. I promise we can help. But you have to help us. Let us find our friends and get out of this house.”

I held my breath as the poltergeist floated lower and lower, until he was face-to-melted-ghost-face with Cali.

I stepped closer to my sister, my body tensed for attack, ready to defend her if things went sideways.

“Please,” Cali said, more quietly now. “I just want to help. I truly do. I’ve seen your son—”

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. As soon as Cali mentioned the son, the poltergeist’s face twisted into something even more grotesque. It was an expression of rage—I was sure about that—and he let out a high-pitched scream that made every hair on my body stand on end.

He lunged toward Cali, but I was ready, and I came at him with the poker.

“DON’T YOU DARE TALK ABOUT MY SON!”

The voice filled the room like a wall of sound, and Cali fell back.

Adair stepped toward her. “It was a valiant effort, but even that isn’t going to beat a poltergeist as strong as this one.”

I glowered at my uncle. I was getting pretty sick and tired of Adair’s constant negativity. Nothing was ever good enough for him; no idea was ever going to work. I rounded on him. “Then what do *you* suggest?” I snapped.

Adair sighed and looked around the room. “The best way to get rid of an evil thing like this is to throw it into another dimension.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, great, okay. Why didn’t you tell me earlier? That is *so* easy! Let me just open up my interdimensional portal device, and we’ll take care of that right way. No problem. Oh wait, they don’t exist, and that’s the shittest idea yet,” I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

Adair didn’t look pleased with my attitude and opened his mouth to snap back, but Cali held up her hand.

“What about a trap?” she asked, effectively stopping the argument.

“What do you mean?” Gabriel asked curiously. “What kind of a trap? Like for game?”

Cali shook her head. “No, not like that.” She looked around at Adair and me. “There are three of us.”

“Yeah, so?” I asked.

Her eyes were wide. “Let’s make a Fae triangle.”

# Episode 3284

Adair frowned at me in confusion. “What are you talking about? A Fae triangle?”

Was this guy being serious? Here he was, some intense, really-good-at-magic-and-fighting Fae, and he didn’t know what a Fae triangle was?

“Come *on*!” I pleaded, hoping to communicate the urgency of our situation. “We’ve done it before when we’ve had three Fae in the same place. A Fae triangle can catch a poltergeist,” I added, just in case he was unfamiliar with the concept.

Adair rolled his eyes. “I know *what* a Fae triangle is. What I’m saying is that it’s probably not going to work here.”

“What? Why the hell not?” I demanded.

“You must not be all that familiar with Fae triangles,” Adair said with a touch of contempt. “It’s going to be very hard to use one to catch a powerful poltergeist. That’s not what they’re intended to be used for. And this isn’t your average ghost,” he finished, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It’s worked before though,” I said. It was how we’d trapped Tony, my old college classmate who had attacked me both in real life and from the grave. Had he not been as powerful a poltergeist as this one? Was that why it had worked?

Artemis glared at her uncle, looking *fed up*. I was feeling the same. “Well, if you have a better idea than a Fae triangle, feel free to share,” she snapped at him. “But if you don’t, then we’re going to do Cali’s idea, because a Fae triangle is the only option we have right now.”

Adair still didn’t look convinced. “Fine,” he said in a resigned way, “but when it doesn’t work, it’s just going to make the poltergeist angrier.” He raised an eyebrow. “If you think the ghost is strong now, just wait and see how pissed off he’s going to be when you try to trap him.”

I felt a thrill of fear as I remembered the power that had radiated from the ghost when he had yelled about his son. I suspected Adair was right about that, but I shook my head. “It’s a risk we’re going to have to take,” I said firmly. “There’s no way to destroy him right now, or transport him, and we have to do something with him, or he’s going to attack again. And we have to find the others.”

My thoughts went back to the little boy on the roof, and my heart ached for Xavier. Where was he? Was he okay? He had been thrown off a roof, for god’s sake! I hated not knowing what had happened to him. Artemis was right, of course. Xavier was an Alpha, and I knew he could take care of himself. But still…

I shook my head, trying to clear the dark thoughts from it. He was going to be okay. He had to be.

Artemis looked at me. “Okay, so how are we doing this?”

I took a deep breath. I needed to focus on the task in front of me. “We need to draw him out, then use the Fae triangle to trap him.”

Over in the corner, Gabriel raised his hand, like we were in kindergarten. “Um, and what should I be doing while you’re doing this ghost geometry stuff?”  
 “Oh.” I had sort of forgotten about Gabriel, what with him not being Fae and all. “I guess you can be our protection for when we make the Fae triangle. Just make sure the ghost doesn’t attack us before we’re ready for him.”

Gabriel nodded and gripped his iron poker even tighter. “Got it. Count on me.”

“So how do we draw him out?” Artemis asked, looking around the now empty room. “He’s never around when we want him.”

I followed her gaze. “I guess we just… taunt him? Kind of antagonize him until he appears?”

Adair rolled his eyes again, but Artemis nodded.

“Let’s do it,” she said.

“So, is this your family home?” I called out into the empty room. “Because it looks like shit!”

My voice echoed off the high ceilings, but nothing happened.

“It’s so dusty! And all the wood is rotting!” I added.

Artemis leaned closer to me. “Cali, listen, that’s a good start, but I think you can go harder than that.”

“Yeah, no more decorating insults,” Gabriel added. “They’re not as powerful as you seem to think.”

I scowled at him and cleared my throat. “Your photo albums… They’re dumb! And poorly labeled!”

Artemis sighed, and I could see that Adair was looking more annoyed than ever.

“I don’t know what to say!” I said desperately.

“Let me try,” Artemis said. She looked around. “It must suck that your whole family is dead! Guess you couldn’t protect them! That’s a real shame, huh? Some witch you turned out to be!”

The room started to shake as though we were in an earthquake, and I felt my pulse rate tick up. I had wanted to draw the ghost out, but now that we were doing it, I remembered how freaky he was.

But Adair looked around, mildly surprised. “It’s working.”

Heart pounding, I stepped closer to Artemis and took her hand, preparing to make the triangle.

“That must be really emasculating, huh?” Artemis yelled. “You couldn’t even protect your wife and kid from being killed. How sad. *Boo-hoo*. And now you’re all vengeful, which is *soooo* creative.”

I stared at Artemis in total shock. I couldn’t believe she was speaking like that.

“It makes sense if you think about it!” Adair added, joining in. “Witches always have such weak magic! It’s pathetic. Nothing like the power of a Fae. *I’ve* never let anyone I love die, but that’s just me, I guess.”

I couldn’t help clearing my throat awkwardly at that. Adair didn’t look at me.

Artemis looked at me and nodded encouragingly. “It’s your turn, Cali. Give it another try.”

I nodded, trying to think of something really harsh to say. Something that would draw this wandering spirit out of the walls. It had to hurt. That was the only way.

“I’ve seen your son,” I said slowly. “And after we capture you, we’re going to exorcise his ghost!”

I had apparently said the magic words. In an instant, Henri’s ghost had appeared in the middle of the room, and it swooped down toward where we stood together. With a shout, Gabriel lunged forward, his poker clutched in his hands like a baseball bat, but I held up my hand.

“No, Gabriel! Stop!” I called. “Let him come!”

I reached out and gripped Adair’s hand in my left, and Artemis’s in my right. I watched Adair hesitate to reach for Artemis’s hand.

“You have to link hands!” I shouted at them. “Do it!”

Adair and Artemis looked at each other, and they both looked awkward and deeply reluctant.

“*Come on!*” I called.

Finally Artemis rolled her eyes and grabbed Adair’s hand. They closed up the triangle just as Henri swooped into the center of it, his transparent face twisted with fury.

My heart was beating like a hummingbird, but I worked to focus all my attention and energy on the ghost, and I could feel it beginning to work.

“Henri Duquette,” I said softly.

Artemis and Adair joined in.

We chanted his name in low voices.

I could feel the strain on my magic as the ghost rammed into the edges of the triangle. He wanted out, and his escape attempts were so violent their reverberations felt like a punch to the gut. It was hard as hell, but I knew I had to hold tight to the triangle for this to have any chance of working.

Then, at the exact wrong time, I felt the Seluna mark flare to life. *No! Not now! It can’t be!*

But then the strangest thing started to happen. Instead of dipping me into a terrifying hallucination, it seemed to be strengthening me—almost like it was *feeding* my power instead of draining it.

What the hell was going on?

Then I thought of the widow’s walk on the roof. Perhaps the handprint could sense I was in danger, and that was why it was helping me? *If* that’s what it was doing.

Whatever it was doing, this was a strange turn of events. But I was grateful and didn’t reject the power. I needed it, and I pushed with all of my might.

And it must have had some effect, because Artemis’s eyes widened in surprise. She looked at me, shocked, as the Fae triangle grew around us, strengthening and solidifying.

“That’s enough!” Adair called out, and the three of us stepped back.

The Fae triangle was holding tight… for now.

Adair looked at it with a frown. “Well, it’s holding, and that’s something, but I don’t know for how long.” He nodded at the ghost of Henri Duquette trapped inside. “This ghost is really strong. I’ve never felt a poltergeist almost break out of a Fae triangle like that.”

I nodded. “Well, at least he’s trapped now. He can’t hurt us while we look for everyone else.”

Adair had been right about one thing—the poltergeist looked *super pissed* to be trapped.

He stared at me with his dead black eyes. “You think you’re safe because I’m in here?” He laughed. “Think again. *She’s* still out there.”

# Episode 3285

**Xavier**

The first sound I heard was a low moan. After a moment I realized that it was me, groaning in pain. I shook my head, trying to clear it. Thoughts filtered back into my clouded mind slowly. Part of me was damp, and when I opened my eyes, I looked around, trying to identify the source of the water. I was on the bank of some kind of old, forgotten pond. My shoulder was half submerged, and algae stuck to my arm. I tried to wipe it off, but the stuff was viscous, and the green goo stuck to my fingers.  
 “*Fuck*,” I said, groaning again. My whole body ached like I’d just had the shit kicked out of me, but I pushed myself to a sitting position and looked around.

The water of the pond was black and almost still, but halfway across I could see ripples moving outward as something started to move toward me. I shifted away quickly when I remembered that I was in Louisiana. I just hoped it wasn’t an alligator or something equally hungry. And with my luck lately, it’d probably be one of those damn gator shifters.

The pain radiating from my leg told me it had broken from the fall. I could feel that it was already starting to heal, but when I looked down at it, I swore again. It had started to heal in the bent position I’d landed in.

“Dammit,” I muttered, and—gritting my teeth—I braced my hands on either side of my knee and rebroke my tibia bone. It hurt like hell, but I sucked in a deep breath and tried not to let the pain overwhelm me.

Partly because it was necessary, and partly just to distract myself, I grabbed a branch that had fallen nearby and settled it next to my leg. Then I yanked off my shirt and started ripping strips of fabric from off the bottom. I used the fabric to secure the straightest part of the branch to my leg, so the bone would heal correctly. Then I pulled myself to my feet.

I couldn’t exactly stay in the muck I was currently half submerged in, so I hobbled over to one of the boulders nearby and leaned against it, grateful for something solid as I waited for my leg to finish healing. I peered into the distance, looking for something familiar, and thought I could see the shape of the house in the distance.

I looked up to see where I’d broken through the thick canopy of willows and kudzu coming down. That fucking ghost boy. If I ever saw him again . . .

I closed my eyes. *Cali? Cali, can you hear me? Are you okay? Are you there?*

There was no answer in the mind link. I guess we were too far out of range, which didn’t exactly make me feel any better about the situation. I peered through the trees at the shape of the house in the distance. What the hell was happening over there? Was Cali okay? She’d looked mostly unhurt on that balcony, but who knew what other ghosts or magic she was facing now? Anything could happen in that place, and I hated that I had left her there alone.

Gingerly, I put some weight on my leg to test it. Pain shot up into my core like hot lava, so I knew it was still broken. I looked over at the distant house with frustration. I knew I couldn’t limp back. Not yet.

“*Fuck!*” I shouted, pounding my fist against the boulder. I hated to wait.

I looked around, thinking hard. Maybe I could shift to my wolf form and run back that way. Maybe that would help me ignore the pain.

But I knew that if I rushed it and didn’t let myself get back to 100%, I might not be able to fight my way back into that damned haunted mansion.

So, even though I hated it, I was going to have to wait.

I leaned back on the sun-warmed rock with a gusty sigh.

*Cali? If you can hear me at all, say something.*

There was still no answer, and that just made waiting even more frustrating. I wished I could know that she was all right.

There was the snap of a twig in the trees behind me, and I twisted around. I peered into the shadows, trying to see if I could catch sight of any movement. I’d been mostly joking when I was thinking about the alligator shifters, but really, I had no idea what the hell was out here.

When I thought back to how easy it had been for Clementine to find it, I probably should have guessed the house was some kind of trap set up for us, but I hadn’t even questioned it at the time. We’d been trying and failing to find a sign of the vampire-witch for days, and then suddenly we were able to find the old family home of the Duquettes? I should have known better. At the time, I’d just been happy for the tip, but looking at it now, it just seemed so shady.

And there was more. The fact that the Duquettes were an old witch family just didn’t sit right with me. At all. I’d spoken to a lot of people, and not one of the sources we’d spoken to on the subject of the Duquettes had *ever* mentioned that very pertinent detail, which seemed now like a pretty big oversight.

I tried to remember more details about the job I’d done all that time ago. I wracked my brain trying to remember if there had been any mention of witches or any kind of magic. I wasn’t always into details as a mercenary, but for the life of me, all I could remember anyone telling me was that I was supposed to track down the family, confirm it was them without alerting them that they were being watched, and report back.

That was it.

Running my hand through my damp hair, I almost wanted to laugh at my past self for being so naive. I’d thought it was just an easy in-and-out kind of job. I think I’d complained about how boring it was to Colton at the time.

Now I wished I could go back and slap myself. But I knew there was no use regretting it now.

Another sound from the trees pulled me from my thoughts, and I realized that I recognized what I had just heard: it was a footstep.

“I know you’re out there!” I called into the trees. “Show yourself!”

I tested my leg again. It felt only about halfway healed, which wasn’t ideal, but if I was going to have to fight, I knew I could.

A breath of wind blew toward me, and I caught the scent. It was a vampire for sure.

“I know that you’re working for the Duquettes!” I yelled. “You’re trying to seek revenge for their dead relatives, right? Whatever they’re paying you, I can double it!”

My voice seemed to get sucked into the shadows of the trees. It was like the opposite of an echo, and there was no reply.

But there was another sound to my right. I studiously avoided turning to look in that direction, pretending like I hadn’t heard it. My leg put me at an obvious disadvantage, so I wanted to store up as many extra advantages as I could. But I kept watch on that side out the corner of my eye.

“Fine! I’ll triple it! If you’ve been watching me, you know I’m good for the money!”

There was a long beat of silence, but it was the kind of silence that was more like the absence of speech. I knew someone was listening.

“Do you think this is about money?” a voice finally came back to me.

I let myself focus on the sound of that voice. It was definitely the voice that had spoken into my mind before, but there was nothing else about it that was at all familiar.

“Then what’s it for?” I asked, trying to keep the voice talking.

“For my *family*!”

Well, that definitely confirmed my suspicions. The witch following me must be related to the Duquettes in some way. It was good information to know, because it meant that I wasn’t dealing with a mercenary here. And it changed things. Something this personal meant that a fight between us would only end one way: with one of us dying.

I got to my feet, ignoring the hot pain in my leg, and readied myself for what was to come. I pushed away the guilt I’d been feeling and forced myself to remember Cali’s pain from the mark on her back, and how this person had stolen Seluna’s ashes and prolonged her suffering. This filled me with the anger I needed.

There were more footsteps, and then finally, someone stepped out from the shadows of the trees. Looking only out of the corner of my eye, the first thing I noticed was the glint of gold buttons.

I took a deep breath and started to turn toward them, ready to face the vampire-witch that had been stalking me all this time.

# Episode 3286

**Greyson**

I felt like I had been sliding for too long. At first I’d been trying to pay attention to how far I would have gone—second floor, first floor—but I had to have passed the level of the basement by now. How deep did this slide go?

I’d tried to brace my hands on the wall to stop my downward descent, but the walls were smooth here and felt strangely slimy, and I hadn’t been able to get a grip. The stone chute beneath me was so smooth and steeply slanted that I couldn’t brace my feet.

After what felt like a long time of sliding in the darkness, I heard a sound, and after a moment longer, I could make out voices below me. I tried again to stop, but I couldn’t do anything about my forward momentum before I slammed into something solid and annoyed.

“Hey!” Mikah bellowed. “What the hell?”

I let out a grunt of pain as I tried to untangle my legs from what I *thought* were Mikah’s arms, though it was too dark to tell for sure. It seemed he had been sitting at the bottom of the slide and I’d plowed right into him. There was a soft click, and Rishika held up her phone, using the flashlight to illuminate the darkness. In the narrow beam I could see that we were surrounded by rough stone walls that dripped with ancient moisture.

Tabitha was still on the ground, probably where she had landed after the slide, and Rishika reached for her and helped her to her feet. I finally got free of Mikah, and the two of us stood as well.

“Where the hell are we?” Tabitha asked. She crowded close to Rishika, looking scared.

Rishika lifted her flashlight higher, looking at our surroundings. “It looks like some kind of cave,” she said slowly.

Great. Another cave. Just what I had been hoping to find in this creepy house.

Mikah frowned as he examined the walls. “It must be built into the foundation of the house. Maybe a tomb for the dead? Catacombs, maybe?”

Tabitha looked around wildly “You don’t think these are the same caves as…” her voice shook as she trailed off.

Mikah wrapped an arm around her narrow shoulders. “No, we’re way too far from that cemetery for it to be connected. It would have to be a massive tunnel system for anyone to connect these caves to the ones at the graveyard.”

I wouldn’t put it past the New Orleans witches to do something like that, but I kept my mouth shut. I could see how scared Tabitha was, and I didn’t see any point in making it worse. She was probably still suffering from some post-traumatic stress from her kidnapping.

I turned to look back at the slide we had just come down. I climbed on it and tried to climb up the way we’d come, but it was too steep and way too smooth for me to get any farther than a couple of steps before I slid back down.

I jumped back to the ground with a frustrated huff and looked at Mikah. “Maybe your vampire speed could work.”

Mikah shrugged and climbed onto the slide. “Worth a try.” He tried to get a running start and did manage to get higher than I had a couple of times, but ultimately kept sliding back down.

“Are you two still playing?” Rishika asked us shortly. “Or are you ready to help me find another way out of here?”  
 I sighed. “Yeah, come on.”

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my own phone and turned on the flashlight. I took the lead down the tunnel, though it wasn’t hard navigating. There was only one direction to go, but I wanted to stay in front in case there was a hidden latch or a door. I walked with my hands on the wall, running them along the rough stone, feeling for any dips or changes.

Finally, my hand sensed something that seemed out of place, and my breath caught.

“What is it?” Rishika asked when I paused.

“This stone is loose,” I said quietly. I pressed it, and it depressed like a giant button. The stretch of stone wall beside me pushed in, then slid to the right with the ear-splitting grinding of stone against stone.

I looked over at Rishika, who was watching the wall move. “I fucking hate hidden doors.”

Rishika sighed. “Same.”

But when it finished opening, both of us went through the door without hesitation.

On the other side was a large, circular room with three metal doors.

“What the hell is this place?” Mikah asked.

I had no idea. “Let’s try door number one,” I suggested. I walked over and tugged at the knob, but nothing happened. But set into the door was a small window. I reached for it and was surprised to discover I could open the little door that covered it and peer inside to a small square room.

I looked back at Rishika. “There’s nothing inside there.”

Apparently not willing to take my word for it, Rishika stepped past me and peered inside the room for herself. And as she did, she let out a shudder.

“What?” I asked.

“It smells awful in there. Like something died.”

Behind us, Tabitha let out a gasp. Mikah was still next to her, rubbing his hand on her upper back, trying to comfort her.

I started toward the second door when a voice spoke from behind the third.

“Hello?”

We all froze. I glanced at Rishika, whose eyes were wide with shock.

“Hello?” the voice said again. “Is someone out there?”

Skipping the second door, I walked to the third and opened the little window in the center of the door. And as I did, the scent of death and decay hit me like a punch in the face. I stepped back with a cough.

“What the hell’s in there?” Rishika demanded.

“I know that scent,” Mikah said grimly.

“What is it?” I asked.

Mikah looked grave. “It’s a desiccating vampire.”

Not exactly what I was expecting.

“Right on the first guess,” the voice said with a laugh. The voice was terrible to listen to, like sandpaper against stone.

I stepped toward the window of the third door and peeked inside. Something inside shifted as I shone my flashlight in, and it let out a low hiss. It looked like a man, though it was hard to tell. He covered his eyes with arms so skinny they looked like they were only bone.

I frowned as I looked back at Mikah. “Is he… dying?”

Mikah shook his head, looking worried. “No, it means he’s starving.”

“Oh, great. Keep your veins to yourselves, everyone,” I said.

“It makes him more dangerous,” Mikah said. “Don’t get too close to the window, okay?”

I nodded and looked back at the vampire. “What’s your name?”

“Pierre,” came the reply.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Wasting away, of course,” he said with a touch of annoyance.

I rolled my eyes at this. Vampires were such drama queens. “Okay, so you’re obviously trapped. We have no reason to help you out of there if you don’t answer us truthfully.”

Pierre considered this. “I was foolish enough to trust a woman once. A very, very dangerous woman.”

“What happened?”

The thin arms gestured around. “The inevitable. She trapped me here.”

I took this in. “Does this house belong to that woman?”

“It belonged to her family once.”

I thought about this dangerous woman Pierre was talking about. I wondered if she was the one who had cast all the spells and trapped the ghosts in the house.

“Was she a witch?” I asked him.

Pierre laughed bitterly. “She was *part* witch.”

My heart started to beat faster at that. “And part what else?”

“Part vampire,” Pierre said, to no one’s surprise.

I looked over at Rishika, who looked shaken. I could tell we were both thinking the same thing. This woman Pierre was talking about—it might be her. The vampire-witch who had been taunting us all, and the one who had stolen the ashes.

“How do I find her?” I asked quickly.

“That’s easy,” Pierre said. “You don’t find her unless she wants you to.”

“What did you do that made her angry enough to trap you?” Rishika asked.

Pierre laughed again, the sound like a sob. “I turned her.”

“What?” I asked, shocked.

“I’m her sire.”

Mikah gasped. “And she *trapped* you?” he asked in disbelief.

“What is it?” I asked, looking at him. “What does that mean?”

Mikah looked deeply shaken. “Most vampires feel a sense of loyalty to their sire. I’ve never heard of anything like this, and it’s strange that she would have trapped him for so long.”

“And that,” Pierre said hollowly, “is what makes our Addy so special.”

“Who’s Addy?” I asked with a sinking feeling in my gut. “Is that her name? The woman who trapped you?”

“That’s right,” he intoned. “My vicious, my horrible, my precious Addy. Adéluce Duquette.”

# Episode 3287

**Xavier**

I squinted into the sunlight as the figure stepped out from the shadow of the trees. As she came into view, however, my eyes narrowed for a different reason. I recognized that face. I had just seen a photo of it in the attic with Cali.

My stomach dropped. This was Adéluce Duquette.

But that didn’t make any sense. How could it be? She couldn’t be here—she was dead.

My heart thumped hard in my chest as I looked at her carefully. Was it possible that she was really nothing but a solid-looking poltergeist? Was I looking at a ghost?

No, I could see the dead leaves rustle beneath her feet as she stepped toward me. She was as real as I was.

“I thought you were supposed to be dead?” I asked.

Adéluce laughed, the sound sharp as daggers. “In a way. But not in the way that you think,” she said cryptically.

Every instinct I had told me to attack. To shift and leap at her and demand she tell me where the ashes were. But I didn’t move. I knew that I had to bide my time. She had already proven how freaking strong she was, so I needed to tread carefully.

“So that was what René meant when he said his mother was there,” I said thoughtfully.

The sound of her son’s name stopped Adéluce mid-step, but just for an instant. She recovered herself so quickly, it’s possible I wouldn’t have noticed if I had not been watching her so closely.

“My son listens well to his mother,” she said quietly.

That idea sent shivers down my spine. That ghost boy had been creepy as fuck.

“Listen,” I started, “whatever issues you have, they’re all with me. None of this has anything to do with Cali. So just give me the ashes, and we can settle this one-on-one.”

Adéluce laughed again, and the sound was no warmer this time. “You must be joking. You didn’t really think that was going to work on me, did you?” She tipped her head, studying me closely. “I’ve been watching you, Xavier Evers.”

Her voice slid over my name in a way that made me feel cold all over, but I tried to hide it. “Is that right?”

She nodded. “Yes, it is. I know everything about you. All your weaknesses. Everything about your pack. Your brothers.” She paused. “Your mate.”

She smiled as I glowered at her.

“I’ve been watching and learning, and I just had to wait until one of you became vulnerable.”

My whole body was tense. Did that mean that Adéluce Duquette had plans to go after more people I loved? I thought of Colton and Maya and their growing family. I thought of Greyson, trapped in the haunted house from hell. And the rest of the pack, back in Oregon, including Cali’s parents. Had I put them all in danger?

I slowly shifted on my feet, putting weight onto my broken leg, testing it out. It felt mostly healed, which was good, as I was going to need to make my move soon. This was my chance. I needed to attack. I needed to act *now*. This vampire-witch had been *impossible* to find up until now. She was like a whisp of smoke. No matter what we had done or who we had asked, I hadn’t seen a trace of her… until now. Now she was out in the open, and I needed to move, before it was too late.

I crouched down into a defensive position and concentrated. I let all of the frustration and anger I’d felt toward this witch fill my soul. It was dark and angry, but I needed it to reinforce my resolve and to give me strength.

There was a long moment of protracted silence between us where the only sound was the distant croak of frogs in the pond, but the moment she took a step closer to me, I leapt, my claws extending as I flew at her.

But without even a flash of surprise in her eyes, she lifted her hands, and with a wave, she stopped my forward momentum and hurled me to the side with her magic. I went flying into a tree and landed hard, dazed for a moment.

She was so damn strong.

But she wasn’t done with me. Before I could recover myself, she lifted her hands, and I rose with them, my feet leaving the ground. There was a tremendous pressure on my throat, and I coughed, trying to drag in air, but the pressure was choking off my breath.

I clawed at my neck, trying to break the invisible grip. Holy shit, she was going to kill me.

Adéluce’s eyes flashed. “You think I wasn’t ready for that?” she snapped. “You think I can’t predict what you’re going to do? You are a fool. I know your every move, Xavier Evers. I know how you think, I know how you feel. You’re really very predictable.”

“Then why don’t you just kill me and get it over with?” I choked out with the last of my breath. “Take your revenge now!”

Adéluce’s face twisted into a terrifying smile, and she tossed back her head with a laugh. “Whatever do you take me for? Why would I kill you when I’m having so much fun with you? You have so much suffering left to give me, Xavier.”

There was something in her eyes I thought I recognized. I had only seen it a few times, but it was the kind of thing that stuck with you. It was madness. She was insane. What she was doing to me, and to Cali, and to the people in the house—that wasn’t normal revenge. There was something deeper to it, and a hell of a lot darker. It was like she had been driven insane by her mission.

The anger I had been cultivating ebbed as I looked into her eyes. I knew what had broken her. “I didn’t know they would kill your family,” I gasped. “I swear I didn’t—”

Adéluce’s eyes flashed, and she screamed, the sound bouncing against the trees. She flicked her hand, and I went flying again, hitting another tree—full force—before I fell to the ground.

Adéluce took a step closer to me, so she was looming over my prone, groaning form. “In your line of work, was it usual to hire you to find people just to say hello? Is that a common practice?” She didn’t seem to want an answer to the question.

“My family had been on the run for months,” she bit out. “We were trying to live normal lives with our son. Surely you must have seen that! And you found us. You delivered us. You are the reason that they’re dead!” She was so angry she was spitting with rage. “You had to have known what would happen. You signed the death warrant on my family’s heads.”

Every word she spoke hit me like a punch in the gut. She was going to kill me, and there didn’t seem to be much I could do to stop her. I pulled myself to my feet—I didn’t want to go out on my knees.

“No,” I gasped. “I had no idea why they were looking for you. I just did a job. I wasn’t involved in what came after.”

Adéluce gave me a smile that chilled my bones. “Oh, if you’re worried about them, don’t be—the ones who hired you. I already found the ones who killed my family.”

“They’re dead,” I said. It wasn’t a question, and my stomach tensed with fear.

“Oh, yes. They died excruciating deaths. But you should feel honored, Xavier Evers.” She held her arms out in a grand gesture, and the dappled sunlight coming through the trees shone on her. “*You* are my final step. My little masterpiece of vengeance. I have thought about you, planned for you, dreamt of you. There were times when I wondered if it was worth it to keep searching, to keep going. I would tire of revenge. But then I would think of the pain I’d been dreaming of inflicting on you, and that would keep me going. All these years, you have driven me.”

I felt a chill rocket down my spine. “So you want me to die a slow death,” I said. I took a deep breath and straightened my shoulders. “Do your worst.”

I braced myself, but I lifted my chin at the same time. I refused to show her the fear I felt. I gritted my teeth, thinking of all the pain she’d already inflicted on me by harming Cali. I let that anger and hatred fill me and strengthen my spine.

But Adéluce didn’t move toward me. She only smiled, her dark eyes dead black. “Oh, I’m not going to *kill* you, Xavier Evers.” Her smile grew deranged. “I’m going to do something so much worse.”

# Episode 3288

**Xavier**

I turned to face Adéluce. *What the hell is she talking about? If she’s not putting me through this funhouse of horrors as part of an elaborate plot to kill me, then what the fuck does she want?*

“Are you just trying to toy with me?” I demanded. “You want me to suffer, so you’re dragging this out?”

Adéluce’s already deranged-looking smile widened even further. “Something like that.”

*Fucking vampire-witch.* Would she never stop being a pain in my ass? I shook my head. “No, I’m not playing these fucked-up games with you. If you want me, then target me. Don’t bring anyone else into this. They’re not involved. They had nothing to do with what happened all those years ago.”

Her smile took on a razor’s edge. “Like you left my son out of it?” Her voice echoed in my ears, and I winced—for more than just the volume.

René. It was no guess what had happened to him. After all, he’d become the poltergeist that attacked me back at the house. The little shit had pushed me off the roof.

But could I really blame him? If the roles were reversed, I would have done the exact same thing to the guy I believed was responsible—and I’d do a hell of a lot worse than just push him off a roof. If I could, I’d rip that fucker to shreds.

But, much as I was sure Cali would hate for me to even think this, now wasn’t the time for empathy. I had to focus. I had to finish off this vampire-witch, get those fucking ashes, and get back to Cali. So the real question was: how was I going to play this?

A head-on attack wouldn’t work. Adéluce was too strong for that, and we were on her turf. She had every possible advantage, so I had to play this smart if I wanted to win. Hell, if I wanted to make it out of this encounter alive.

I needed to get her talking, get her distracted. Then, when her guard was down, I’d strike.

I shifted lightly on my feet. My leg had finally healed enough that I was confident I could be spry if I needed to. I was ready to shift at a moment’s notice—which was exactly what I’d have to do to pull this off. Because I knew one thing for sure: there was no way in hell I was going to let this vampire-witch get out of here alive.

This ended now.

“I’m done playing your sick little games,” I said “Just tell me where the ashes are. The ashes that you *stole.* That’s all I want. That’s all I’m here for. Tell me where they are, and I’ll let you do whatever you want to me. I won’t even fight you.”

Adéluce scoffed. “Oh, please. I don’t need you to cooperate with me for my plan to work. I have you right where I want you—along with everyone else. Everything is going according to my plan.”

My brows rose. “You wanted us to come to New Orleans? Did you set us up? Was this all some big conspiracy to get me out here?” The thought was even more concerning than I let on. I racked my brain to try to remember how Big Mac had mentioned she knew Clementine. I was pretty sure Big Mac had said that they were old friends and used to date. But could Clementine be in on this?

Suddenly, I was doubting everything and everyone. Had we truly been manipulated all along?

“Think bigger, wolf. It doesn’t matter *where* you are in the world. I’ll always be able to find you. All that matters is that I can exploit your weaknesses and the weaknesses of the people you love. I could destroy you here, at your home, or in Antarctica if I wanted. Location is irrelevant; that’s how well I’ve designed my torture for you.” She grinned again. “There’s no escaping everything I’ve got planned for you, Xavier Evers.”

Her little monologue was no doubt intended to scare me, but it just left me confused. What the hell kind of torture did she have in mind that our location was irrelevant? I didn’t want to imagine what she actually wanted with these ashes. Because really, it all pointed to one thing, didn’t it?

Adéluce meant to kill Cali.

And I’d never, ever let that happen. I’d rather die and take this vampire-bitch down with me than let anything happen to Cali. She’d been through enough already—she didn’t deserve any of the horrors Adéluce had in store for her.

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “I take one random job and tell someone where your family was hiding, and now you’re out to destroy everyone *I* care about? Does that about sum it up?”

Her smile disappeared, and she snarled. “It wasn’t *random* to *me*!”

The absence of that vicious grin sent a thrill through me. Clearly, she wasn’t as in control as she wanted me to believe. This still mattered to her. She was still furious. And that meant she could make a mistake.

“Huh. You know, I still remember where I was when I got that job. I was a little short on cash,” I said. “My bike was kind of wrecked after my last job, so I needed cash quickly. This job seemed so simple. Easy. *Throwaway.*”

Her fingers curled into fists, and her jaw twitched with rage.

“Really, it sounded too good to be true. This guy was offering one of the easiest jobs I’d ever done. Surveillance and reporting? No need to even get my hands dirty? That was just how I liked ‘em.” I gave her my most wicked grin. “And you know what? The job was just as easy as it sounded. And the money was more than enough to fix my bike. So, I guess I should be thanking you, huh?”

I hoped to god that Adéluce was too pissed off to hear my heart pounding. I was playing chicken with a vicious predator, putting myself on the line in the hope that I could piss her off enough to take advantage.

And it seemed to be working. As long as she didn’t completely lose her shit and rip my head off first.

I started to pace, taking on the lazy posture of someone telling a funny story. Bit by bit, I used the momentum to bring me closer and closer to Adéluce. “Your house was cute, you know. Quaint, really. Honestly, I thought it was adorable. It was like the perfect background for a boring, average, suburban life. That’s what you wanted, right? To settle down with your white picket fence away from New Orleans? Raise your family, have dinner on the table by five. Maybe even have another baby?”

Her hand shot to her stomach, and her expression crumpled. Even in the dim light of the room, I could make out the tears shining in her eyes. I’d hit a tender spot for sure.

If this witch hadn’t made Cali’s life a living hell, I might have felt bad for hitting such an obvious wound. But I didn’t have an ounce of pity inside me right now. She’d hurt my mate. I deserved to pay for what I’d done, but Cali was innocent. And thanks to Adéluce’s intervention, Cali’s life and sanity were in danger. There was nothing she could do now to make me feel anything but fury and disgust. In fact, I knew the best thing for me to do now was twist the knife one last time.

“But I guess you can never have kids now, right?” I grimaced in pretend sympathy. “You know, now that you’re a dirty bloodsucker?”

I watched my words slam into Adéluce, and I saw the precise moment when she snapped. She let out a scream of rage, her face twisting into an expression of pain and murderous intent, and I pounced.

I shifted one hand and dug my claws into her shoulder, drawing blood. Then I gripped her throat in one hand, squeezing as hard as I could. “Tell me where the ashes are!” I screamed. “Tell me now, or I’ll rip your fucking throat out!”

Her eyes widened, and for a split second I could see the whites around her irises. Then, just like that, anger shuttered out any fear in her face. “Your mate will pay for what you just did!”

She blasted me off of her, and I skidded to a stop with a grunt, a few feet away. When I scrambled back up, Adéluce blipped out of sight.

“Fuck!” *I had her! I was* this *close!*

And then her words sank in, and horror slipped down my spine.

Adéluce wanted to hurt me, make me lose everything just like she had. And she was smart enough to know that she could outright kill me, and it still wouldn’t do as much damage as if she targeted the one person in the world who meant everything to me.

*Cali.*

I raced back to the house.

# Episode 3289

Urgency pounded through me with each beat of my heart. “We need to find Xavier,” I said. “And Greyson!”

Who the hell was I supposed to look for first in this damn place?

I hurried out to the balcony again, almost as if I was expecting to look out and see them down there somewhere below. I knew they wouldn’t be there, but the movement, no matter how futile, was better than doing nothing. What if they were in trouble?

Artemis’s advice was bouncing through my head. I knew they were both strong Alpha werewolves. Sure. Objectively, they could heal almost any injury they sustained, and they’d faced all kinds of scary and powerful creatures before and come out the winner. By all accounts, they were perfectly capable. I had every reason in the world to believe they’d be just fine.

But I was me.

And all of that logic dried up in the face of my fears and worries. What if they were hurt and fighting for their lives? What if they were outmatched? They needed help. We couldn’t just let them face whatever the hell was out there.

My nervous energy had me pacing back and forth on the balcony, and Artemis caught me by the arm and stopped me.

“Slow down, Cali. Tell us what happened exactly.”

“Um, that ghost boy René threw Xavier off the roof!” I said. “I told you that already! He could be hurt, and who knows what else is out there? The spirits here have a vendetta against him, and now he’s vulnerable and all alone and—”

Adair cut me off. “He’s potentially helpless and in danger and needs backup. We get it.”

I scowled at him. Admittedly, I didn’t know Artemis’s long-lost uncle all that well, but the more time I spent around him, the less I liked him.

Artemis ignored Adair’s jab and nodded at me. “Why don’t we split up into pairs and search the surrounding area?”

I nodded, my heart in my throat, and turned to Gabriel. “Let’s go.”

Adair held up a hand. “One question: why do I have to go?”

I spun on him with murder in my eyes. “Are you shitting me? You just said you get it. What part of this is so hard for you to understand?”

“I think you’re the one who doesn’t understand.”

“Did you seriously just say that? About my fear for my mate’s life?”

Adair let out a long sigh. “Caliana, like Artemis has already pointed out to you, Xavier is an Alpha werewolf. Even if he’s injured from the fall, he’ll heal quickly. He was built to survive situations like this one—Tabitha, on the other hand, is not. Why do I have to waste time searching for Xavier when she’s lost somewhere in this house?”

I gaped at Adair, then glanced at Artemis, who also looked shocked by Adair’s callous, if not totally unreasonable, perspective.

This guy was nothing like what I’d pictured, and if I felt that way, I could only imagine how disappointing this all must be for Artemis. She’d been waiting to meet someone from her father’s side of the family her entire life, and she ended up with Adair.

*She really got the short end of the stick—in more ways than one.*

Gabriel just sighed. “Look, he has a point. They both do. Xavier is an Alpha. There’s no scenario where he’s helpless,” he said. “Go find Tabitha and Mikah.”

Ugh. I knew they were all talking sensibly. Xavier could handle himself, wherever he was. And the same was true of Greyson. But that didn’t mean I didn’t want to help both of them immediately. They were my mates. I would *always* be protective of them.

Suddenly, a cold rush of wind cut me off. My skin tingled with magic moments before I heard Henri’s voice behind me.

“Ah, my dear. You’re here.”

I spun around with a gasp. A woman had just appeared in the middle of the room. *Poof!* There she was. And, even more shocking, I recognized her from the photos and other belongings in the attic.

I was staring at a very real, very *not dead* Adéluce Duquette.

“Cali, get behind me,” Artemis said, her voice low and dangerous in a way I’d never heard before.

“Wait.” I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

Adéluce waved a hand dismissively. “Yes, yes, I’m alive. I’m not a ghost, or any kind of apparition. Blah, blah, blah. I already went through all this with your mate.”

*That* got my attention. “Xavier?” I rushed toward her, ignoring Artemis’s cry for me to stay back. “Where is he? What did you do to him?”

Adéluce held up a hand, and something firm and unforgiving pressed against me. I braced myself, but it pushed me back like an invisible wall

“Calm down, dear,” Adéluce said, rolling her eyes. “Your precious mate is alive. For now.”

My heart pounded in my chest so hard I was certain everyone in the room could hear it. Xavier was alive. I had to get to him. Had to find him, now. Before anything else terrible happened.”

Gabriel stepped forward, his eyes narrowing and his nostrils flaring. “Be careful, Cali. She’s not just a witch. She’s a vampire too. I can smell the death stank on her.”

My jaw dropped as the puzzle pieces fell into place. The vampire-witch. This was the woman who stole the ashes. Who had made my life a living hell. She was the reason I was having hallucinations, that my sanity was hanging by a thread.

*Adéluce Duquette.*

“You bitch,” I breathed, shaking from the force of my rage. “You stole the ashes from us. You’ve been terrorizing us—all this time.”

Adéluce slowly clapped, her lips curving up into a sarcastic smile. “Winner, winner! I think you’ve just earned yourself a prize!”

“Please, don’t do this! Give us the ashes, let us go, and you’ll never hear from us again. We’ll go our separate ways. You can live your life, and we’ll leave you alone.”

“Dear, I don’t want you to leave me alone. Where’s the fun in that? My life was taken from me when my family died. It’s been over for a long time now. But vengeance? Well, that’s just beginning.”

I gulped. “I know that it was wrong for your family to get killed, but what you’re doing is wrong too.”

“I’m punishing a bad man for the crimes he committed. Don’t you think accessory to murder is wrong?”

I shook my head. How could I even argue with that? In her mind, Xavier had enabled the murder of her family—nothing I could say or do would change that perspective.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she teased. “His punishment won’t happen today. For what I want, it’s going to take a long, long, long time. At least as long as I have suffered waiting for justice.”

My heart sank. I almost wished she’d just get it over with. Stop toying with us and do whatever it was she was planning to do. That was better than waiting, right? Better than not knowing what was coming? It was certainly better for her to put me out of my misery now than to let Seluna’s curse keep chipping away at me.

But, then again, that was probably exactly why she’d done it. Adéluce wasn’t stupid—everything she’d done to us so far had the making of some kind of supervillain’s evil plot.

“Fine,” I huffed. “It’s not today. Then tell me where Xavier is!”

“I’ll do you one better. Your mate claims that you shouldn’t be involved in his sentencing. He says I should return the demon ashes to you.”

My heart sped up in both hope and dread. *What kind of game is Adéluce playing here?*

“I have to admit,” she continued, “his pleas got to me a bit. I’m not heartless as you may be inclined to believe. So, I’ll do something for you. I’ll give you exactly twelve hours to find the ashes without any interference from me—barring any spells I’ve already cast, of course.” She grinned, and it sent chills down my spine. “What do you say?”

I blinked. I knew this offer was too good to be true, but how could I possibly turn down an opportunity to find the ashes, to free myself from Seluna’s curse once and for all? Even if it was a trap. Even if, in the end, it’d only break me even more. I had to try.

Adéluce had me. Hook, line, and sinker. I knew it, and she knew it too.

“So, the ashes are here then?” I asked.

She shrugged. “No hints, dear. That would be cheating.” She turned to Henri. “Shall we go, my love?”

I tried to step forward to stop them, but once more I was pushed back by the force field. Adéluce snapped her fingers, and just like that, the Fae triangle trapping Henri disappeared.

He floated over to his wife, and she turned to look at me. “Goodbye, for now.”

Then they both disappeared.

I gasped. “What the hell?” We’d worked so hard to set up that triangle and contain Henri, and she’d broken through it like it was made of string.

Artemis stepped up next to me, shaking her head. “That’s impossible… Can a witch break Fae magic like that?”

Adair shook his head. “No.”

*Shit*. What else was she capable of?

# Episode 3290

**Greyson**

I stared at the emaciated vampire in shock. “Adéluce Duquette? Isn’t she the woman whose family Xavier was hired to track down? The family that ended up dead?”

Pierre shrugged his skin-and-bone shoulders. “I don’t know who this Xavier is, but I do know that my Addy was on the brink of death when I found her. She was the victim of a vicious, brutal attack—one that took her entire family.”

I blinked. Obviously, there was no coincidence, but I still couldn’t be sure where this was leading. If she was the same woman that Xavier was hired to find—and I was almost certain she had to be—and she was then turned by this vampire, Adéluce had to be the vampire-witch we’d been hunting for all this time.

And that meant I had to get the hell out here, find Xavier, and warn him ASAP.

He continued. “She was so beautiful. I knew at once I had to make her mine. I saved her by turning her, you know. She never would have survived if I hadn’t given her the gift of everlasting life.” He started to ham up his little speech, adding gestures and intonations.

*This guy must be pretty jazzed to have someone to talk to after all this time.*

“Was she a witch when you turned her?” I asked.

The Crypt Keeper—I mean, Pierre—frowned, like he was miffed with me for interrupting this monologue.

*Correction: Maybe he’s jazzed to have someone to talk* at*.*

“She was. Though, I wasn’t even aware that she was a witch at the time. I should have sensed it, but she was so broken and on the brink of death, and all that blood.” His face took on a dreamy expression. “Mmmm, all that delicious blood…”

Pierre trailed off as he was apparently caught up in some old mental fantasy about Adéluce’s blood. The guy had been starving for a long while, if his emaciated form was any indication. He had to be pretty damn hungry by now.

“I’m sorry,” Rishika cut in. “Is there a point to this story? Not that the idea of you turning a woman too battered to consent to becoming a vampire isn’t entertaining…”

A smirk tugged at my lips. Rishika always knew what to say.

Pierre snapped back to attention. “Apologies. My mind is not as sharp as it should be. What with the hunger and all. Anyway, after I turned my beloved, we went on a romantic, moonlit, delicious killing spree.” He grinned, and it somehow made him look even more like a corpse. “She had so much rage pent up inside of her. It was glorious, really. She was so… cruel. So needlessly violent. In all the years I’ve walked this earth, few of my experiences have measured up to the thrill of the time spent hunting with my sweet Addy.”

Tabitha visibly shuddered next to me, obviously horrified by the vampire’s love of brutality.

I could relate. The sensual way he described Adéluce’s literal bloodlust was enough to make my stomach lurch. I couldn’t imagine anything but complete repulsion, were Cali and I by chance in a similar situation.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Hey, Skeletor? Get to your point, or we’re leaving.”

Pierre blinked, his brows furrowing. “My point? Oh, yes. Well, Addy soon became obsessed with the idea of revenge. Her human family had been massacred—I told you that already, didn’t I?”

“Yes.” Rishika sighed, rubbing her head. “You did.”

“I tried to tell her that her human life didn’t matter anymore, that she was free from all of her mortal connections, all of her mortal worries. She wasn’t a human anymore. Her family, well, they were human, technically, but they were also dead. She had nothing left to tether her to that old existence, but she just wouldn’t let them go. She was driven, obsessed with the idea of getting justice for her loved ones in life.

“I followed her here to New Orleans to try to stop her from enacting a spell that could destroy her, and what do I get for that deep concern for her well-being? She trapped me in here.” He huffed. “It’s been years… I think. I don’t know for sure. I stopped counting long ago.”

Well, this was a pretty fucking awful revelation. It sounded like his beloved, bloodthirsty Adéluce was definitely the vampire-witch who was after my brother and Cali, and if she was so hell-bent on getting revenge against Xavier that she betrayed her own sire, then I didn’t have the first clue how we’d be able to stop her. That kind of unhinged focus didn’t go down easy.

I turned to Mikah, Rishika, and Tabitha. “We have to get back to the others. Tell them what we know.”

I moved to shut the window when Pierre lunged forward. “Wait! Please, I can help you!”

Rishika and I exchanged a glance.

*Right. Like I was gonna let the guy with the hard-on for violence get anywhere near us.*

Mikah looked similarly skeptical. “You just want us to let you out.”

“Of course I want you to let me out!” Pierre groaned, his voice a whine that was as annoying as it was pathetic. “Is this any way for a person to die? Locked away, starving to death as the ages pass!”

“You’re not a person,” I gritted out. “You’re a monster.”

I sensed Mikah stiffen next to me, and quickly added over my shoulder, “No offense.”

He shook his head. “No, I think he’s a monster too. I’d never do the horrible things he describes with such glee.”

“Come on! I’ve repented in this dungeon, haven’t I?” Pierre wailed. “I regret my killing ways! Please! You can’t just leave me here!”

Tabitha stepped forward, her brow creased. “Can we maybe just hear him out?”

I sighed. She and Cali were cut from the same cloth—both of them were far too tender-hearted for the monsters they spent so much time around.

I turned back to Pierre. “Consider this your audition. What can you help us with? Tell us what information you have, and *maybe* we’ll let you out.”

The vampire’s expression was grave. “I know that Addy will stop at nothing for revenge.”

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Okay, but you *literally* just told us that.”

“Oh. Did I?” He gulped. “Well… um… I know that she planned to use revenge magic to, you know, enact her revenge.”

“Yeah, we’re aware of that as well.”

“You lot are clearly very well-informed! I, um… well, let me think here…”

“If you can’t think of anything, we’re going,” I said.

“Wait! I know… I know where she hides things!”

I paused. That sounded promising… or like a desperate, half-assed lie.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“When I followed her to New Orleans, I watched her for a bit before I revealed myself. She knows this city well. Her husband’s family was from here. They settled here when they first got married. She has hiding places that she used as a human witch, and I saw her visit them. I can take you to them.”

This sounded like a genuine lead—and too good to be true. But if Pierre wasn’t lying, and if his memory held up—two big ifs—one of these hiding places could very well be where Adéluce stashed Seluna’s ashes.

It made perfect sense for her to hide them somewhere she was familiar with. Somewhere she already knew was well-protected. It was exactly what I would do, if I were in her homicidal, witchy shoes.

“Tell us where her hiding places are.”

“Uh-uh.” Pierre shook his head. “I can only *show* you.”

“Fucking pain-in-the-ass bloodsucker,” I cursed under my breath, then turned to Mikah. In our short time together, I’d grown to trust the vampire’s judgment. Where Gabriel was rash and impulsive, Mikah seemed to have a much cooler head on his shoulders.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I think that if you’re looking for those ashes, then you have to at least check out these hiding places.” He didn’t look particularly pleased by this revelation.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Rishika said. She was speaking my mind.

“Yeah, and you said he’s dangerous, right?” Tabitha asked. “It’s one thing to give this guy some company, but letting him out? Are we sure that’s a good idea?”

“I never said it was a *good* idea.” Mikah slung an arm around her shoulders. “But don’t worry. I won’t let him touch you.”

“Okay, so we let him out, but we keep him on a short leash.”

Mikah and Rishika nodded, and I turned back to Pierre. “If you so much as look like you’re going to betray us, then I rip off your head. Got it?”

“Of course! Of course!” Pierre smiled, showing off his greying, crooked vampire teeth. “I would never hurt you, my saviors!”

I grabbed the lock on the door and broke it off with an echoing *snap*.

God, I hoped I wasn’t going to regret this.

# Episode 3291

**Xavier**

I raced through the trees, trying desperately to mind link with Cali.

*Cali! Cali! Can you hear me? Cali!*

Finally, her voice slipped through my mind, and for a split second my muscles went lax with relief.

*Xavier? Oh, thank god. Where are you? Are you all right?*

*I’m outside! I’m in the backyard. I’m fine now—where are you? Are you okay?*

Worry had driven me up the fucking wall since Adéluce threatened Cali and then blipped out of sight. My mind had been filled with all kinds of horrifying, worst-case scenarios of what could happen to my mate, and I couldn’t truly rest until she was safe in my arms.

*I’m still in the house. On the balcony.*

As I moved closer to the house, I was able to make out Cali’s shape on the balcony, looking down over the yard.

*I see you!* she said. *Are you hurt?*

*No, I’m fine.* I healed all my injuries from getting yeeted off the roof of the house by that ghost kid, so it wasn’t a lie. *Are you injured?*

*No. I’m okay, but we have something really important to talk to you about.*

There was a lot of that going around.

*Adéluce Duquette is the vampire-witch!* I told her. *It’s all connected. Her and this fucking house and all those ghosts. They’re the same family.*

*I know…*

I frowned. *How do you know?*

*Because I put the pieces together when she popped in on us. But there’s more you might not know.*

My heart dropped. So Adéluce had sought out Cali after our confrontation in the yard. *What did she do to you?*

*I’m okay, Xavier, really. For now. She didn’t hurt me. She didn’t even touch me. And she’s going to let us look for the ashes. Xavier, I think they’re in the city somewhere! We’ve been near them this whole time!*

My steps stuttered. The ashes were in the city? No, that didn’t make sense. Why would Adéluce stash something so precious in the same place she knew we were going? And why would she give us this time to look for them, unimpeded, when she seemed so hell-bent on not giving up the ashes to me earlier?

*This has to be some sort of trick*,I said.

*Probably.* I could hear the exhaustion, the note of defeat, in Cali’s voice. *But what other choice do we have? If the ashes are truly here, and we don’t expend every effort to look for them, that’s the same as just giving up, isn’t it?*

Fuck. I hated this. I didn’t want to get jerked around by Adéluce any more than we already had been. I was tired of playing her games when she’d already rigged the whole thing in her favor. She was too clever, and no matter what I did, I had the sense that I was playing right into her hands.

But Cali was right. We didn’t have another choice because I sure wasn’t going to miss an opportunity to free Cali from this hell she’d been locked in for far too long.

*Do you think you guys can make it out of the house?* I asked.

*I think Adéluce took the poltergeists with her, so we can probably get out okay.*

Cali turned back toward the balcony door to head inside.

“Be careful!” I called out.

She nodded and disappeared inside the house. I stood outside, anxiety grating at me every second that Cali and the others took to get out of the house.

I mind linked with her again, too unnerved by everything that could be happening to her inside, out of my reach.

*Are you coming? Is everything okay?*

I didn’t hear a response. I waited outside until Cali, Artemis, Gabe, and Adair burst out of the house. I let out the breath I’d been holding since I watched her go back inside. She raced toward me and threw herself into my arms, and I held her tightly, breathing in her scent.

For the first time since we’d gotten separated, my heart rate slowed. Cali was okay. She was here. With me.

I lifted her off her feet, holding her close.

When I set her down, Gabe held out his arms for a hug. “It’s my turn now, right?”

Rolling my eyes, I pushed him back and smiled. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

My smile disappeared when I realized we were missing several people. “Where are the others?”

“They’re still trapped inside,” Adair said, turning on his heel to face the house. “And I’m going back in to get them.”

Artemis grabbed his arm and yanked him back. “Wait! You can’t just go charging back into a haunted mansion! We have to make a plan.”

He ripped his arm out of her grip. “I have one: rip this damn house apart until I find Tabitha and Mikah.”

“Hey!” Cali protested. “Greyson is in there too.”

“Yeah!” Artemis nodded emphatically. “Greyson, and you don’t think I want to tear through this place to find Rishika too? But with all the magic that we faced in there, if we make the wrong move, it could make things even worse for them. We have to play this right.”

Adair scoffed and shook his head. “With how long I’ve been around, do you seriously think a little bit of magic can stop me?”

“You said yourself that Adéluce’s magic is the strongest you’ve ever seen. Considering *how long you’ve been around*, don’t you think it’s worth taking some time to prepare before throwing yourself back into that hell house?” Cali asked. “We shouldn’t underestimate her.”

“I’m going back in, and you can’t stop me.” He moved to go back into the house, but Artemis stepped in his path.

“We get that you think you’re hot shit,” she said, “but you’re being an idiot. We need to make a plan! Together.”

“Come on, Adair. We need you too,” Cali said, clearly trying to mediate the growing tension between uncle and niece. “We all want the same thing here. We’re on the same side.”

I was ready to step in when a familiar voice called out.

“Hey!” Greyson called. “Where are you all?”

“Greyson?” Cali yelled back.

I spun on my heel, looking around wildly for my brother. Then I spied a big metal door. *Maybe there’s a cellar or something.*

I started walking around the perimeter of the house and couldn’t find anything at first, and then my ears picked up on the banging, and I noticed a boulder up ahead shifting ever so slightly with each *thump!*

I called over Gabe and the others. “They’re over here!”

I pushed on the boulder with all my considerable strength, and it budged maybe a few inches. It was super heavy. I could see why Greyson and his group hadn’t been able to push open the door.

“Here. We’ll help. Come on, Adair.”

Gabe and, moments later, a pissy-looking Adair joined me in pushing against the boulder. Our combined strength was what it took to push the boulder off what looked like a pair of rusted, old storm shelter doors.

As soon as the boulder was gone, the doors burst open, and Tabitha was the first to climb out.

Adair rushed forward, helping her up the remaining steps and gathering her in his arms.

“Adair, I’m okay,” she said, her voice muffled by his chest. Still, the Dark Fae didn’t look like he was going to release her anytime soon. That’s how I’d felt when I’d seen Cali come out of that house, too.

*It’s nice to know he’s not Mr. Personality with everyone.*

Greyson came up the staircase next… holding a chain?

I jumped back as some kind of creature came up the stairs behind him. “What the fuck is *that*?”

The monster was all skin and bones and kind of looked like Gollum from the *Lord of the Rings* movies—only, you know, worse somehow.

Mikah climbed the stairs after the creature. “I never want to go underground ever again.”

Gabe rushed forward and hugged his mate, but I was too fixated on the creature to get caught up in the happy reunions.

“What are you doing with that thing?” I demanded.

“I’m not a *thing*,” the creature rasped.

“This is Pierre,” Greyson said, his expression grim. “He’s Adéluce Duquette’s sire.”

I froze. *What the hell? This is the* thing *that made Adéluce Duquette into a vampire?*

Fury rose up inside me, and I stalked forward. “You’re the reason she’s still alive to torture us!”

The vampire cringed back, the chain around his emaciated waist clanking with each step. Cali stepped forward and caught my arm. “Before we go ripping heads off, let’s just talk and see why Greyson brought this… Pierre here. There’s a reason after all, right?”

I pulled in a breath but nodded tightly.

Cali turned to Pierre. “Are you ok—”

The vampire let out a hiss, his eyes suddenly blood-red, and lunged at Cali.

# Episode 3292

“No—oh my god!” I screamed, falling flat on my ass as Pierre lunged at me, murder and bloodlust in his scarlet eyes.

His body lurched to a stop in mid-air and then was magically yanked backward. It wasn’t until I saw the flash of grey and heard the clank of metal on metal as Pierre skidded across the ground that I remembered he was chained—and Greyson held the leash.

Clearly, he wasn’t going to hesitate to use it.

Xavier jumped in front of me, his hands shifting to claws as Greyson stepped in front of him.

“Get the fuck out of my way!” Xavier snarled. “I’m going to tear that vampire to shreds! Maybe remember this next time you decide to bring home a stray!” He tried to leap around his brother, but Greyson put himself in Xavier’s path again.

“Xavier, wait!” Greyson said. “We need him.”

Behind Greyson, Pierre was moaning and sobbing on the ground. He looked like a skeleton in greying, moth-eaten clothing as he curled into a tight ball. “I’m sorry! I’m just starving! I haven’t eaten in years, and she smells so delectable! It’s her delicious Fae blood! I didn’t mean it!”

The emaciated vampire began to wail and thrash on the ground, like his soul was being torn from his body. He was so loud he almost sounded like a car alarm, and I half-expected all the dogs in the area to come running at the sound.

Gabriel clapped her hands over her ears. “Greyson! Does your pet come with an off-switch?”

“He’s not my fucking *pet.*”

Adair raised an elegant brow. “You’re the one who came out of that cellar leading a vampire on a leash.”

Greyson let out a string of curses. “He’s the means to an end.”

“Yeah, and I’m gonna end him now,” Xavier growled.

I got to my feet, dusted myself off, and put a hand on Xavier’s arm. His hands were still shifted, and he looked just as bloodthirsty for Pierre as Pierre had looked when he’d tried to attack me.

“I’m fine. Let’s just hear Greyson out,” I said.

He jerked his arm out from under my hand. “I don’t care. I won’t let something like that live after it just tried to attack you!”

Greyson scowled. “What, you think I’m happy about this?”

Pierre, still on the ground, kept wailing and sobbing.

*Yeah, I don’t think any of us are particularly happy about this.*

“Why the fuck is he here then?” Xavier demanded. “What’s this big plan you have for him? You think Adéluce’s gonna care that we have her sire when she clearly doesn’t give two fucks about him?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“They brought him out of a storm cellar on the Duquette property, wrapped in chains, and he’s over there crying because he hasn’t eaten in years,” Xavier explained. “Sounds like she locked him up and threw away the key a long time ago.”

“You’re right,” Greyson said. “But—”

“Great! Let’s finish him off. Put him out of his misery.”

“Will you let me finish?” Greyson snapped. “Pierre knows where Adéluce’s hiding places are in the city, which is very likely where she hid the ashes. He’s a pain in the ass, but he’s useful.”

My head snapped up. “Wait, really?”

He nodded. “Yeah. So we told him we’d let him out of the prison Adéluce trapped him in if he could lead us to them.”

I rushed forward and took Greyson’s free hand, a grin tugging at my lips. “This is great!”

“I mean, yeah, I thought it was a good lead on the ashes, but what are you so happy about?”

“I mean, aside from potentially finding the ashes,” I started, “when Adéluce talked to us, she gave us twelve hours to find the ashes with no interference from her. And now we have a great lead.”

Greyson didn’t smile. His brows furrowed. “Wait, back up. You talked to Adéluce? When?”

Mikah stepped forward. “I think we all need to share what we’ve learned.”

Tabitha nodded. “Great idea. But maybe we should feed the starving vampire first? So he doesn’t, you know, attack again?”

Everyone turned to stare at Pierre, who was still curled up in a ball and sobbing on the ground. “I’m sorry, but I’m just so hungry! I’m starving! I can’t go on like this!”

Pity nagged at my stomach, even though he’d tried to turn me into his latest meal. I’d almost managed to drown out the pitiful wailing and crying.

“Tabitha’s right,” I said. “He needs to eat if he’s going to be of any use to anyone.”

“And that wailing is giving me a headache,” Adair grumbled.

Rishika stepped forward. “I can feed him.”

Artemis grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “Like hell you will.”

“It makes the most sense.” Rishika shrugged. “*I* make the most sense. I’m not a Fae; I’m not an Alpha. My blood won’t heal him or give him super strength. It’ll just feed him. Which we need to do if we ever want to get the hell out of here.”

My brows rose. *Can’t really argue with that logic.*

My sister seemed to realize this too, because she released Rishika’s arm. “Be careful.”

“Aren’t I always?” Rishika made her hand into a sharp werewolf’s nail and slashed her arm, holding it above the still prone Pierre and letting it drip onto his lips. The vampire eagerly lapped up the blood, actually turning onto his back and opening his mouth wide so the drops fell into his waiting mouth. It was the strangest feeding I’d ever seen, but the distance between Rishika and Pierre eased the anxiety in my chest. He wasn’t lunging at her or taking more than she was willing to give. They weren’t even touching each other.

“Okay,” Greyson said. “That’s enough.”

Rishika nodded and returned to Artemis’s side. The cut was already healing, but Artemis still placed a kiss on Rishika’s palm.

I turned to Greyson and Xavier. “We need to get moving as soon as possible. Adéluce came to us upstairs. She said that we have twelve hours to find the ashes with no additional interference from her.”

“Yeah,” Adair added. “Right before she used her powerful magic to break our Fae triangle.”

I scowled at the memory. The depth of Adéluce’s power was nothing short of chilling, but I couldn’t let fear stop me. Finally, I had a real chance to find Seluna’s ashes and break the curse on me. I couldn’t let that chance pass me by.

“I fought Adéluce in the woods,” Xavier added. “I think her desire for revenge has driven her mad.”

Greyson nodded. “That fits with what Pierre told us. Apparently even after he turned her, she still wouldn’t let her human family go. She’s been obsessed with revenge ever since—and it looks like she’s getting it.”

I frowned. This vampire-witch seemed to have a one-track mind, and that couldn’t bode well. If she’d waited this long to get revenge, she wasn’t going to stop until she felt Xavier had been punished.

I moved to Xavier’s side and took his hand. He looked down and gave me a grim smile.

“Okay,” I said. “We have to take away her leverage then. One of which is the ashes.”

Xavier nodded. “The ashes are still our priority.”

I checked my watch and glanced over at Pierre. “I don’t suppose he has a daylight object?”

“I did once,” Pierre replied, his voice deeper and a little stronger now. “But Addy took it when she trapped me.”

I nodded. “We have maybe six hours until sunrise. Which means we have six hours to find all the hiding spots Pierre knows of.”

“Let’s stick together for this,” Greyson said. “I don’t want anyone getting lost or left behind again.”

Xavier nodded and squeezed my hand.

I turned to Tabitha and the others. “You guys don’t have to join us. I know you didn’t come here intending to get mixed up with all of this. I can’t believe you almost got hurt in that house because of me.”

Tabitha took my free hand. “We wanted to come and help you. This isn’t your fault. What this vampire-witch is doing to you is wrong.”

Tears stung my eyes, and I forced a watery smile. Tabitha was every bit as sweet and kind as Dani. We needed to get through this so they could be reunited, too.

“Thank you for saying that.” I nodded. “Let’s go, then.”

We started for the front of the house, and I was light-headed with anticipation. After all this time, I couldn’t quite believe that we were *this* close to finding the ashes. That we had a chance of finding them *tonight*.

*This might be over sooner than I thought. Is that crazy to think?*

I felt light as air.

And then, with a lurch, I realized the feeling wasn’t excitement. I actually felt like I couldn’t keep my balance. The world was spinning around me, and I stumbled. The handprint on my shoulder throbbed like it had its own heartbeat.

Xavier called my name, but he sounded far away and underwater. I tried to reply, but darkness rushed in.

# Episode 3293

**Xavier**

I caught Cali as she fell, wrapping my arms around her shoulders, then scooping her into my arms when her body went limp.

“Cali! Can you hear me? Open your eyes. Say something.”

She didn’t so much as flinch. Fuck. What was wrong with her?

Greyson and Artemis rushed over as I carefully and gently lowered Cali to the ground, still begging her to talk to me, to do… anything! She didn’t hear or respond to me at all; she was completely out cold.

“What the hell happened?” Greyson demanded, dropping to his knees next to me.

I held Cali tightly in my lap. My heart was in my throat, and for a moment, I couldn’t speak. “I don’t know. I’m wondering the same thing myself. One second she was fine, and the next second she passed out. Didn’t give me a warning or anything.”

Artemis leaned closer to examine her sister’s face. “Cali?”

I adjusted her in my arms, bracing a hand on her shoulder, and jerked my hand back with a hiss. Greyson was there to brace Cali’s body.

“What is it?” he asked.

“She… burned me.” I looked up at him, a grim realization setting in. Judging by my brother’s expression, he was thinking the same thing.

“It’s the mark, isn’t it?” he asked. “It’s always that fucking mark.”

I tugged the collar of her shirt aside to reveal the handprint. It was glowing red-hot on her shoulder.

*Dammit.*

We were so close to finding those ashes. We’d just gotten the strongest lead we’d come across so far. But that curse wasn’t going to wait around for us to lift it. If anything, it was getting worse even as we were getting closer to ending it.

Cali was only going to continue suffering unless we could figure out how to stop it, and quickly.

“Is she having another hallucination?” Artemis asked quietly, all the urgency gone from her expression. Now she just looked sad. Defeated. The exact same way I felt.

I leaned over. I couldn’t tell if she was hallucinating or not, but it didn’t seem like she was. She wasn’t thrashing around or screaming, as her hallucinations caused her to do far too often. She was just… still. Unconscious. Save for the soft rise and fall of her chest, and the steady *thump* of her heart, she could have been dead.

I flinched as soon as the thought landed.

“Cali,” I said gently, needing her to wake up, to show some sign that she was hearing me. “Cali. Tiger, talk to me. Tell me you can hear me. Whatever it is you’re seeing, it isn’t real. Wake up now; we’re here with you.”

I wasn’t used to being the comforter, but for her, I could manage it with ease.

Tabitha came over and kneeled down between Artemis and me. She held out her hands over Cali’s head. “May I?” she asked, catching my gaze.

At first, I didn’t have a clue what the hell she was talking about. And then it hit me.

Her magic. She was asking permission to try to use her magic on Cali.

I nodded, desperation thrumming alongside my heartbeat. “Yes. Do it. Whatever will bring her out of this.”

She nodded. “I don’t know if it’ll work, but I’ll try.”

Tabitha placed one hand on Cali’s head and the other over Cali’s shoulder and then closed her eyes. She let out a pained hiss at the heat of the handprint, and Adair moved to step forward.

The glare Artemis gave him stopped him in his tracks.

Tabitha’s eyes were squeezed shut in concentration for a long string of seconds. Finally, as she opened her eyes again, Cali let out a gasp, and her eyes shot open.

Cali looked completely dazed as she looked around.

Tabitha, on the other hand, fell backward, breathing hard. Adair crouched down beside her, a supporting hand on her back as he murmured something to her. I wasn’t listening—I was entirely focused on my mate in my arms.

“What happened?” Cali slurred, staring up at me with glazed eyes.

“Nothing. You’re okay.” I shook my head and then hugged her close, gulping down her scent. Then I froze. She felt warm. Warmer than she should be. Hot, almost. Like she was burning up with a fever.

*What the hell is happening to her?*

I released her and helped her sit up on her own.

“How do you feel, love?” Greyson asked.

“A little shaky,” she whispered.

That didn’t even begin to satisfy me. I had to know what happened. How she felt when she lost consciousness, how she was feeling now. If there was anything we could do to get some kind of control over this damn thing.

“Did you see anything?” I asked. “What did you hallucinate about?”

She just shook her head, looking lost. “I… I didn’t have one.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? You didn’t hallucinate at all?”

“I didn’t see anything at all. I just… fainted. Lost consciousness. Everything went black, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up here, with all of you around me. I think it might have just been, you know, a normal fainting spell.”

“I’ve never seen you faint before,” Greyson said. “I don’t think what just happened was normal at all.”

“It wasn’t,” I agreed, shaking my head. “The handprint was *glowing*, Cali. It burned me and Tabitha. We both felt it. I’m glad you didn’t have another hallucination, but… I think Greyson’s right. There was nothing normal about what just happened to you.”

Cali blinked, then shuddered. “This isn’t new then.”

My heart dropped somewhere near my stomach. *This can’t be happening. We are so close to finding those ashes—so fucking close. Cali can’t be getting sick like this when we almost have those ashes back.*

Cali tried to stand again and wobbled in place. I jumped up to steady her. “Easy. Take all the time you need.”

She shook her head. “We can’t waste time with this. We have to start looking in all of Adéluce’s hiding places.”

I grimaced. “You’re not doing any of that. I’m taking you back to the safe house.”

“Good idea,” Greyson said beside me.

Cali scowled. “What? No, that’s a waste of time and energy—two things we don’t have to spare right now. We have to search *tonight*, before the sun rises, or Pierre can’t help us.”

I understood where she was coming from—and in a way it was comforting to see her already going right back on mission—but I was torn as I looked from Cali’s face to the emaciated vampire Greyson still held on a tight leash.

“Fine. We’ll keep looking. But *you* are going back to the safe house to rest.” I turned to Gabe. “Can you take her back for me? Keep her safe?”

Gabe nodded. “Of course. I’ll take care of her.”

“I’ll go with you,” Mikah said, stepping forward.

“Me too,” Tabitha said. “If I can stop this from happening to her again, I should be with her.”

“Then I’m going too,” Adair said.

Artemis’s brow rose. “Are you gonna work some Fae magic on Cali or something?”

Adair gave her a dubious look. “No. I’m not letting Tabitha out of my sight in this witch-infested city.”

I nodded. This was good. Cali would have a witch (sort of), an Alpha werewolf, a vampire, and, in the right circumstances, a Dark Fae helping protect her while she was out of commission. The more the merrier.

“No.” Cali shook her head. “This is ridiculous. I don’t need an entourage. I’m fine! And if anyone wants to help me, they need to be focusing on finding those ashes.”

“Either you go back to the safe house with them, or we all go back together,” I said.

She scowled. “You’re bluffing.”

My gaze narrowed on her. “Try me. I won’t let you put yourself at risk like this, Cali. Your safety comes first.”

“Fine.” She scoffed. “I’ll go back with Tabitha and the others. But the rest of you have to keep looking.”

“We will,” Greyson said. “I promise. We’ve got this.”

Cali nodded and looked over at Artemis for confirmation. She nodded. “We won’t let you down.”

“Fine,” Cali said with a huff. “Let’s go.”

I nodded again and turned to Gabe. “Check in regularly.”

“I will if you will.”

We shook hands, and he pulled me into a half-hug, and then Gabe, Mikah, Tabitha, and Adair led Cali to one of the cars out front.

I turned to face the rest of the group. “So… what’s the plan?”

“We need to move fast,” Greyson said, though his eyes followed Cali’s journey to the car. I could tell he was worried about her—just like I was.

I hated that I wasn’t going with her when she was under the weather, but we didn’t have much of a choice. We had to do everything we could to find those ashes and finish this once and for all. And with the curse weighing on Cali, the cruel truth was we’d move a lot faster without her.

My choice wasn’t an easy one, but it was the right one.

“Agreed,” I said. “Let’s end this. Tonight.”

# Episode 3294

**Greyson**

It just about killed me to watch Cali leave with Mikah and the rest. Every muscle in my body screamed to go after her. To personally make sure she was okay, to stay with her, and give her the care that only I could give her. Or to bring her along with us so we could keep searching and I wouldn’t have to let her out of my sight.

But I also saw how pale she looked. She’d scared the hell out of me when she’d passed out so suddenly, and even with Tabitha’s intervention, Cali still looked like death warmed up. Whether she was willing to admit it or not, she didn’t have it in her to be traipsing around the city all night long. She needed to rest. To conserve her strength.

I should have never let her come out here so late in the first place, especially after everything she went through in the cemetery to save Tabitha.

But I couldn’t focus on that right now. And beating myself up over something I couldn’t change wouldn’t help.

Since I was the one who’d agreed to let Pierre out of his tomb, I was the one stuck on leash duty, and I had to keep an eye on the old bag of bones. Make sure he wasn’t pulling a fast one on us.

I kept the chain leash tight, so Pierre was forced to stay right at my side. It put me within range for him to attack me, of course, but I preferred he go after me over anyone else in the party. It was only fair, since I’d let him out. But I wasn’t worried for my safety—I could snap him like a twig if push came to shove.

“We should head to the center of the city,” Pierre suggested.

“Right. Let’s bring the Gollum cosplayer to the part of the town with the highest tourist density,” I deadpanned. Hopefully, with it being after midnight, there would be fewer people out and about. And maybe we’d get lucky and the people we did come across would be too drunk to think twice about whether or not Pierre looked like a walking corpse.

“What’s a Gollum cosplayer?” Pierre asked on the drive back to the French Quarter. “Is that a newfangled term for ‘vampire’ I haven’t heard yet?”

“It’s a movie reference,” Rishika said. “You wouldn’t get it.”

“Try me.”

She eyed him up and down and turned forward. “Greyson, your pet’s awfully chatty.”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s not my pet,” I grumbled.

I didn’t like bringing along the vampire responsible for giving Adéluce Duquette an immortal life to pour all of her revenge planning into as much as anyone else did, but seeing as how Pierre was the best lead we’d gotten yet, I wasn’t going to toss him aside either.

As we slowed through the French Quarter to give Pierre the opportunity to point out Adéluce’s hiding places, I realized it was naive to assume the streets wouldn’t be crowded. The place might as well have been the Las Vegas strip or Times Square for how many revelers and tourists were out, filling the streets.

I glanced over at Pierre, who was eyeing some nearby tourists with sharp interest.

“Don’t try anything,” I told him.

He nodded, and I turned my attention to the next task at hand: figuring out how we were going to explain the sight of a sickly-looking man on a chain leash. At some point, we were going to have to leave this car and continue on foot, after all.

*It’s not like Pierre’s conspicuous or anything…*

I glanced over at the vampire again. *Is this all part of some elaborate plan to be let off his leash?*

Thankfully, we turned onto another street that was a hell of a lot less populated. I breathed a sigh of relief.

*There’s one less thing to worry about.*

“It’s just up ahead,” Pierre said.

My eyes narrowed at the street through the windshield. “You mean the—”

“That’s it,” Pierre said, pointing to the large entrance gate to a cemetery.

*Jesus fucking Christ. I have had enough with the damn graveyards, already.*

“Seriously?” Xavier threw the car into park with a huff, and I knew he was having similar thoughts. “Another fucking cemetery?”

We parked on a side street, and I climbed out of the car and yanked on Pierre’s chain to pull him after me—maybe a little more roughly than was strictly necessary, but I couldn’t find it in me to care.

I wanted to make it crystal clear to this bloodsucker that I wasn’t going to give an inch. He could follow orders, or he could end up with his throat ripped out. The choice was up to him.

“I’m coming!” he whined from behind me. “No need to be so harsh.”

“Where, exactly, is this hiding place?” I demanded. “I want to go straight there and then get out of here.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy. The last time I was here was a long time ago. I have to look around and remember.”

I shared a look with Xavier, who looked borderline murderous. I could relate. Ending that bag of bones and dumping him here with all the other decaying bodies was looking more and more promising.

Xavier leaned in, his gaze narrowing on Pierre. “You better not be leading us on a wild goose chase.”

Pierre lifted his hands in front of him. “Of course not. What would I stand to gain by lying? You’re in control here.”

Xavier scowled at the vampire, and I moved forward, tugging the chain as I went. “Let’s go. We’re wasting time just talking.”

Xavier snapped the lock on the front gate with ease, and we cautiously entered the cemetery.

I made Pierre stick close to my side, with Xavier flanking his other side. Rishika and Artemis followed close behind us, covering our backs. I was on high alert as we moved through the cemetery, looking at every moving shadow and half-expecting to see skeletons climbing out of the tombs again.

But, other than the breeze that drifted between headstones and mausoleums, the cemetery was still.

Pierre pointed to a nearby statue. “That angel statue! I remember it! She turned left there!”

There was nothing for us to do but follow his directions, turning at each landmark that Pierre “recognized” as we wound our way through the cemetery. It was beyond tedious, and I felt like we were walking in circles. If Pierre was fucking with us, I was really going to enjoy ripping him limb from limb.

Artemis sidled up to me. “There’s power here. I think this cemetery crosses over a ley line.”

I didn’t love the sound of that, but it made sense. Of course Adéluce would hide something so precious to us in a powerful, creepy-ass location like this. I really hoped we weren’t heading for another underground chamber.

Then Pierre pointed to a small fountain up ahead. “That’s it!”

Unlike the hundred or so mausoleums we’d crossed, it didn’t look like there was anything supernatural going on with that fountain. I frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. In the center there should be some kind of a switch that will open a small compartment. She definitely took something out of it when I followed her here. Some kind of satchel. Never figured out what was inside, though.”

I glanced at Xavier with raised brows.

“Rock Paper Scissors for who gets wet?” he asked.

I scowled. “What are you, ten?”

He shrugged, and after a beat I sighed. “Fine. Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

I played paper, while Xavier used scissors.

*Fuck me.*

I held out Pierre’s leash. “Take this.” Then I pulled off my shoes, rolled up my pants, and waded into the fountain, which was in desperate need of some maintenance. The water was murky, and the surface below my feet felt slimy.

I winced. *Can’t wait to get a shower later. The groundskeeper really needs to stop phoning it in and clean this thing.*

I reached the middle and looked back at Pierre. “Where’s the switch?”

“I think it was at the top?”

I froze. “You *think*?”

“It was years ago, and I’ve been locked up and starving since.”

If I waded into this cesspool of dysentery for nothing, Pierre was going to have bigger worries on his mind than his hunger.

I stood on my toes to reach the top tier of the fountain. It was just as slimy as the bottom, and I winced as my fingers caught on a bunch of moss that felt like a wet clump of hair.

“Fuck, this is gross.”

I felt around the top of the fountain some more until I finally felt something shaped like a knob. I pushed it.

Immediately, the water I stood in started to drain, and when it was gone, leaving a horrifying amount of algae and moss in its wake, a small click sounded and one of the square, mossy stones at my feet slid open.

I kneeled down to reach inside. “I think I found something.”

“What is it?” Artemis called.

My heart pounding in excitement, I pulled out a small box that was plenty big enough to hold an urn full of ashes.

I lifted the lid, a smile tugging at my lips—

And then my smile disappeared. I looked up at the others, my heart plummeting. “It’s empty!”

# Episode 3295

I was embarrassed to say that by the time the car pulled into the driveway of the safe house, I was completely exhausted. Apparently fainting from a demon curse wasn’t quite the same as taking a power nap.

Part of me was relieved to be back, where I knew I had a bed waiting for me, and another part of me was pissed off.

What the heck was happening to me that I could barely stand up straight? Could all of this be from the damn mark? The hallucinations had been bad enough, but if I was actually getting sick from this curse… Could I also get worse? What else could Seluna still be capable of doing to me before we could finally get rid of her ashes?

Sweat beaded along my brow, which I knew shouldn’t be happening. It was a very cool December night, even in muggy New Orleans. I should have been shivering. Not sweating.

Tabitha climbed out of the car and then opened the door on my side and reached in to help me out. It was so embarrassing to need this much help. In no time at all, I’d gone from able-bodied and ready to take on the world to basically becoming an invalid.

I wished I didn’t need the help, but I was grateful for her to go out of the way to offer me support. It saved me—and my battered ego—from having to actually ask for help. I knew Mikah would step in if I asked and would do so kindly, but Gabriel would have some funny comment, and Adair would probably give me the stink eye for even considering inconveniencing him.

My legs still felt wobbly as Tabitha helped me to my feet and then led me inside the safe house. I plopped down on the nearest available surface: the couch.

“Do you want some water?” Tabitha asked. “Or maybe a sandwich? You still look really pale.”

I’d never felt less hungry in my life. “Maybe some tea?”

She nodded and went into the kitchen to start boiling water while the guys entered the house. Mikah immediately headed for me and pressed a cool hand against my forehead.

“Does that even work?” I asked. “You’re a vampire. Anyone with a pulse is gonna feel warm to you, right?”

He gave me a rueful smile. “It works well enough that I know you for sure have a fever.”

“I’m just tired,” I lied. “And it’s really muggy in here. I’m not used to the humidity. It’s all kind of wearing on me.”

Mikah’s hand dropped, and he hummed, looking at me skeptically, but he didn’t disagree.

“Maybe you should lie down?” Gabriel suggested.

“I’m fine. I want to be awake when Xavier and Greyson call to check in.”

He sighed, clearly conflicted. He’d promised Xavier he’d take care of me, but he also clearly wasn’t comfortable saying no to me. Which was great, because the last thing I wanted was to be bossed around by any more Alpha werewolves. Especially ones that weren’t my mates.

“I’ll rest,” I conceded, “but I’m not going to sleep.”

After a beat, he nodded. “Deal.”

Tabitha came in with the tea. “What’s the deal?”

I reiterated mine and Gabriel’s agreement, and she frowned. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Actually getting some sleep might help you recover faster.”

I pursed my lips. “I’m not going to miss out on any calls about the ashes just because of one fainting spell. Besides, I’m fine,” I added in a much lighter tone. “I’m sure this tea will work wonders.”

“If you say so.” She didn’t look even remotely convinced.

Tabitha put a hand on my shoulder, and I braced for the skin-deep burn of the handprint to flare up again. But nothing happened. No more pain. I let out a sigh of relief and felt my body relax as I looked up at Tabitha.

“Thank you for what you did back there. Helping me break out of whatever the handprint was doing to me.” The fainting spell had felt like seconds to me, but judging from my mates’ and sister’s reaction, I’d been out of it long enough to scare the hell out of everyone.

“I’m still new at using my powers, but anything I can do to help, I want to.” She smiled. “My ability is so passive that I often feel pretty useless. Please don’t think I’d wish you ill or anything, but it’s kind of nice to be needed.”

I shook my head. “I get that, but rest assured that right now, you’re the most special person in my vicinity. I think that you’re the reason I’m not still passed out right now.”

Not that I was feeling anywhere near a hundred percent. Even sitting down on the couch after a long car ride, I still felt dizzy. That same light-as-air, spinning sensation that had accompanied me when I’d lost consciousness.

I took a sip of tea. Hopefully the warm liquid would help me find my balance. I didn’t want to pass out again. Gabriel would have to call Xavier, and he’d tell Greyson, and knowing them, they’d drop everything to come rushing back here and take care of me.

We weren’t going to find the ashes like that.

I looked up from my tea and noticed Adair lingering in the doorway. But I knew from first glance that he wasn’t here for my benefit. His eyes were locked on Tabitha, and he watched her with the same intensity he’d had since the moment he pulled her out of that tomb.

Despite what a complete asshole he’d been, I felt myself softening toward him. He obviously loved Tabitha, even if he seemed to be struggling to admit it. It actually reminded me a lot of how Artemis used to be when we first met. She was cold on the outside, afraid to let anyone in, or to show anyone any care or kindness. All of that had almost been beaten out of her by growing up alone in the Fae world.

Almost. Beneath that hard exterior, Artemis had a deep capacity for love.

I remembered suddenly how Adair had brought Artemis to the brink of tears earlier, and my heart hardened to him again. He might have a bunch of Fae world hang-ups, but that didn’t make it okay for him to treat my sister—his niece—like shit.

A sudden and probably idiotic impulse took over, and before I could change my mind, I sat up and blurted out, “Adair, can I talk to you? Alone?”

The Fae’s brows rose, and Tabitha, Mikah, and Gabriel exchanged a look.

Tabitha stood. “Um, why don’t we just give you some privacy?”

Adair hadn’t budged. “Why do you want to talk to me? We have nothing to say to one another.”

God, he was insufferable.

I tried to keep my tone light. “I think I get to decide that for myself, don’t I?”

“Well,” he began, but Tabitha spun to face him and gave him a hard look. His lips snapped shut, and he sighed. “Fine.”

Tabitha and the others started for the door, and she quickly turned around. “Cali, let me know if you need anything, okay?” Then she pinned Adair with another hard look. “Be nice.”

She shut the door, leaving Adair and me alone. Adair was still leaning against the far wall, his arms crossed over his chest. It was nearly impossible for there to be any more space between us.

I realized quickly that he had no intention of coming over to sit with me, so I straightened a bit and cleared my throat. “I think we need to discuss my sister, Artemis.”

“I know her name.”

My eyes narrowed. “Glad to hear it. We still need to talk, though.”

He shook his head. “What’s between me and Artemis has already been discussed.”

“No, it hasn’t. You made an executive decision and decreed that you have no intention of having any kind of relationship with her without even hearing her side of things. You know she’s waited her whole life to meet you, right? She’s been longing for a connection to this side of her family, and instead she got you. You’ve been such a disappointment.”

“If that’s the case, it’s better for me to stay away.”

“You’re not even going to try? You won’t even talk to her?”

“This isn’t any of your business,” he ground out.

“Like hell it’s not. Artemis is my family. Which means, whether you like it or not, you and I have a connection too. I don’t want to sound mean, but… you’re being a real asshole right now.”

His brows lifted. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not stupid. I know you’re capable of feelings—big ones. The kind that run deep. I see it every time you look at Tabitha. So why is it so hard for you to even *try* to get to know Artemis, who shares your blood?”

“*Because* she shares my blood!” he snapped.

I blinked, then shook my head. “That… that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Artemis shouldn’t have anything to do with me. It’s for her own good. If I let myself…” He trailed off, his throat working against some emotion I couldn’t even begin to name.

“What is it?” I asked. “If you let yourself talk to her? If you let yourself care about her? What have you got to lose?”

His blue eyes blazed with a quiet fury. “It’s not about me. If I let myself become attached, then *they’ll* find out and go after her too.”

# Episode 3296

**Xavier**

Frustration didn’t even begin to describe what I felt as I watched Greyson step out of that drained, slimy fountain with the empty box. How the fuck was this empty? We’d followed that goddamn bloodsucker’s directions all over this godforsaken cemetery, and the ashes weren’t even hidden where they were supposed to be?

I stepped forward, yanking Pierre with me to look into the box myself. I scowled at the empty container.

“Fucking perfect,” I snarled.

My instincts screamed at me to turn on Pierre, to take my anger out on the vampire. To give him what he deserved. After all, in a roundabout way, this was all his fault. He was the one who’d made Adéluce so powerful. If Pierre hadn’t interfered, Adéluce would have died alongside her family and none of this would have ever happened.

I was seconds away from slashing his throat, but I held back.

*We still need him. I can’t kill him yet.*

Adéluce had other hiding places in the city, and we’d never find them in the time allotted without our walking, bloodsucking treasure map.

But, in the back of my mind, I was counting down. Pierre’s long and parasitic life had an expiration date. If he turned on us, or if we learned we didn’t need him after all, his time would be up, and I’d relish the opportunity to snuff out his life.

Greyson chucked the box aside, wiped his hands on his stained pants, and took the chain from me. “Where else did Adéluce like to hide things?” he asked Pierre, his tone clipped.

“Well… You might not like the next place,” Pierre said slowly.

Right. Because walking through a fucking graveyard in the dead of night was so much fun.

“Tell us,” I snarled through gritted teeth.

Pierre gulped. “Do you know anyone who can rent us a boat?”

Artemis scowled. “A *boat*? What are you talking about? I thought her hiding places were in the city?”

The vampire shook his head. “This one was. But since it’s not in use, the next most likely place is out in the bayou. Addy took a boat to get there—one of those boats with the big fan on the back.”

Greyson frowned. “Like those tourist rides?”

“The locals use them too, to get out to more remote places in the bayou where the water is shallow,” Rishika explained.

We all turned to stare at her, and she shrugged. “That’s what the airboats are there for. Other boats get stuck because of things like roots and shit in the shallow water.”

We kept staring. “Since when are you an expert on airboats?” I asked.

“I’m not. Artemis and I have just been on a lot of tours since we arrived here. Unlike some people, I pay attention.”

Artemis grinned and leaned in to kiss her cheek. “You’re so smart.”

Rishika blushed.

The Fae couldn’t hide her smile, but she nodded. “Okay, so where do we rent one of these boats?”

“That’s the problem,” Greyson said. “We don’t. Not at this hour, at least. None of the places will be open.”

I shrugged. Out of our growing list of problems, that one was probably the easiest to solve. “Then we break in and ‘borrow’ one.”

My brother sighed. “I hate to admit it, but you’re right. That’s the only way we’re going to get what we need.”

We pulled out our phones and searched for a nearby place that rented out airboats and then hauled ass over there. Hopefully between the four of us, it wouldn’t be too tricky to steal a boat. Greyson, Rishika, and I all had our werewolf strength. Artemis was strong too, but someone would have to keep track of Pierre and make sure he didn’t slip his leash…

I grinned when we reached the rental shop on the edge of the bayou. Several boats were docked next to the shop—no fencing or anything to keep them locked in. This would be even easier than I thought.

As we got closer, I realized why this was so seemingly simple: people probably weren’t in the habit of stealing these things. The airboats looked old and weird. They probably wouldn’t go for much if they were resold—and who would even want to buy one anyway? Owning an airboat just meant spending a lot of time in the humid, sticky bayou, full of mosquitos and gators and god only knew what else.

But, for us, in this moment, it finally felt like we were catching a break. No fencing, and a boat conveniently docked on the edge of the bayou would make it a hell of a lot easier to steal—erm, *borrow* one.

I headed for the dock and chose the airboat at the farthest end. A quick shift of my fingertips, and my werewolf claws severed the chain keeping the boat tethered to the dock. I hopped on and frowned down at the controls.

*Oh. These… don’t look intuitive at all.*

Rishika appeared at my side and took one look at my expression before sighing. “Move.”

I frowned. “What, did your New Orleans tour include an airboat driving class or something? I can do this. It can’t be any harder than a manual stick shift.”

She rolled her eyes and muttered, “Men.”

Then she shoved me aside and took the driver’s seat.

*All right then.*

I didn’t argue. If she wanted to drive that badly, who was I to stop her? I took a seat next to Greyson, who had sat Pierre down on one of the low benches at the front of the flat, wide boat.

He wordlessly held out a life vest to me.

I scoffed. “Seriously? I don’t need a fucking vest. I know how to swim.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged and pulled a life vest on before putting one on Pierre. Artemis held a life vest to her chest, but she didn’t put it on.

Rishika managed to get the engine to sputter to life, and I winced. The engine was a hell of a lot louder than I’d thought it would be, and it was wreaking havoc on my werewolf senses.

*This is gonna get really old, really fast.*

I noticed several pairs of plastic earmuffs and quickly grabbed a pair and pulled them on. I settled back into my seat with a sigh of relief. They didn’t block out the engine entirely, but they did dampen the sound so it was bearable.

Greyson quickly pulled on a pair of earmuffs too, then grabbed another pair and put some over Pierre’s ears as the vampire grimaced at the sound. I smirked at the sight of the chained-up vampire with his bright orange life vest and earmuffs.

*Is Greyson Pierre’s captor or caretaker?*

Rishika managed to back the airboat away from the dock, the motions a little jerky as she adjusted to the gear shifts and figured out the steering, and finally we took off down the bayou.

I scoffed. *I’d have done a hell of a lot better job driving this thing.*

Pierre was now gesturing wildly in a bunch of different directions. None of us could hear each other or make out what the fuck he was saying.

I saddled up to Greyson and shouted, “You really think this guy isn’t leading us somewhere he can overpower us?”

“If you’re worried, then keep on alert. I’m not worried about overpowering him if it comes to it. The guy’s a bag of bones, and he’s outnumbered and outmatched.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sure, bro. I’ll protect you.”

Greyson glared at me and shook his head. The sight lifted my spirits a little bit. Getting under Greyson’s skin always had that effect on me. And now, with so much on the line, it was the first thing that had truly brightened my mood in days.

Soon, we left the view of the city behind as we ventured farther and farther into the marsh. I immediately understood a new reason that they didn’t bother to fence in the airboats. It was pitch-black out here—there were no electrical lights, and the moon was shrouded by the clouds. If we didn’t have our werewolf and Fae senses, we never would have been able to navigate the swamp.

As it was, it was still tricky for me to make out where the shore ended and the bayou began through all the high grasses and murky water.

Still, I tried to stay on high alert. This place was creepy as fuck all on its own, and since we were heading to another of Adéluce’s hiding spots, there was no telling what kind of magical traps she might have left for us, or whether or not Pierre would ultimately betray us—to say nothing of any natural obstacles we might come across.

I thought I heard a splash in the water beside the airboat, but with the loud-ass engine and my earmuffs, it was hard to tell. I stiffened, partially shifting just in case.

*Maybe I should warn Greys—*

A gigantic set of jaws appeared and chomped down on the side of the boat. The whole rig lurched and tipped to the side, and we all started sliding down the bench we were sitting on.

I thought I heard Artemis cry out, but it was hard to tell amidst all the chaos.

I tried to grab onto anything that might keep me on the boat, but I couldn’t get purchase on anything, and I tumbled into the murky water.

# Episode 3297

**Artemis**

I should have known that this little venture on the water would go, as Rishika said, tits up.

I surfaced from beneath the cold and murky water, grass and algae and gods only knew what else clinging to my hair and skin.

“Rishika!” I called. “Rishika!”

“Artemis!” she called.

I turned in the water, looking around wildly for my girlfriend. The bayou was pitch-black, and even with my enhanced Fae vision, it was difficult to make her out amidst all the thrashing bodies, the still-running airboat, and—gods, what had that thing been?

“Greyson!” Xavier shouted. “Greyson, where are you?”

My heart beat a panicked rhythm against my ribcage. I didn’t know who to go to first, who needed my help the most, or who was even closest to me.

*Fuck it. Greyson and Xavier can work together for once. I’m finding Rishika.*

I swam in the general direction of the boat. It sounded far away, and panic poured into my veins. *Shit. We can’t lose it. We’ll be stuck out here, treading water.*

I swam as far as I could, pushing through grimy water, tall grass, and roots, trying to locate the boat. I had no idea how to drive the thing, but I’d figure it out. I didn’t have a choice.

As I neared the floating boat, a splash sounded and the water several feet in front of me shifted. There was something in the water between me and the boat, and I could only assume it was the same monstrous beast that had tipped us all out into the bayou.

It was a gator.

*Fuck these swamp monsters!*

They’d given us so much grief on this trip that I now categorized them as one of the worst parts of the human world. The Fae world wasn’t a walk in the park by any means, but, as far as I knew, the Fae world didn’t have alligators.

*Lucky them.*

I tried to find my well of Fae magic. I hadn’t even considered using it since we left the pack house since it’d been acting up and magic was turned off here for so long anyway. But in the water, with the darkness dulling my senses, I was no match for a full-grown alligator.

If I didn’t find something to level the playing field, I wasn’t gonna make it out of this alive.

I tread water, trying to reach into that deep well of magic as the water rushed toward me—a sure sign the gator was bearing down on me. As its jaws opened wide, I realized with a lurch that I couldn’t find my magic. It wasn’t going to save me.

Something blurred past, intercepting the gator before it could turn me into a midnight snack. It was Xavier, partially shifted. His claws slashed down the alligator’s back, distracting it enough to swerve.

I took the chance to swim to the boat with all my might and pulled myself up onto the deck. Nearby, Pierre was floundering in the water. His life vest was just barely keeping his head above water, but those chains were heavy—they had to be pulling him down.

I wondered briefly why the gator hadn’t bothered to eat him, and then, as I lifted him out of the water, I caught the scent of death and decay emanating from him.

Right. Why would an alligator eat Pierre when there were other warm-blooded options floating nearby?

“Rishika!” I called. “Rishika! Where are you?”

“I’m here!” I spun to search for her, then spotted her form in the water, fighting the alligator with Xavier. I had no idea where Greyson was.

I sat in the driver’s seat and scanned the controls. I didn’t have the first clue how to drive this thing, so I started pressing random buttons, hoping I’d come across the right combination.

The engine lurched to life again, and I pushed the controls forward as far as they would go.

The boat zoomed toward the others. “OUT OF THE WAY!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, praying they’d hear me over the engine and the fighting and everything else that was going on.

Thankfully, Xavier and Rishika seemed to notice and backed out of the way just in time for me to run over the gator. The boat lurched, and I flipped the fans off completely, so the full weight of the boat would crash down on the gator.

Its tail thrashed in the water, slamming into the bottom of the boat for a moment. Then the gator seemed to think twice about trying to lift an entire airboat off its back. It took off down the bayou.

*Thank gods.*

If I never saw or heard of another alligator again in my life, it’d be too soon.

The others climbed onto the boat and flopped down on the deck, exhausted. I was relieved to see Greyson had rejoined the group. His life vest was now torn to shreds and looked like a puffy orange necklace.

I jumped out of the driver’s seat and rushed over to check on Rishika. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, still breathing heavily. “You think a little alligator can take me?”

Her bravado was what broke me, and I threw my arms tight around her.

Nearby, Xavier pulled himself up off the floor of the airboat and snarled at Pierre. “What the fuck was that all about?”

The vampire weakly lifted its arms in self-defense. “You can’t possibly think I had something to do with that alligator attacking us?”

Xavier scowled. “I wouldn’t put it past you. You’ve been trying to plan your escape from the moment Greyson let you out, haven’t you?”

“Of course I have!” the vampire snapped. “I’d like my freedom when this is all done. But I pay my debts. I promised to show you Addy’s hiding places, and I will. Even if it kills me.”

“Don’t get my hopes up,” Xavier said. “I kind of doubt we’ll get that lucky.”

Greyson pulled Xavier back. “Come on. Playing the blame game isn’t getting us any closer to finding those ashes. We have to find this hiding place and get back in one piece in just a few hours, so stow the shitty attitude and—”

“Are you really that fucking naive?” Xavier shouted, spinning on his brother. “Don’t you get it? Can’t you see the truth by now? There *is* no hiding place out here! It’s just water and mud and gators! We haven’t seen one fucking building since we left the dock. This bloodsucker is leading us on a wild good chase so he can make his escape. Hell, he’s probably in cahoots with Adéluce!”

“You’re being paranoid,” Greyson said. “I get that Adéluce is under your skin, and you’re worried about Cali, but Pierre is the best lead we have right now and—”

“It is kind of odd,” Pierre mused. “The lack of houses. I could have sworn there were more buildings out here the last time I came out this way.”

“See! Even he admits it!” Xavier was fuming.

All the yelling was giving me the beginnings of a headache. Maybe Xavier was right—maybe we really did make a mistake trusting this guy. Maybe we were so desperate to help Cali that we didn’t evaluate Pierre’s intentions well enough.

I just wanted so badly to save Cali. We all did. But Xavier wasn’t wrong—it sure felt like we were on a wild good chase. And if that was the case, then none of this was going to help Cali.

Rishika held up a hand. “Pierre, when exactly did you come out here last?”

He frowned. “Well, I was following Adéluce’s trail. And if you’re telling me the truth about what year it is now, I’d say it was… five years ago? Things must have changed since then.”

I froze. His intel was five years old? It could be completely useless by now.

Greyson and Xavier seemed to come to the same conclusion.

“So, all the landmarks that Pierre would have used to guide us are gone,” Greyson said.

Xavier scowled. “Maybe this hiding place is gone too then.”

I cursed under my breath. “Are you saying we’re lost out here in the swamp?”

“We should turn back,” Rishika suggested. “Try to retrace our journey and get back on land.”

Silence settled in as we all considered this change of plans. I hated the idea of just giving up, especially on the off chance that Pierre wasn’t totally wrong about where this hiding place might be. But the bayou was hard to navigate in the dark already, and if Pierre’s memory didn’t match up with the current landscape, there was literally no way for us to know if we were on the right track.

*Rishika’s right*. I sighed, ready to tell the others we should head back when a small ball of light flashed in front of me. I blinked, then held my breath as the others started to debate the pros and cons of leaving versus continuing to search the bayou.

“Hey!” I snapped. “Shut up!”

The group turned to look at me in surprise, and I pointed at the light floating in front of my face. “It’s a wisp! I think it’s trying to show us the way.”

# Episode 3298

**Greyson**

The wisp floated and dipped above us as I watched it with no small amount of suspicion. The last time I’d trusted a wisp, we’d ended up facing off against demon spirits. Time was of the essence here, and we couldn’t handle even the smallest detour—but I trusted Artemis. She was the only Fae with us at the moment, so the wisp had to have been drawn to her. I couldn’t help but think that if it were Cali here right now, I wouldn’t hesitate to trust her. Even thinking about Cali sent me into a tailspin of worry that I had to work hard to pull myself out of.

*Well, I trust Artemis a hell of a lot more than I trust Pierre, that’s for sure, so if this wisp knows the way, then maybe we should follow it.*

So far, Pierre had only managed to lead us on a wild goose chase through the bayou with no end in sight. If there was even a chance this wisp knew more than our vampire prisoner, then it made perfect sense to follow it. “Rishika, let’s follow the wisp,” I instructed. If we were going to get to the bottom of this, we would have to take some risks.

“You got it.” Rishika pulled a lever, and the boat lurched forward.

“I hope this leads to something good,” I said under my breath. I’d had an unsettled feeling in my stomach ever since we parted ways with Cali, and I didn’t see it going away any time soon. I only hoped that we were close to finding the ashes. That was the only thing that would help me breathe a little easier.

I glanced at Pierre. *Does the vampire recognize any of this?* I pulled on his chain to make sure it was secure and positioned myself between him and Rishika, just in case. He’d had a taste of Rishika’s blood, so there was no question that he might hunger for more of it and attack her without warning. *He’ll have to go through me first.*

I sighed, feeling a bit overwhelmed and antsy to get this over with. At least the boat’s movement had redirected the pungent vampire death smell away from me. It was almost too much to handle, and Pierre’s weakened state meant he smelled even more strongly than the typical bloodsucker.

I only hoped that this wasn’t a waste of time—or worse, an elaborate trap. *Could Pierre’s story have been a total lie? Is he secretly working for Adéluce? Maybe she wanted us to find Pierre.* It could all be part of her master plan, and it wasn’t lost on me that this little scavenger hunt had separated me and Xavier from Cali.

A chill went down my spine at the thought of anything happening to Cali and us not being able to do anything about it from way out here.I wanted more than anything to believe that my doubts were misplaced. I wanted to believe that in the end, we would recover the ashes in one of these hiding places Pierre had mentioned and be on our way. But I also knew better than to be naïve. Pierre was a starving vampire who would do anything to get out of his prison under the Duquette mansion, and that meant he was capable of damn near anything.

I looked at my brother, who had barely taken his eyes off Pierre since we started our journey. There was no doubt in my mind that Xavier trusted Pierre even less than I did, but right now, I didn’t see any other options.

*If we don’t track down those ashes soon, Cali’s life will be in grave danger. The only thing that matters is saving Cali, whatever it takes. Even if it means trusting this rotting vampire and this strange wisp.*

Running around a place like New Orleans searching for the ashes with no guidance at all would be a complete crapshoot, and we didn’t have time for that. If by some miracle everything did work out, Cali would finally be free of Seluna for good, and that’s what I had to focus on. I had no choice but to see this through.

Rishika slowed the boat. “Look,” she said, pointing to the shadow of a building in the distance where the wisp hovered for a moment before dissipating into the thick fog hanging over the swamp.

I held Pierre’s chain taut and used it to pull him forward. “Does this place ring any bells?”

Pierre nodded fast. “It does. It’s just like I remember.”

He sounded truthful enough, but that didn’t fill me with much confidence since we’d established that his memory was sketchy at best. Where his memory hadn’t failed, time had changed so much about the places he used to know that it might as well have. Still, it was all we had to go on, and so we had to explore the possibility that this was, indeed, one of the hiding places from Pierre’s memory.

“Let’s get closer,” I told Rishika.

Rishika pulled the boat up to a rotting dock, which was angled down into the murky water. The path that led from the dock to the looming building was overgrown with vines and vegetation and looked like no one had walked it in decades.

Wasting no time, Xavier stepped carefully out onto the rickety dock and tied the boat to it as Rishika cut the engine.

“This thing looks like a one-way ticket to death town,” Artemis grumbled as she took a ginger step onto the dock. Once she’d gotten her footing, she looked back at the rest of us. “Be really careful. Most of this wood is rotted straight through.”

“Go slow, everyone,” I cautioned as I stepped gently off the boat, pulling Pierre along with me.

“Does anyone else hear… music?” Xavier asked as we all carefully made our way over the swaying, groaning dock to the overgrown path.

I paused and listened. “Yeah, I hear it, too. It sounds like an old blues song. Do you think there are people here?”

Everyone exchanged nervous looks. Whoever might be hanging out at a place like this wasn’t someone we were eager to meet. The music drifted in and out on the breeze, sometimes sounding slowed down and warped, and other times sounding sped up and frantic. It was creepy to say the least.

The path had quickly turned to thick mud that sucked at our shoes as we walked, and we waded through it to the building’s sagging porch. The place had definitely seen better days. Part of the roof had collapsed, partially exposing the dark interior.

“Here goes nothing,” Artemis said as she pushed open the front door, revealing a large, dilapidated great room with a crumbling bar on one side and a decaying stage on the other. Broken chairs lay scattered around the room and the entire place smelled like mold and rot.

Suddenly, the music stopped. I looked around, expecting to see someone appear, but the place seemed empty—and it felt like we were the first people to see the inside in a long, long time.

Still holding Pierre’s chain taut, I led him deeper inside. I couldn’t help but notice that the vampire was looking a little worse for wear. I tightened my hold on the chain just as Pierre snarled and lunged at Artemis. Rishika didn’t waste any time slamming him back against the bar, sending a shower of rotting wood tumbling to the decaying floor. She snatched up a chair leg from the floor and pressed the jagged edge against his chest.

“If you don’t keep your shit together, I’ll stake you right here, right now!” Rishika hissed.

Pierre held his hands up in surrender and ducked his head. “I’m sorry. I’m just so hungry. I haven’t had a proper feeding in so long… I need more blood.”

I cursed under my breath. I knew that without blood, Pierre’s condition would only worsen, and he would continue to lose control. Still, I didn’t want anyone else to give up their blood to the likes of him. Rishika had already done more than was required by doing it the first time.

I looked at Pierre. “No one here is going to satisfy your hunger, I’m afraid.” I looked at the others. “If the ashes are here, and I hope to hell they are, we won’t have any more need for Pierre, and then he can go hunt down a gator for all I care. Until then, we all need to search this place top to bottom. I’ll keep an eye on the vamp.” I looked Pierre right in the eye. “And trust that I won’t save you if you try anything like that again.”

Xavier and Artemis began searching behind the bar. Xavier pulled a faded photograph from the wall and held it up so that I could look at it closely. It was Pierre sitting on the stage with a group of older men, trumpet in hand.

“What the hell does that mean?” I said, trying, and failing, to determine exactly how old the picture might be.

Rishika gasped and pointed to the spot where the picture had been. “There’s a witch mark.”

# Episode 3299

Adair was confusing me more and more as time went on. “So… It sounds like you do have some emotions regarding Artemis, but you’re still choosing to push her away? Even though she’s your family?”

“You don’t get it,” Adair said simply. “The reason I have to run away from Artemis is the same reason I had to leave Tabitha behind—for her safety. Everything isn’t about sappy feelings and holding on to a relationship for dear life. Sometimes, things are way more complicated than that.”

I thought about that. There was definitely something between Adair and Tabitha. With the way they acted around each other, it was obvious. “I don’t know if you’re thinking straight about all of this. It was your kiss that woke Tabitha up and helped her escape Odette and the council. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?” Adair had been dogged in his search for Tabitha, so it was clear that he was capable of caring about someone else—even if he absolutely sucked at showing it.

Adair waved that off. “I did what I came to do. Free Tabitha.” He turned away from me and looked out the window. “I don’t know what else you all want from me.”

I was getting annoyed now. “So now that you’ve freed her, you’re going to just run away? You do remember what happened to Tabitha when you left before, don’t you? She was kidnapped! If you hadn’t left her, you might have been able to prevent that!” I didn’t understand how Adair could be so concerned about Tabitha’s safety yet so hell-bent on leaving her vulnerable out in a world that hadn’t been too kind to her lately. He was really getting on my nerves.

Adair looked stricken for a moment before his eyes flashed angrily at me. “You have no idea what I’ve been dealing with. It isn’t as simple as you’re making it out to be. The Dark Fae court will never stop pursuing me, and that means that everyone I come into contact with is in danger. You’re only half Fae, so it’s no surprise that you don’t get it. You’ve been living in the human world so long that you have no idea how the Fae world operates, so stop talking about something you know absolutely nothing about!”

*How dare he?* “What I understand is that you refuse to help the people you claim to care about so much. Instead of running away, you should be using your magic to protect Tabitha and Artemis. It’s all too easy to just run away, isn’t it? Any coward can do that.” My heart was beating fast in my chest. I hadn’t planned for this to turn into an outright confrontation, but that’s where we were headed.

Adair glared at me. “Just because you’re a Wrenthorn doesn’t mean that you understand, so don’t you dare lecture me. You’re better off worrying about yourself. Seems like you have enough shit on your plate without butting into my business.” Adair stormed off, slamming the door hard behind him.

*Well, that went well… Not!*

I was starting to think that I’d maybe come on a little too strong, but it was pissing me off that he couldn’t see the error of his ways. He was clearly a powerful Fae who was choosing the easy way out. Artemis had been searching for him all this time, and she had a lot of hope tied up in Adair and what he could tell her about her father… And he was letting her down. I didn’t want to see my sister hurt, especially when it wouldn’t even take that much for Adair to just be decent and talk to her to help fill in the blanks in her life.

*Artemis’s father is dead. Why can’t her own uncle step in and give her what she longs for? Why is he making it so hard? Why can’t he see that he’s doing more harm than good? Even if the Dark Fae council is after him, that’s not an excuse to abandon your family when they need you the most!*

I felt so bad for my sister. What she’d feared would happen if she tracked Adair down to New Orleans had become a reality, and that had to hurt more than anything. She’d been so torn about coming to New Orleans, and it pained me that things weren’t going better for her.

*I might be a Wrenthorn, and Artemis is part Wrenthorn, but Artemis is also a part of Adair’s family, and that means something. Why can’t he see that?*

I was frustrated… and hungry. I was still feeling pretty weak after what had happened at the Duquettes’ haunted mansion. *Maybe a little food will revive me. It definitely couldn’t hurt to get something in my stomach.*

I went to the kitchen, wondering how Greyson, Xavier, and the others were getting on. I hoped they were safe and that Pierre was holding up his end of the bargain. Artemis was going through enough without running into danger on their newest mission. But at least she had Rishika by her side. There was no way she would let anything happen to my sister—and neither would Greyson or Xavier.

Knowing that Rishika and my mates could handle themselves gave me solace, but I was still filled with regret at not being strong enough to go with them. The ashes were my problem, and yet, here I was, waiting for others to do what I should be doing myself. I’d always prided myself on not needing to rely on anyone else to solve my problems, and now I was being forced to wait in the wings while people I cared about did all the heavy lifting.

“Hey, Cali, how are you feeling?” Tabitha asked as soon as I stepped into the kitchen. She was busy whipping up sandwiches, and I had to stop my mouth from watering at the sight of them.

“Thanks for asking.” I sighed as I took a seat at the kitchen table. “I’ve definitely been better.” I thought about my argument with Adair and cringed internally. I didn’t know if I’d made things better or way worse.

“I can only imagine. Are you hungry now?”

“I’m actually starving. How did you know?”

“You have that look,” Tabitha said. She set a sandwich down in front of me, and I wasted no time shoveling it into my mouth as she took a seat across from me.

“Dani has had such nice things to say about you,” I said around my food. I was too hungry to be polite. “It’s nice to finally meet you.” She had the same calm, genuine energy as Dani, and it was refreshing in the face of all the darkness swarming around us.

Tabitha sighed and looked down at her hands where they sat clasped on the tabletop. “I really miss her, and I can’t wait to see her again.”

“I know. And I feel a little bad. The only reason you aren’t on your way to see her right now is because you agreed to stay and help me—unlike Adair.”

Tabitha arched her eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

I knew that I probably shouldn’t have said the Adair thing out loud, but it was too late now. “What’s the deal with you two, anyway?”

Tabitha shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I don’t know, it’s just that Adair seems to… you know… have feelings for you. And from the looks of it, you have feelings for him, too.” I was pushing the issue, I knew, but I just couldn’t leave the whole Adair thing alone. All I could think about was finding out whatever I could that would help Artemis get what she needed from him.

There was a span of awkward silence. “I—I don’t know what to say…”

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “I really don’t mean to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, but Adair is pretty hard to figure out. I think I’m just struggling to understand what makes him tick. Really, I’m just worried that he’s going to break Artemis’s heart.”

“Yeah… Him being her long-lost uncle and all, I get that. The thing is, I’ve known Adair longer than you, and he’s still not an easy man to figure out. Anyway, I thought there was something…” She trailed off and looked away. “It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that we found each other. That’s all that counts, right?” Tabitha smiled sadly and cleared her throat. “How’s the sandwich?”

“Good,” I said, managing to smile back. It was all so strange. They clearly had feelings for each other, yet neither of them seemed to want to admit it.

*If Tabitha and Adair did let go of their reservations and give in to those feelings, not only would they both be in a better place emotionally, but it might also give Adair a reason to stick around.*

Adair deciding not to run away from the people that cared about him would give him the opportunity to get to know Artemis. That way, Artemis would get what she wanted—what she needed—and Adair would realize that being with the people who mattered to you was more important than trying to save them by disappearing from their lives all together.

I polished off my sandwich, feeling hopeful. It would all work out in the end. It had to. All I had to do was play matchmaker.

# Episode 3300

**Xavier**

I looked closely at the strange markings on the wall. There was no question that Rishika had just pointed out a witch mark, and it didn’t surprise me in the least. New Orleans was all about witches, after all. I would’ve been shocked if we *hadn’t* run into a witch mark at some point during our time in NOLA.

I thought back to the witch mark we’d found on the lake house what seemed a lifetime ago. It had summoned ghosts and communicated with the spirit world, which meant that this mark could be doing the same and alerting who knows what to what we were doing here.

*Adéluce probably knows what we’re up to. She’s probably watching us right now, plotting, waiting for the right moment to attack. Fuck.*

I turned on Pierre and jacked him up against the wall, almost having to hold my breath from the stench of him. “You set us up! Bad move! It would be all too easy for me to squeeze your neck until your head pops right off!” I wrapped my hands around his neck and squeezed, Pierre’s loose skin feeling disgusting in my grip, but I held on. I wanted him to know that I wasn’t bluffing.

“Easy, brother,” Greyson said, pulling me back. “Slow your roll, okay? We might still need him. We still have no idea where the ashes are. If they aren’t here and you kill him, we’ll be shit out of luck.”

I shrugged out of my brother’s hold. “Yeah, well, I want answers. What is this place? Why are we really here? It doesn’t feel right, and I’ll be damned if I’m walking into some trap set up by Adéluce and her vamp lover.”

Pierre, shaken, was breathing hard and trying to catch his breath. “I assure you that I haven’t set you up. In fact, I’ve brought you right where you need to be. This used to be Marvelle’s Music Hall. Adéluce used to come here a lot to do some of her business with the locals. She spent a great deal of time here, and if my memory serves, she used this place as a stash spot.” Pierre coughed and held his neck, his sallow cheeks puffing in and out. He looked like he was seconds from passing out, and I didn’t care one bit. I was tired of him and Adéluce and everything that New Orleans had offered us since we’d arrived. I only wanted to get the ashes and get the hell out of here. My patience had worn thin.

“I can only imagine what kind of business your precious *Addy* did here… probably dealing in spells and dark magic, with no regard for human life.” I was getting more and more pissed the longer we stayed in this creepy place. “So, vampire, you claim that she used this as one of her hiding places. Where should we start looking?”

Pierre looked frightened by my reaction as he shrugged. “I don’t know; I’m sorry. Addy never fully trusted anyone, least of all me even though I was her sire. You’re all going to have to search.”

I scowled at the vampire, holding myself back from pinning him against the wall again. Obviously sensing this, Greyson caught my attention.

“We should worry less about Pierre and just focus on locating the ashes,” he said. “Don’t get distracted. This is the hand we’ve been dealt right now, so let’s see this through.”

I glanced at the witch mark. I wished I could just shift one hand and slash away at it until it was gone, but I knew that it took way more than that to destroy a mark like that. Last time, I’d needed Kira to do it—and we were fresh out of witches at the moment. Not to mention that I’d be a fool to touch it. It was probably still active and could wreak all kind of havoc if I tampered with it. We had enough to deal with without me stirring up the wrath of whoever had marked this place.

*Maybe I could still test it out, see if it still has any juice.* I glared at the vampire. *I could maybe slam Pierre into it and see what happens.* As satisfying as that idea was, I pushed it away. We still needed Pierre until the ashes were secured, and Greyson was right, I needed to focus my attention on the task at hand. If Pierre were misleading us, I’d make sure he got what he deserved in due time. For now, the ashes were all that mattered.

“This place must be haunted,” Rishika said. “How else can we explain that eerie music?”

We all looked around, an air of uneasiness whipping between us. I wouldn’t have been surprised in the least if we saw a ghost band performing up on what was left of that stage. The air was thick with dust and musty from being shut up for so long, but there was something else in the air, too—a heaviness that might have been coming from the witch mark, for all I knew.

On the bright side, if I could call it that, it seemed that we were on the right track. The picture had proven that Pierre knew this place well, at least. I wondered if this was where he’d come across the people who’d hired me to track the Duquettes. I wouldn’t doubt it. This definitely felt like the type of establishment where all manner of bad deals had gone down. I’d seen a lot of places just like it during my time as a mercenary, although those places had been arguably a lot less… haunted.

“There has to be more to this place than this bar and stage. Maybe there are storage areas, sheds, a cellar…” I suddenly became acutely aware of the way Pierre was looking at Artemis.

I went up to Greyson. “I don’t like the way Pierre’s looking at Artemis. He might attack at any moment. I can see the hunger in his eyes. Seems like Fae blood is a hell of a drug.”

“I agree,” Greyson replied. “Why don’t I take Pierre with me and go look outside to find out if there are other storage places? Maybe something out there will jog his memory.”

“It’s worth a shot. In the meantime, we’ll search top to bottom in here.”

I watched Greyson yank Pierre outside by the chain, and then Artemis, Rishika, and I started tearing the place apart. We pried up floorboards, peered into darkened closets, opened all the rotting cabinets and explored all the nooks and crannies behind the bar. We even went as far as cutting into the soft cushions of the booths in the corners of the room and rooting through the damp yellowed stuffing inside.

“If the ashes are here, we have to find them,” I said. I was already covered from head to toe in dirt and grime, but I didn’t care. I was too focused on scouring every inch of the place, but I made sure to steer clear of the witch mark. I couldn’t shake the sensation that its energy was coursing through the air, waiting for one of us to slip up.

I stopped and looked at the pictures hanging crookedly on the walls, most of them covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs. There was something about them that gave me the chills—which wasn’t saying much since almost everything in this room was giving me the creeps.

“There it is again,” Rishika said as the music started up once more.

“Yeah, I hear it too.” I looked around, wondering where the hell it was coming from. I concentrated hard and tuned my ears to the sound. I followed the chilling melody to a picture behind cracked glass, the frame almost entirely green with mold. *This must be from the 1930s, maybe even earlier.* It showed a group of people dancing while a small band played. *Is that Pierre up on the stage? It sure looks like him*.

I was just about to turn away from the picture when something caught my eye. “Did those dancers just move?” I paused and leaned in close, examining the faded image. Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I whirled around and was startled to see a waiter dressed in clothing of the same style and period as the people in the photograph. “What the…” The waiter handed me a beer, and I nearly dropped it.

The music seemed to grow louder by the second, and the moldy-smelling air gave way to the familiar aroma of a bar—cigarette smoke, alcohol, perfume, sweat.

I looked toward the stage where a young man who was the spitting image of Pierre wrapped his hand around the old-timey microphone in front of him. “Ladies and gentlemen, our next singer tonight is a very special guest.”

The crowd murmured in anticipation as I tried to make my way through the press of their bodies, my eyes searching their strange, creepy faces for any sign of Rishika or Artemis. *What’s going on here? I have to be hallucinating.* The music grew even louder, and the Pierre look-alike on stage began to sway to the beat.

What in the hell was going on here? Was this the witch mark?

# Episode 3301

I’d returned to my room, glad that I finally had an idea of how to fix things with Adair and Artemis—but first, I needed to consult with the matchmaking queen herself. Lola. If anyone knew how to play matchmaker, it was her. After all, she was the one who’d tricked me into meeting Xavier. Granted, Xavier and I had had a rough start, but now I couldn’t imagine my life without him—and Lola was to thank for that.

I dialed my friend, and she picked up on the second ring. “Hey! How’s New Orleans treating you, Cali? Wish I was there with you. Now that Christmas is over and done, Torin’s totally obsessed with New Year’s Eve and is driving me—and everyone else—absolutely nuts. If you ask me, he missed his calling as an event planner.”

I couldn’t believe that New Year’s Eve was already just a couple of days away. *Time certainly flies when you’re in a strange city searching for the key to removing a cursed handprint from your body…*

“Torin definitely loves holidays more than anyone I’ve ever met,” I said, suddenly wishing that I was home with the rest of the pack—even if that meant I’d be subjected to Torin’s festive wrath. “As far as our trip… Things have been pretty interesting. We have a lead on the ashes, but that’s not why I called. You know how Artemis came here to meet her uncle Adair?”

“Yes, she was pretty nervous about it, if I recall correctly,” Lola replied. “How’s all that going?”

“If I’m being positive, it’s amazing that we were able to reconnect with him at all, but I have to admit that their reunion definitely could have gone better.”

“Really? That’s too bad. What happened?”

“Adair ended up being a little… colder than Artemis expected. But I think I have a way to make things right between them.”

“Oh? What do you have in mind?”

“So… We also linked up with Tabitha—Dani’s sister.”

“I heard! That’s such great news!” Lola said.

“It is… But Tabitha and Adair have a… thing. Except neither of them seems open to exploring it. That’s where I come in, and why I need your help. I want to get them to realize—and act upon—their feelings for each other. I think if Tabitha and Adair get together, it’ll put Adair in a better mood—which is what Artemis needs.”

“Say no more. I’m totally down to help!” I could tell Lola was excited. “So, we’ve got a case of two ships passing in the night when they should really be docked next to each other. Nothing a little nudging can’t fix. So let me think this through…” I could hear Lola talking something through to herself. “Okay, I think that you’ll have to push whatever they’ve got going a step further—up the stakes, if you will. The way I see it, the only way they’ll admit that there’s really something between them is if they hook up!”

“What? I’m not sure that’s exactly what I had in mind…” Leave it to Lola to make it about sex.

“No, it’s not what you had in mind, but that’s why you called me! So I can think of the things that you’d never consider. Hear me out. Once they hook up, the feelings will gush forth like a geyser. Trust me. Think about it: Adair is a Fae, and I assume he’s super hot.”

I hadn’t really taken the time to consider it, but I supposed that he was pretty attractive. “Yeah, I guess you’re right about that.”

“I know I am. And, if Tabitha is anything like Dani, Adair will have a hard time resisting her. If they have all the feelings you say they do all pent up inside, why *would* he resist?”

“That might be true and all, but if they haven’t acted on them before now, how do I get them to hook up now?”

Lola was quiet for a moment before she said, “I suppose you could drug them—”

“Lola, what? You have to be kidding. There’s no way I’m drugging them!”

“Okay, okay, so no drugging. Sheesh. Well… I guess all you need to do is get them alone together—something romantic, intimate, special. And make sure there’s alcohol.”

“That seems like a lot… And I’m not going to get them drunk. If this is going to work, they need to have all their wits about them. And all this needs to happen pretty fast since we’re up against a witch’s deadline.”

“Why can’t you just lock them in a room together and let nature take its course?”

I thought about that. Maybe all they needed was some quality time alone together to figure out what there really was between them. “That might do the trick… Though I’m not too crazy about locking up a powerful Fae like Adair. I might piss him off, and then who knows what he’ll do?” I sighed and thought through all the ideas that Lola had presented. None of them seemed quite right.

“Thanks, Lola, for your advice.”

“Anytime. You know I aim to please.”

“I’m going to think about it some more. I’ll let you know which direction I end up taking in all this. I’d better get going—oh, and can you let my parents know that I’m okay? I don’t want them to worry.”

“Sure thing,” Lola said before we ended the call.

I sat back on my bed, feeling more than a little overwhelmed. I’d lied to Lola. I wasn’t okay. I still felt plenty weak, though the sandwich had helped a little. I sighed and closed my eyes, concentrating as I weighed my options.

*Maybe if I can just get Adair and Tabitha to talk about their feelings…*

Gabriel popped his head in. “Hey, Cali. Any word from Xavier yet?”

I shook my head and sat up in bed, my thoughts still snagged on Adair and Tabitha. Somehow thinking about the two of them had managed to keep me from worrying about my mates for the time being. “No, nothing yet.”

“Not surprised. Chances are there’s no cell service out on the bayou.”

“Probably not.” I considered Gabriel closely. “Nice of you to ask about them.” *I guess even mercenaries have feelings.*

He shrugged. “Of course. Xavier and I go way back. That’s also why I think they’ll come out on the other side of this thing okay.”

“You don’t know how much that reassures me,” I said. An idea suddenly occurred to me. “I was wondering… Do you think there’s anything going on between Adair and Tabitha?”

Gabriel grinned. “Uh… Fuck yeah, there is. It’s been obvious ever since Adair and Tabitha met.” He narrowed his gaze. “What are you up to? I don’t know you all that well, but even I’ve noticed that you get a certain look in your eye when you’re stuck on something.”

“I’m trying to get Tabitha and Adair to admit what we all know to be true,” I said matter-of-factly. “That they’re head over heels for each other.”

Gabriel chuckled. “Then the best thing for you to do is to stay out of the way. If they do have feelings—I mean real, true feelings—then everything will work itself out in the end. If you try to meddle with things and force it, you could make things worse between them.”

I let out a breath of frustration. “That’s the exact opposite of Lola’s advice,” I grumbled. Adair and Tabitha were so busy dancing around each other, and I only wanted to speed up their little burgeoning love waltz. The quicker they caved to their feelings for each other, the quicker Adair would soften and see the value in sticking around. What would be so bad about rushing things a little?

“Who do you trust more on this? Lola, who’s never even met Tabby or Adair, or me, whose mate has a long history with Adair? Add to that, I’ve known Tabitha for a quite a while—at least way longer than you or Lola have. She’s my friend. The choice is obvious. Believe me.”

I didn’t like that he was making sense. I looked at the floor, my mind still racing. I hadn’t totally given up on the idea that I needed to push things along a bit, but I couldn’t ignore Gabriel’s very levelheaded advice.

“Man, I can see that you’re really torn up about all this. Maybe I can say something to them? If you want?”

“Um, no… I don’t think that’s a good idea. This needs to be handled just right, and no offense, Gabriel, but you can be a little… impulsive.”

“Pssh, me? Impulsive? Call it what you want, but when something has to be done, I take action.” He turned toward the door. “Let me know if you need my help.” Then he slipped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

I plopped facedown on my bed, wishing that there was an easy way to make this happen. The thing was, Gabriel and I weren’t all that different. When I saw a problem, the only thing I could usually think about was how to solve it—and I often acted without thinking things through all the way. But I couldn’t mess this up.

The only thing I knew was that I had to do this for my sister, by any means, and I smiled as I realized that I might just have an idea how.

# Episode 3302

**Greyson**

I paced around behind the back of the music hall—which these days looked more like a shack—when the music started up again. “Do you hear that?” I asked Pierre. I wasn’t at all pleased that it had started up again.

Pierre nodded. “I do.”

“How is that even possible?” I looked around, not knowing what I was expecting to see. “This place is empty, and from the looks of it, it has been for a long, long time. Is there some sort of ghost band? Or is this yet another one of Adéluce’s spells at work?”

“Addy is crafty and devious; I know that better than anyone. If we’re hearing music, there must be a reason.”

*Well, that’s unsettling. What purpose does creepy music serve? Other than freaking us out? What could she be up to?* If the music was indeed Adéluce’s doing, then that meant that she was tracking us. I was starting to feel like we were marionettes and Adéluce was holding the strings. I hated feeling like I wasn’t in control of the situation—well, I hated any lack of control, but once the music started increasing in pitch, I knew that was precisely the position I was in.

“Marvelle’s Music Hall has a lot of history,” Pierre rasped. “It was a popular place not only for the locals, but also for witches to gather when they tired of the city. Addy used to come here all the time,” Pierre said almost wistfully. “I used to call this place her headquarters of sorts.” He coughed and braced himself against a nearby tree.

I was hoping that Pierre would inadvertently mention something useful in his reminiscing, something that might offer some insight into exactly where Adéluce stashed things that she brought here. “But why? Why did she come here so often? Could it have anything to do with the revenge magic she’s trying to work against Xavier?”

Pierre shook his head, his cloudy eyes gazing out into the distance. “I’m sorry; I don’t know. My mind—it’s so fogged up by hunger and fatigue. I only had enough of your companion’s blood to keep my craving in check, but not nearly enough to allow me to function normally. With starvation, the mind is the first thing to go.”

I considered the possibility that he was playing up his hunger to manipulate me, but I had a feeling that he was telling the truth. It was obvious from the way he lunged at Artemis that Rishika’s blood hadn’t satisfied him for long. He wasn’t looking so good, either, and Xavier attacking him hadn’t done him any favors. We had to get what we needed out of him before he became totally consumed by his hunger and was no use to any of us.

“Try, Pierre. Where might Adéluce have put those ashes?” There was no way for me to be entirely sure, but I felt like we were so close to the ashes. It was probably wishful thinking, but we had to search this place thoroughly before I would even feel moderately comfortable with leaving it behind.

Pierre looked past me. It didn’t seem like he’d even heard a word I’d said. I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, and he seemed to come to, his dry lips cracking into a weak smile. “I am sorry. As I said, I’m quite weak and confused. I’m not sure how much help I can be to any of you in this state.” He sagged against me, and I shoved him away. He wavered on his feet, his eyes closed and his mouth slack.

*Shit! He looks like he’s seconds from losing consciousness. Does it make sense for me to give him some of my blood? Just enough so he can regain his strength and get a clear mind capable of remembering the details we so desperately need?* It seemed like a good idea, but if I gave him more blood, that also meant he would grow more powerful and probably try to attack and make a run for it, and I was in no mood to face off with a vampire right now. I had better things to do at the moment.

Pierre stumbled over a rock and fell to his knees, clearly exhausted. s

“Shit!” I hissed as I took a quick look around. We were standing just outside a row of sheds, and the haunting smell of smoked meat assaulted my senses, almost like a memory. *This must be where they prepared BBQ for their customers all those years ago. Strange that the scent of it lingers, even now.* The smell only served to remind me of where we were, and how much help we were going to need if we wanted to ensure we didn’t overlook those ashes. This place was alien to me—hell, all of New Orleans was—and the ashes could be anywhere.That was why we needed an inside man to lead the way, or I feared we’d never find them.

I returned my attention to Pierre, who was still on his knees, rocking back and forth as if trying to keep himself from collapsing in a heap on the ground. He wasn’t going to last much longer without intervention, that much was clear. If there was something out here, Pierre was the only link we had, and I couldn’t let him slip away, no matter how much I wanted to be rid of him.

“I’m going to help you,” I said, offering up my wrist. “But I’m warning you, if you get greedy, I will stop you by any means necessary.”

Pierre looked up at me, surprise etched across his shrunken features. “I understand, and thank you. I only need a little pick-me-up, that’s all. Just a sip, and then I’ll be right as rain.” He curled back his lips to expose his fangs and quickly dug them deep into my wrist.

I winced as his fangs pierced deep beneath my skin. I’d been bitten by bloodsuckers before, but I’d never willingly offered up my blood like this. I didn’t like it one bit. I especially wasn’t too keen on how it sounded—almost like Pierre was slurping up my blood through a straw. At first, Pierre took his time and drank slowly, as if taking time to savor each gulp. But the more he drank, the more ravenous he became, and soon he was tugging at my arm and slurping hungrily like he was wolfing down a juicy steak, which I guessed in his case, he was.

I only wanted to give him enough to sharpen his cognitive skills, no more. I for damn sure didn’t want to give him so much that he drained me completely, and when it came to a vampire, that could happen quicker than expected. “Ease up, Pierre. Remember that I won’t hesitate to end you.”

“Mmm,” Pierre moaned as his grip tightened around my wrist. Now it was like I could feel torrents of my blood pouring into his mouth at a pace that began to worry me.

“Get off!” I yelled, yanking my arm away. But the vampire was latched on like a vice, and instead of tearing free of him, he held on tight so that I dragged him along with me when I moved. His teeth were fully embedded in my arm so that if I yanked too roughly, his teeth might tear my flesh. Had I made a big mistake? Was it possible that he might drain me so quickly that I might be too weak to break free?

*I can’t let that happen. Cali’s life depends on me.*

I grabbed the back of Pierre’s head and, bracing myself, ripped his fangs from my wrist. I winced against the searing pain that raced from the puncture wounds to every corner of my body. I slammed Pierre to the ground and stumbled back against a tree, pressing my hand against my gushing wrist to stop the blood flow. My head swam as I struggled to focus on Pierre, who was perched on the ground, his mouth smeared with my blood as he watched me with hunger in his eyes.

“It’s like you want me to kill you.” I pulled my hand away from my wound only to see that it was still oozing blood that dropped onto the marshy ground at my feet. I covered the wound with my hand again and leaned back against the tree, keeping my eyes on Pierre. I would heal soon, but vampire bite wounds tended to take a bit more time to close up.

Pierre rose to his knees, licking my blood from around his mouth before he busied himself with licking his fingers clean. His eyes were focused and hard as he stood up, and it was clear that he was no longer the shadow of death that he once was. Now, he looked like the man from the old photograph—maybe not completely restored to his old self, but damn near.

Pierre flexed his muscles and smiled, still licking his lips.

I watched him, the smallest shred of uncertainty rising up inside of me. Was he going to stand down like I’d asked, or was he going to attack and try to drain me dry?

# Episode 3303

**Xavier**

I pushed through the dancing crowd and was on my way back to the bar when something drew my attention. I could just make out a woman’s voice singing along to the music. The words and melody weren’t familiar, but the voice certainly was. My heartbeat quickened, and I swallowed. *It can’t be.*

I bumped into a couple dancing as I reversed course back toward the stage, frantic almost as I pushed through the crowd.

“Hey! Watch where the hell you’re going, asshole!” the man said as his dance partner looked on in annoyance, but I ignored them. I was too busy taking in the unbelievable sight standing right before me. Where Pierre had once stood in the center of the stage, bathed by the eerie spotlight, Ava now sat seated on a stool, singing a blues song. Her long, dark hair was piled high on her head, and she wore a sparkling dress that looked like something straight out of a fashion magazine—from over eight decades ago.

I watched her in awe. Ava sounded amazing. *I had no idea that she could carry a tune so well. She sounds like one of those professional blues lounge singers from way back when.*

I shook my head, squeezed my eyes shut, and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to clear the unbelievable image of Ava singing from my mind. *This doesn’t make any sense. Ava shouldn’t be here.* I was about to call out to her when someone grabbed me violently from behind and spun me around. It was the same guy I’d bumped into before. A straight razor gleamed menacingly in his hand.

“You owe the lady an apology!” the man boomed. “And I suggest you give it to her. Now.”

“It was an accident. Big deal. Get over it,” I said. I turned back to the stage, but the man stepped in front of me, blocking my view.

“Maybe you didn’t hear me clearly the first time, so I’ll repeat myself just this once because I’m a nice guy. Say you’re sorry. Now.” He moved the switch blade around so that it caught the light.

“Fuck off!” I spat. I needed to get to Ava. I didn’t have time for this.

“Maybe I’ll slice you to ribbons to teach you some manners,” the man said as he lunged for me with his blade high in the air.

I was just fast enough to dodge out of the way before he could make good on his promise—though the blade did slice into my shirt sleeve. I stared at the torn fabric, anger rising inside of me. “You shouldn’t have done that!” I yelled as I grabbed his hand, forcing the blade away from me and back toward his grimacing face. He pushed back, and we grappled and struggled, knocking into the other patrons, and crashing into the bar before I was finally able to wrench the blade from his hand. It clattered to the ground, and immediately I drew my fist back, preparing to sock the guy in the mouth just as something hit me hard across the jaw.

I saw stars for a few long moments before my visioned cleared. I blinked a few times before Rishika materialized in front of me. She was saying my name and snapping her fingers in front of my face.

“Xavier! Snap out of it!”

“Did you just slap me, Rishika? That fucking hurt!”

“Yes, and I’ll do it again if you keep zoning out on me. Trust me, I called your name a few times before I resorted to a more… direct approach. You weren’t listening.”

I rubbed my jaw and shifted it around a bit. “So you had to sock me on the jaw?”

“Oh, stop whining, Xavier,” Artemis said. “There was no way we were going to take the other route and kiss you like Cali did. Punching you was the next best thing.” Artemis shrugged. “Besides, we’re supposed to be looking for the ashes, remember? Not getting into fights with ghosts.”

“Oh, so you both saw the same thing I did?” I thought back to the chilling sights and sounds of the old-timey club. I couldn’t help but picture Ava at the center of it all, the light shining down on her as she sang the blues.

“I did,” Rishika said. “That’s why I slapped you to break up the fight. You’re welcome!”

“Maybe I’ll thank you when my ears stop ringing,” I said. I looked back at the stage, a peculiar feeling circling in my stomach. The stage was empty now, and the music had stopped. The entire place was silent. There was no switch blade on the floor and no pissed-off guy trying to kill me. It had all been some sort of illusion. I looked around. “What about Ava?”

“Why are you asking about her?” Artemis hissed. “Maybe Rishika needs to hit you again and bring you back to your senses if she’s at the top of your mind.”

I started to tell her how I’d seen Ava on stage singing, but I stopped myself. “Never mind… just my mind playing tricks.” I poked my fingers into my temples and took a deep breath, trying to clear my head and push all thoughts of Ava far, far away. I just had to keep reminding myself that no matter what weird shit happened, the only thing that mattered was Cali.

“Okay, we’ve wasted enough time. Let’s get back to it,” I said. I turned and dove back behind the ruined bar and started rummaging through the old, rotten liquor shelf, breaking it in the process. I pulled up the bar top—which wasn’t hard since it was rotted through—and tore into more of the booths, cursing under my breath when I came up empty. I was making a point to break things just because. I couldn’t shake the feeling this this entire place was made just to torture me, and I wanted to destroy it. *I’ll show Adéluce what I think of her precious Marvelle’s Music Hall.*

“Hey, look at this,” Artemis said as she tugged on a door that was rotted shut. She pulled a few more times before wiping her brow. “It’s not budging.”

“Well, what do you know? Looks promising,” Rishika said before kicking the door down. We all peered inside and saw a double-doored hatch in the floor, like the entrance to an old cellar. Rishika yanked open the door, sending up a cloud of dust and causing huge spiders to scatter to safety. “After you,” she said to me.

I pushed past her and looked into the depths. There was a small flight of stairs that led down into the darkness. “Here goes,” I said as I climbed down slowly, swiping away thick cobwebs as I went. *Lots of magical, witch-made basements in New Orleans.* *What the hell is waiting for us down here? Hopefully it’s the ashes.*

Rishika and Artemis followed right behind me, and I strained my eyes trying to make out what awaited us at the bottom of the stairs. Even with my enhanced vision, it was almost impossible to make anything out, but the sharp, awful smell of the place was enough to turn my stomach.

Rishika flicked on her cell flashlight and shined it ahead of us. “Is this a wine cellar? Maybe there are some valuable vintages down here. If we don’t find the ashes, at least this little exploration wouldn’t be a total bust.”

I coughed and covered my nose as the smell grew even more suffocating. “I really doubt that there’s anything of value down here. It looks like nothing more than an abandoned root cellar.”

“It doesn’t look all that abandoned to me. Who put those there?” She pointed to shelves lining the walls, each one holding dozens of jars.

With only a second of hesitation, I stepped down off the last step onto the packed dirt floor and advanced into the room to examine the jars more closely. “They look like pickling jars.”

Artemis picked up one of the jars and held it up to the light. “Are those snakes?”

Rishika pointed to another jar. “Rats? Who in their right mind pickles rats and snakes?”

“Looks like they’re preserved in formaldehyde. I’m not sure I want to know why,” I said, the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. It was clear that we’d walked into something horrific, but I wasn’t sure what.

Rishika moved to put one of the jars back down and accidentally knocked another jar over, sending it crashing to the floor. She let out a shout of disgust as we all jumped back as a dozen eyeballs scattered all over the ground at our feet.

“Gross!” Artemis hissed as the eyes seemed to stare up at us.

Another chill raced down my spine. “A jar of eyes definitely makes sense. Witches tend to like eyeballs for their spells… Just ask Jay. Looks like we’ve walked right into a witch’s root cellar. Lucky us.”

“Lucky us is right. It smells disgusting in here. Let’s get the hell out of here,” Rishika said.

We all turned to leave, but Rishika’s light caught something, and Artemis gasped. “Do you two see that? One of the jars is different from the rest! Look!”

High up on a shelf sat a jar filled to the brim with what looked to be black ashes.

# Episode 3304

**Greyson**

I braced myself for Pierre’s attack, all the while willing my strength to return. “Shit! How could I be so stupid?” I hissed to myself. I’d allowed myself to be used as a feed bag, and now I was paying the price for my stupidity. I crouched down just as my feet were swept out from under me by something I didn’t see coming. I hit the soft ground with a wet thud and tried to rise to my feet, only to see a large alligator move swiftly past me and grab Pierre by the leg.

I scrambled to my feet just as the ground around us seemed to come alive. Shadowy figures emerged from the swamp all around us, and I realized that we were surrounded by gators. They were coming from every direction, some sliding soundlessly out of the swamp while others seemed to materialize out of thin air. I’d never seen so many in my life.

*This isn’t good. Did my blood attract them?* I turned just in time to see a glint of teeth as a gator opened its jaws and bolted straight for my leg. I leapt out of its reach just in time and partially shifted, then I lunged forward and raked my clawed hand across the gator’s throat, spilling rivulets of blood across the soggy ground. The gator fell dead at my feet, but there were a lot more where that one came from.

Revived by my blood, Pierre was holding his own. He’d fought off the gator that had grabbed him and then flanked the creature with impressive speed and dug his fangs into the gator’s back. He held the gator still while it tried to twist away from him, sucking its blood with the same disgusting slurping sound he’d made when feeding on me.

I was revolted by the sight, wondering what a vampire thought of reptile blood. I shifted my gaze away from Pierre as more gators headed straight for us, their jaws open and at the ready. I grabbed the tail of one that was charging at Pierre, and, feeling my muscles strain, I wielded it like a bat and swung it against the others. The tail tore off as I did, sending the gator crashing long ways into a line of approaching gators, knocking them back.

“There are too many of them!” I screamed as more and more shadowy figures slid out of the swamp. This was one instance when I’d rather flee than fight. I hadn’t come all this way to battle gators, and with as many as there were, they could overtake us if we weren’t careful.

I fought my way over to Pierre, kicking at the growling, snapping, hissing gators and slicing at them with my shifted claw as I went. “We need to get the hell out of here!” I shouted at him. I wasn’t sure if Pierre was going to listen to me. He was clearly amped up by the promise of an endless supply of gator blood.

*Maybe this was his plan all along—to set me up and turn me into a gator meal.* As much as I didn’t trust Pierre,I doubted it. It wasn’t like vampires were reptile whisperers that could make gators do their bidding, and the large, angry beasts were being as hostile toward Pierre as they were toward me. If this had been his plan, it wasn’t going very well for him… Though he was getting quite a bit of sustenance from the whole ordeal.

Pierre spat out a mouthful of gator blood and then vaulted forward to take on another gator, grabbing it by the neck and digging his fangs in deep.

“Watch out!” I cried out as I saw another gator ambling up to Pierre’s flank. I turned to face off with it, preparing to shift completely when another massive gator charged out of the swampy water and clamped down on the gator, dragging it back into the water. The two gators struggled and fought until the larger gator maneuvered the other onto its back and dragged it down into the depths of the swamp.

I backed away as the air filled with the smell of blood mingling with the aroma of the swamp—but the gator smell was… strange. There was something off about their scent, but I couldn’t quite figure out what it was.

Pierre grabbed me by the arm, his face smeared with dark gator blood. “Come on!” He said, dragging me away.

I noticed then that the gators seemed to have lost interest in us. They’d turned on each other, and the ground around us was moving with the thrash of tails and the snapping of jaws as they tore each other apart. There was blood everywhere, and it was all flowing into the muddy swamp water, creating a horrific sight that I only wanted to forget.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked, almost unable to look away from the carnage around us.

“A gator brawl between shifters,” Pierre said.

Then I remembered. Gabriel was right. Gator shifters. That was why these gators smelled so strange.

There was a loud splash, and the large gator that had dragged the other to the bottom was emerging from the water, bits of flesh stuck in its teeth. It was about to bite down on another gator that had turned its attention toward me when another larger gator shot out of the darkness and headed straight for it.

Something inside me—something primitive—made me pause. I felt an obligation to the gator that had saved me. *Should I stick around and return the favor?* If I had half a brain—which was up for debate after the position I’d put myself in with Pierre—I’d haul ass, get the others, and get the hell off this godforsaken land. But I was an Alpha—and being Alpha meant the rules were different for me. I was used to protecting others, throwing myself into the line of fire if the moment called for it, and I’d always believed that one good turn deserved another.

If I were still a Rogue, I probably would’ve left the first chance I got without giving it a second thought, but those days were long gone, and I really felt like I owed the gator—especially since it was partially human.

I shifted completely, feeling right at home as my wolf self. I leapt on top of the big gator before he could clamp his jaws around the one who’d stuck its neck out to save me. I tore into the rough flesh of its back, sending a river of blood shooting into the air. The other gator jumped in to help, and all hell broke loose as we thrashed and fought with the large gator, trying to subdue it. We gained control quickly, and without even exchanging a glance with the other gator, I clamped my jaws around the monstrous gator’s tail while the other gator clamped onto its head, and we both pulled with all our might, tearing the hissing gator clean in half.

Without wasting a moment, I whirled around to take on another trio of approaching gators. I leapt behind them with ease and tore into one and tossed it into the other while Pierre used his renewed strength to pick up and throw the others far out into the swamp. We fought like hell, biting, ripping, tearing, and in Pierre’s case, drinking gator blood until the tide began to turn. Soon, I caught sight of droves of gators abandoning the fight and sliding back into the murky waters.

I checked on Pierre. He was breathing hard and looked completely worn out. It was obvious that he wasn’t back to a hundred percent, but he’d held his own.

Honestly, I was probably in the same shape as he was. I’d still been recovering when all the gators came at us. I shifted back, my own breath coming in ragged gasps as I propped a hand against a tree to regain my bearings. “You good?” I asked Pierre.

He gave a soundless nod.

I was about to turn back toward the building, wondering how the others were getting along, when the large gator shifted into human form. A few of the other gators did the same.

“We should go, River,” one of them said to the man who used to be the large gator. “We should hunt the other congregation down while we still have them on the run. It’s nice to have the advantage.”

River held up his hand and turned his attention to me. “Not before I thank this werewolf for saving my ass.” He held out a hand to me, accompanied by a big smile. “River Boudreaux of the Creed pack. I owe you one.”

*Never in my wildest thoughts did I think gator shifters were real, and now here’s one standing right in front of me.* I took his hand and gave it a shake. “I think we’re even. And with all due respect, I’m glad we don’t have to deal with gators back in Oregon.”

River laughed. “Not much to worry about there. That’s a little out of our comfort zone. We prefer things a lot warmer, and a lot muggier.”

I turned and gestured to Pierre. “Let’s go. We still have a job to do.” We both started toward the music hall when River shouted out a warning.

“Hey, I don’t think you want to be heading in that direction, friend.”

# Episode 3305

I was looking all over the safe house for Tabitha and feeling pretty good about my idea. I’d decided not to overcomplicate things. All I had to do was get Tabitha and Adair in the same room together, and if Gabriel was right, things would take their course. When two people were really into each other, it didn’t take much to get things going, right? In this case, it might take a little trickery on my part since Adair seemed pretty adamant about keeping his distance, but I wasn’t above that when it was for a good cause.

*If I were a witch, I could use a spell to show Adair how much he really cares for Tabitha. Maybe I could’ve even created a love potion type thing to show him the light.* I sighed. I wasn’t a witch, though, and my Fae magic wasn’t going to cut it in this instance. Whatever attraction existed between them couldn’t be boosted—by me, anyway—but I could do something to remind Adair of what attracted him to Tabitha in the first place. All I had to do was create the mood.

*I might not be able to do anything about how Adair feels, but I can definitely do something about the way Tabitha looks. Men are visual creatures sometimes, aren’t they? If Tabitha wows him tonight, he won’t be able to resist.*

We’d saved Tabitha with only the clothes on her back, so I knew she didn’t have any glamorous clothes to wear. Luckily, I remembered that Mikah mentioned that there were still clothes left in some of the closets. Surely there was an outfit that might be suitable for a little Dark Fae seduction.

I found Tabitha pacing back and forth in one of the rooms. I beamed at her. “It’s time to get you into some clean clothes.”

“What?” She smiled slightly, confused. “What’s wrong with what I have on?”

“Nothing, but I was just thinking that you were probably tired of wearing the same clothes you were kidnapped in. Probably bringing back all kinds of bad memories.” I steered Tabitha into one of the bedrooms and flung open the doors of a mahogany wardrobe with a flourish. “You know what they say about clothes—they can change your entire day.” No one had ever said that exactly—but it was true enough.

Tabitha raised a brow. “Whose clothes are these, anyway?”

“I don’t really know… But we’re just going to borrow them for the night. No harm in that, right?” I pulled out a few dresses and held them out.

She made a face. “Not my style,” she said simply. “They look a little… How do I say this respectfully? Too sophisticated for me. That’s it.”

I held them out in front of me and looked at them. “I admit these are a little much.” I knew what Tabitha meant. They were nice dresses, but the style did seem a bit mature for either of us.

*What kind of thing would drive Adair wild? He’s from the Fae world, but he’s spent quite a bit of time in the human world. Who can even say where his tastes lie?* I looked at the dresses again. *It’s probably a good bet that these aren’t it, though.*

“I was just wondering, Tabitha, what were you wearing when you and Adair first met?” If Adair had been attracted to Tabitha right away, it made sense to try to recreate that look. First impressions were everything in burgeoning romances. If I could put her in something that reminded him of how he’d felt the first time he’d ever laid eyes on her, my job would be that much easier.

Tabitha gave me a strange look. “Why do you ask?”

Knowing that I couldn’t reveal the full scope of my plan lest sweet Tabitha tell me to butt out, I smiled innocently. “No reason, really. I just noticed that Adair seemed a little edgy, and I thought that maybe some reminders of… better… times might ease his mind.”

She gave me a skeptical look. “Um… I don’t know. I was probably just wearing jeans and sneakers. Maybe a baseball cap? No, I don’t think I had on a baseball cap.”

I groaned. Not that there was anything *wrong* with a more casual approach, but it never hurt to spice things up a little—especially if she was going to reignite her and Adair’s spark. I turned back to the wardrobe and pulled out a short black dress. “What about this one?”

Tabitha looked it up and down. “Looks expensive.”

*At least she didn’t turn her nose up this time. We might have a winner.* “I know, right? Try it on. See how it feels. I absolutely *love* the fabric.” I held it out to her, and after a few moments of hesitation, Tabitha took the dress and disappeared behind the open wardrobe door to try it on.

“How do I look?” Tabitha asked as she stepped back into view.

“Wow. Tabitha… You look… *Wow.*” I couldn’t believe how stunningly beautiful Tabitha looked in the dress. *There’s no way Adair will be able to pretend he’s not interested when he sees Tabitha in this. Only a dead man could resist her looking like this.*

I felt a twinge of guilt about being so manipulative, but then I reminded myself that all of this was for Artemis. My sister’s happiness meant everything to me. It wasn’t like I was pushing Tabitha into an arranged marriage. Tabitha and Adair clearly had feelings for each other—hell, maybe they even loved each other. I was just greasing the wheels a little bit.

Tabitha twisted back and forth in front of the mirror, admiring herself. “This *is* a pretty dress. It fits like a glove, too.” She turned to face me. “You should find one, too!” She dashed over to the wardrobe and pulled out a few options.

I hesitated. *This isn’t about me… But the dresses* are *beautiful. And, I mean, anything to keep the rouse up, of course.*

Tabitha held out one of the dresses. “This one. This’ll look perfect on you. I know it.” She smiled at me as I took it, and I couldn’t help but feel bad for manipulating such a sweet girl. But if she and Adair finally expressed their feelings for each other, I knew it would be just as good for Tabitha as it would be for Adair—and Artemis.

I stepped behind the wardrobe door and changed into the dress. I looked down at myself, liking what I saw. I’d never really been one for fashion, but even I could tell that it worked. *I wish my mates were here to see me in this.* Hopefully they would be back soon, and then I could model for them.

Tabitha gasped when I stepped out. “Wow.” She fanned herself. “That looks amazing on you!”

I could feel myself blushing. “You’re too kind,” I said. “Hey, we should go find the others, see what’s going on.” *Hope we run smack into Adair on our way.* Then I would maneuver them into a room together, and voila, my work would be done. I was feeling pretty proud of myself, truth be told. Tabitha looked happy and confident in her dress, and I just knew that Adair was going to fall for her all over again when he saw her in it

I kept my eyes peeled as we made our way down the hallway, and I nearly jumped with glee when I spotted Adair in one of the studies, his nose buried in a book. He looked up as I pushed Tabitha inside.

“Hey, Adair,” I said, trying to sound natural. “Tabitha and I found all these cool dresses, so I thought we could put on a little impromptu fashion show!”

I saw the look that passed between Tabitha and Adair, and my heart jumped in my chest. *I was right. They absolutely adore each other! I’m doing good work here!*

“I don’t know…” Tabitha began, suddenly looking a little uncomfortable. She was all but avoiding Adair’s gaze now.

“Oh, come on, it’ll be fun. That dress is amazing, so just show it off. Pretend Adair is a judge at a fashion show; sell the dress to him. Work it!” I snapped my fingers for emphasis.

“Um…” Tabitha looked a little lost.

I backed away slowly, knowing that all I had to do was step out and shut the door behind me—then I bumped right into Gabriel and Mikah. Both men craned to look past me into the room.

“What’s going on?” Mikah asked. “Nice dress, Tabitha,” he said, an eyebrow raised. He turned his attention to me. “Both of you!”

“Thanks,” I said, shoving them back out of the room.

“Hey, what gives?” Gabriel complained.

“Ow, that’s my foot!” Mikah said.

“Shh, stop it. You’re fine,” I snapped, trying to hush them up before they got Adair on high alert. I grabbed the door and started to yank it closed just as Tabitha put her hand out to stop me.

“Cali, what’s going on? Why are you acting so weird?” Tabitha looked back and forth between me and Adair before her gaze landed on me.

I looked between the lovebirds and said, “Nobody’s leaving until you two work things out.” Then I slammed the door shut and winced, hoping that I hadn’t just made a huge mistake.

# Episode 3306

**Xavier**

“Stand back!” I yelled at Rishika and Artemis, my eyes on the jar. I couldn’t risk another accident. If the ashes were actually up there in that jar, they weren’t going to do much good for Cali if they ended up in a heap on the floor of the cellar.

Cautiously and with great care, I reached up and wrapped my hand around the jar. Then I lowered it down slowly, using two hands where ordinarily I would’ve used one. Once I had the jar secure in my grasp, I stared at the ashes, revolving them in the beam of Rishika’s light.

*I can’t believe it. After all this, could this really be it? Are these really Seluna’s ashes? I’d kiss this jar if it weren’t covered in gross dust from this dirty cellar.*

As I examined them, I realized there was nothing special about the ashes. In fact, they looked like they could be the ashes of just about anything. I wondered if I should feel anything weird being so close to them, much like the way Cali felt things because of Seluna, but there was nothing. *Maybe they’re just dormant right now? Or maybe only Cali can feel the effects?* I didn’t know, but I hoped the complete and total lack of sensation or the fact that they didn’t look like much didn’t mean they weren’t THE ashes.

“Hey, hold this—and be careful,” I said to Artemis as I handed her the jar. I watched her, looking for any sort of reaction. “Do you feel anything? Any strange buzzing or tingling or tickling? Hearing any voices?” I didn’t quite know what I’d expected to feel once we had the ashes in our possession, but nothing definitely wasn’t it.

Artemis held the ashes up to the light and examined them closely, her brow furrowed in concentration. Finally, she shook her head. “No. I don’t feel anything. Is that bad?”

“Is there a way to verify whose ashes those actually are?” Rishika asked. “This place if full of weird stuff. How do we know this isn’t just the ashes of whoever used to own a set of these eyeballs?”

I shook my head. “Hell if I know.” I didn’t even want to consider the possibility that these weren’t the ashes we were looking for. I just wanted to ride the high of finding what might actually be the thing we’d been trying to track down for so damn long.

“It would be stupid of us to just assume that these are Seluna’s ashes, right? And it would be foolish for us to bring these all the way to the demon world, only to find out that they’re not Seluna’s after all,” Artemis said. “I don’t know how we can do it, but we need to be sure.”

“I agree, but there’ll be time to figure all of that out later.” I kept my eyes on the ashes. I didn’t even want to let them out of my sight for a second. I felt so out of sorts down in the cellar, especially with a bunch of eyeballs glaring up at me from the floor. I didn’t want to take any chances that some weird phenomena would happen here and somehow ruin the ashes or take them away from us all together. The place was strange, and anything could happen. I took the jar from Artemis and held it close to my chest, making sure that it would stay protected even if I happened to trip and fall. “Come on. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“I don’t know…” Artemis began. “Maybe we should take another look around. If these aren’t the ashes we want, that doesn’t mean that the right ashes aren’t here in this room somewhere. Let’s be as thorough as we can.”

“You’re right,” I said. I resisted the urge to put all my eggs in this basket. I was over Marvelle’s Music Hall, and I wanted nothing more than to be done with this place forever, but it almost seemed too easy that we would just find the ashes sitting here out in the open, like they were waiting for us.

More than anything, I wished that I could mind link with Cali and tell her that we might have found the ashes. She would be so relieved, and there was nothing I wanted more than to bring her some good news—especially the type of good news that meant she would be done with the Seluna curse forever.

Begrudgingly, I turned away from the stairs and walked deeper into the dank space, looking around for anything else that might jump out at us—though not literally. I thought about how this time, once we confirmed that these ashes did indeed belong to Seluna, I wasn’t going to make the same mistake as before. I wasn’t going to trust them to some rando courier. No. This time, I was going to take them to the bowels of hell personally, if I had to.

Maybe I wouldn’t make it back alive.

But at least Cali would be free, once and for all.

“There’s nothing else in here that looks like ashes,” Artemis said, turning away from another strange jar with disgust. “Is there a hidden door or secret compartment somewhere in here? Maybe a trap door in the floor like the one we just used to get in here?”

I looked down at the eyes glittering all around us on the floor. “I’m not looking for anything down there unless someone sweeps up all these eyeballs first.”

Rishika poked around the floor with her toe, taking care to avoid the eyeballs. “Nah, I don’t think there’s a door or anything in the floor. We would’ve found it by now, like the last one.”

We looked around for a few more moments before I finally heaved a sigh of satisfaction. We’d looked around enough. There was nothing else. “This is the only container of ashes in the entire place. I think it’s time to leave.”

“Incredible news,” Artemis said.

As we moved toward the stairs, the ground began to shake, accompanied by a low rumble. “What is that, an earthquake?” I tightened my grip on the jar. “And by the way, what’s going on with Greyson? He and Pierre went outside ages ago. At least that bloodsucker ended up being good for something.”

“We’d better check on him,” Rishika said, already bounding up the stairs.

For once in my life, I was so eager to show Greyson what we’d found—and even more eager to get the hell out of this bayou and never look back. I knew that tourists came from far and wide to see places like this and to enjoy the wonder of the swamps, but I never wanted to see this—or any place like it—again for as long as I lived.

Making sure to protect the jar, I stepped out of the cellar and advanced back into the bar room. Whatever had caused that rumble, it didn’t appear to have come from in here. But there was no Greyson either. I was starting to get concerned. I knew that my brother could hold his own, but Adéluce had proven herself to be as unpredictable as she was powerful, and there was no telling what she might be up to. I glanced at the witch mark and scowled.

“We need to find Greyson,” I said, quickly leading the way to the exit just as the music swelled again. We all slowly turned back around. The band was back on stage, and once again, the room was filled with dancing couples. Everyone looked like they’d walked right out of a 1930s musical, but with a Cajun twist.

Young Pierre stepped into the spotlight and blasted a few notes on his trumpet, drawing everyone’s attention.

I leaned toward Rishika. “You’re seeing this, too, right?”

“Why yes, I am,” Rishika answered, but she didn’t sound like herself. Her voice had taken on a distinct southern drawl.

“Huh?” I turned and didn’t see Artemis anywhere. “Fuck.” I turned back to Rishika. “Artemis, where is she?”

Rishika pointed to the stage. “She’s up there, darling.”

I was shocked to see Artemis walk onto the stage and approach the microphone. She leaned close to it and started singing a haunting melody. Her voice rose crisp and clear over the music, and everyone stood raptly, watching her.

“We need to get her. I’m not sure what’s going on right now, or why she’s up there singing,” I said.

Rishika wasn’t listening. She was completely spellbound by the song. She was in some kind of trance.

“Rishika, are you listening? We have to *get* her, not listen to her sing!”

Rishika didn’t even look at me. Her eyes had a glazed look, and she was swaying ever so slightly to the music.

“Shit!” Still holding the jar tightly to my side, I made my way toward the stage. Like I was stuck in some déjà vu nightmare, I ran smack into the same belligerent man as before.

“What is your problem?” he snarled. “Why don’t you learn to watch where you’re going?”

I rolled my eyes just as he pulled out an old straight razor.

*Not this again.* I held the jar protectively and puffed out my chest. “What, you want a piece of me?”

A joyless smile crept across the man’s face as his eyes flashed. “No. I want all of you.” Then he lunged at me.

# Episode 3307

**Greyson**

There was something about the tone of River’s voice that didn’t sit right with me. He’d lost his light, joking attitude and had grown completely serious. He even sounded a little afraid—which was jarring in light of how fearless River had been during our fight. “What’s there to be worried about? It’s just some old music hall.” I turned back and looked at the crumbling building as if I’d be able to see some indicator of the peril that River was alluding to.

“That’s how it looks,” River said soberly. “You think it’s all good and that this place is just some cool relic from the good old days… until they have you right where they want you.” River stared up at the looming structure and then looked away quickly, bringing his troubled gaze back to me.

I frowned at him. “Who is ‘they’?”

River picked a piece of gator flesh from his teeth and spat into the dirt. “The music hall had its glory days long ago. It was popular with the witches during prohibition, and it lasted all the way into the thirties. But then, there was some bad blood—as there always is in these types of places. The details are a bit vague, but the bottom line is that there was a big party in there, and by the end of the night, everyone was dead.”

“That’s shitty and all, but I don’t see what that has to do with the present.”

“Because the ones who died in there? They never stopped partying. That place is haunted as much as the rest of the city, but it’s extremely active from what I’ve heard,” he said. “Makes perfect sense, too. When things like that happen in places like this, well, it leaves something behind. Something evil.”

I didn’t quite know what to make of River’s story, but he didn’t seem like the superstitious type, so I couldn’t help but feel a bit unsettled by what he’d said. “Thanks for the warning, but my pack members are in there, including my brother. I have to go back in.”

The other gator shifters were getting antsy, their eyes darting toward where the other gators had gone. I could tell that they didn’t give a damn whether I went in or didn’t, they just wanted to get back to their own affairs.

River sucked his teeth thoughtfully. “That’s too bad about your brother and them. Good luck, but if you got any brains in that wolf body of yours, you’d better not go in there, because you might never come back out.” With that, River shifted back into a gator. The others followed suit, and then they all slid into the water and disappeared under the surface with little more than a ripple in the water.

I turned on Pierre. “What the fuck? You didn’t think to warn us about that?”

Pierre shrugged. “Look at this place. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a place that looks more haunted. Still, I didn’t think you would care. You wanted to search Addy’s hiding places, and I didn’t think a ghost story would have stopped you.”

“That’s not the point,” I said, starting back toward the building. I was really worried about Xavier and the others. I wasn’t one to scare easily, but nothing had quite been right for us ever since we stepped foot in New Orleans, and things had only grown stranger once we got tangled up with the Duquettes.

“Besides,” Pierre said, sounding nonchalant, “I’ve heard all those stories before—hell, I’ve lived some of them. There’s a lot of history down in these parts that turns out to be nothing but myth.” Pierre looked off into the distance. “Boredom gives people wild imaginations, so you never know what’s real… or what’s fake.”

I stopped walking and turned to face Pierre. “I’ll tell you one thing, if that ‘myth’ as you call it ends up hurting my brother, my mate’s sister or her girlfriend, I’m going to make good on my brother’s threat to pop your head off.”

*Though it won’t be as easy now as it would have been before… now that he has a lot of his strength back thanks to that gator blood*. *And mine.*

At this moment, I didn’t care if Pierre was almost back to his old self. I’d bested stronger vamps than him before, and if he got out of line, I’d take him out, too. I shoved him against a tree, my anger rising. “And by the way, I find it quite convenient that we ended up in the middle of a turf war between gator shifter factions. Something fishy is going on here if you ask me.”

Pierre shrugged. “I had no idea. Gator shifter congregations are always fighting about one thing or another. Waving their big tails around. You walk anywhere in the swamps, and you’re bound to trip over a gator shifter fight.” He calmly eyed my hands. “So, are you now more interested in me than finding your brother and the ashes? Because it seems to me that you’re wasting time.”

I shoved away from him. I didn’t trust Pierre in the slightest, and not least of all because he’d nearly sucked me dry and might have tried to finish the job before the gator fight broke out. I picked up the chain from the mud and jerked Pierre toward the music hall. “You’re going in first,” I said, pushing him ahead of me. “If we’re going to be killed, I’m going to be the last to die.”

“Wait.” Pierre dug his heels in and refused to go any farther, even as I tugged at the chain. “Didn’t you just hear what River said?”

“Yes, but we’ve already been inside, remember? Nothing happened then, so why would it randomly happen now?”

“You never know with these types of things. We might have just gotten lucky… But I know a way in that could keep both of us safe.”

I hesitated. “Is this yet another ploy? The other stuff you tried didn’t work, so now you’re going for a different angle to trip me up?”

“No, of course not. I’m only trying to help. The sooner we recover the ashes, the sooner I can go. So see, there’s something in it for me. It’s to my advantage to help you get what you want.”

I was feeling really irritated right about now. I wanted to get to Xavier, and I’d already wasted enough time messing around with this vampire. “I don’t care about your idea. Let’s move.” I yanked on the chain, but Pierre stayed put.

*Yeah, he definitely has way more strength than he did before. Still doesn’t mean that I can’t get the better of him if I absolutely need to.*

I hoped it wouldn’t come to that. We still might need him for the ashes, and more than that, I didn’t want to waste another second in a fight with him. It wasn’t worth it.

“Don’t you get it? If we walk through the front door, we could be possessed by ghosts… or worse.”

I gave a humorless chuckle. “Funny. Now you’re suddenly agreeing with River when a few moments ago you were calling the whole thing a myth. What changed in a minute’s time?”

“Nothing changed. I just think that it would be foolish to take unnecessary risks. I have heard the stories, after all. They’re not pretty. Where I’m from, if you can avoid danger by being smart, you definitely do the smarter thing.”

I looked closely at the vampire, trying to see if I could sense an obvious sign of his dishonesty. I sighed. “What’s this plan of yours?” I couldn’t tell what he was up to, but I was definitely starting to feel uncertain about what the right move might be. River’s warning was still echoing in my mind, and somehow, I didn’t think that charging in without taking precautions was the right thing to do.

“The guests that died all came in through the front entrance. My thought is, if we go in through the back door like thieves in the night, the ghosts won’t have any claim on us. I’m just trying to give us the best chance possible of getting in and saving your friends.”

“That sounds like a bunch of bullshit.”

In reality, I wasn’t so sure I disagreed with him. I’d experienced enough weird things to know that it might make more sense to take a cautious approach. I went back and forth for a few seconds before I decided to do things his way, if for no other reason than I didn’t want to waste any more time discussing it. I gestured to Pierre with an exasperated sigh. “Where’s this back entrance?”

Without answering, Pierre led the way to a single door in the back of the building. It was metal and nearly rusted straight through. It looked like it hadn’t been used in over a hundred years or more. I yanked at the handle, attempting to pull it open. It was in such bad shape that I half-expected the rusted handle to crumble to dust in my hands. Before that could happen, something hard smashed me in the back of the head, and I dropped to my knees.

# Episode 3308

**Tabitha**

I raced over to the door and tried to follow after Cali. The door was locked! She’d locked me in a room with Adair.

“Cali!” I pounded on the door. “Come back! What the hell are you doing?”

“All this tension has gone on long enough. Neither of you can leave until you figure things out!” Cali called through the door.

*Great. So we’re going to die in here.*

Because one thing was certain: Adair and I were never going to “figure things out.” At least, not as long as he persisted in being an absolute asshat.

“Cali! Open the door! This isn’t any of your business. You don’t have to get involved!”

“It’s physically painful to watch you two go on like this,” Cali called out. “Something had to be done. Good luck, you two!”

Footsteps sounded on the other side of the door, moving away from the room she’d just locked us in.

“Step aside,” Adair said. “I’ll use my magic to break down the door.”

I moved just out of the way of the doorframe, and Adair stepped closer. He paused, staring down at me with a look I couldn’t quite decipher.

“Where did you get that dress?” he asked.

In that particular moment, locked in this room with the Dark Fae with whom I had such a complicated history, no combination of words could have shocked me more.

Heat rushed into my cheeks. *Why is he looking at me like that?* “Um, I borrowed it from one of the closets. My other clothes were dirty after, well, everything. Why?”

Adair shrugged. “It looks nice.”

He turned his focus on the door, and my stomach churned. *Did he just say I look nice? Or… was he just talking about the dress?*

Either way, I couldn’t quite wrap my head around the whole thing. He’d never given a second glance at what I wore before.

“You’d better step back farther,” Adair said, “or you could get hurt when I blast this door.”

He raised his hands, but I didn’t move.

“Tabitha?” he pressed. My name sounded like liquid silk on his lips. He’d always had a way of caressing those three syllables, making my name, which seemed so mundane, feel like something magical, something otherworldly.

Or maybe that was just Adair. Maybe he was the magical, otherworldly thing, and my bland human history could never hope to measure up.

*Yeah*, *that sounds right.*

My stomach tightened. “Adair, wait.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t break down the door.”

His brows furrowed. “Why? We both want to get out of here.”

I shook my head. “That’s just the thing… I’m not sure I do. Maybe Cali has a point.”

“A point about *what*?”

“I don’t know, exactly. But there are things that neither of us has been able to talk about.”

He rolled his eyes with a huff. “What is there to talk about? I know I said I was going to stick around for my own reasons, but forget it. I’ve already made up my mind.”

Just like that, all the words I’d neglected to say ever since I woke up in that tomb, Adair’s face hovering over mine and his kiss still warm on my lips, rushed forward. “And what about me? Don’t I get a say in any of this?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see how my leaving or staying has anything to do with you, or anyone else.”

His words hit me like a sucker punch to the gut.

The only reason I’d come out here to New Orleans was to find him, and instead I’d gotten turned into a citywide magical mute button. And if that wasn’t enough to fuck with my head, ever since I’d been rescued, Adair had been a mother hen—obsessively protective of me every second of every day.

And yet, what I wanted for him, for *us*, didn’t matter?

Screw that.

“Don’t act like there’s not a freaking Pacific Ocean of stuff between us that we’ve never talked about. Like how you left me at the Grand Canyon, or, I don’t know, how you kissed me and let me fall for you when you had a wife all along?”

His expression was stone. “Tabitha—”

There it was again, that magical voice making my name sound like the sweetest plea… *No. I’m not going to fall for it again.*

“We can stick to current events, if you like. Let’s talk about how you spent weeks searching for me after the witches took me, how you won’t let me out of your sight if you can help it.”

His eyes narrowed. “Let me blast through the door, and I’ll get out of your sight right now.”

I ignored him. “And yet, I mean nothing to you? You’re just gonna leave again? You’re going to act like none of this matters? That *I* don’t matter?” I gulped down the emotions filling my throat. “We both know that’s bullshit.”

Adair’s expression softened, and for a split second, I thought I saw pain behind those endlessly blue eyes. “I have a very complicated life, Tabitha. You know this, and it’s better if you stay out of it.”

“Who’s it better for?”

“What are you getting at?”

I pulled in a slow, steadying breath. Everything was rushing to the forefront of my mind so fast, my thoughts were getting confused. All that old hurt was mixing with new frustration. Longing with heartache. And I didn’t know how to make heads or tails of it.

I knew I was attracted to Adair—how could I not be? I felt things for him, *deep* things. And I knew he felt the same sorts of things for me. But he wasn’t letting himself show it. And if he wasn’t willing to meet me halfway, then what was the point of putting myself out there?

My mind helpfully flashed back to all the times we’d kissed. All the times he’d protected me. The first one was just a ruse, but it had quickly grown into something more than that. Just *remembering* those kisses stirred something deep inside me.

I couldn’t be the only one who felt that, right? But he was acting like none of it mattered. Like *I* didn’t matter.

*Maybe he’s right. This is stupid. It was stupid to dress up and even more stupid to expect Adair to open up.*

I angrily pushed past him and tried the door again. Still locked.

“Cali! Open the fricking door!” Angry, hurt tears burned in my eyes. I was ready to pound the door down all by myself when I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder.

“Wait.”

I slowly turned to face him, a few tears slipping down my cheeks. Adair’s eyes turned stormy when he saw I was crying. I wished, not for the first time, that I could read his thoughts. Even just one fleeting glimpse of what the hell was going on inside his head.

“We both know there can’t be anything between us.”

He said the words gently, like he knew they had the power to break me. All the kindness in the world couldn’t have softened that blow.

I shook my head. “You’re just making excuses.”

“I’m a member of the Dark Fae court. I have responsibilities now—ones I didn’t want. But all the wishing in the world hasn’t made them go away. That’s why I’m being hunted, and just being near me puts you in their crosshairs too. It’s not safe for you—” He stopped suddenly, his throat bobbing. He looked away. “I’m sorry. I really am. This just can’t work out.”

All the breath stuttered out of my lungs as he turned his gaze back on me. Despite everything he’d said, his eyes were so full of longing that every muscle in my body froze. I’d seen that look before.

Adair had looked at me like that right before he’d left me back in the Grand Canyon.

“It wouldn’t be good for either of us,” he continued.

Then he took a step closer, leaned in, and kissed me.

Shock coursed through me as I realized what was happening. I savored the sensation of his full, sinful lips moving against mine for all of four seconds—and then I pushed him back.

“What the hell? You can’t do this. This is exactly why Cali wanted us to talk—you say one thing, and then you do the opposite!” I shook my head. “If you don’t want to be with me, if that’s truly what you want”—I pointed to the door—“then you should go. Because I can’t keep doing this.”

Adair gulped. “You want to know what I really want?”

“Yes! Obvi—”

His hands slid to my waist, pulling me against him. His entire body was hot, searing itself against mine. He cut me off with another kiss. I held on for dear life and threw myself into the kiss.

I gave him the opportunity to walk away, and he chose to stay. Ever since our first real kiss, this was what I’d dreamed of—being with Adair.

And maybe he’d shut down again and pretend this didn’t mean anything, but right now, I knew it did. He wanted to be with me, and I wanted to be with him.

Nothing else mattered.

He grabbed me tighter, pressing me up against the door, deepening the kiss and knocking some books off a nearby shelf in the process. My senses were entirely filled with nothing but him. I arched myself up to meet him, to bring him all that much closer to me. I didn’t want distance between us, not anymore.

“Are you guys okay in there?” Cali called.

Neither of us answered her.

Instead, I slipped my arms around Adair’s neck, and his hands traveled down my waist to my hips and then to my thighs. In one movement, he lifted me up, and I gasped as he filled the space between my legs. I tightened my legs around his waist as he carried me away from the door and toward a couch. He tasted amazing—like licorice and clove and something deliciously, magically masculine.

We fell back together, Adair’s strong body pressing into mine as I sank into the cushions.

Adair’s lips broke away from mine, and he kissed a hot trail along my jawline. “Tabitha,” he whispered in my ear, “I’m sorry I waited so long.”

# Episode 3309

**Greyson**

Pain lanced through my skull, and my vision went double. *What the fuck?!*

On my hands and knees, I slowly turned around as the world tipped on its axis. It was a hell of a challenge to reorient myself. I blinked rapidly, trying to focus my double vision, and saw two overlapping Pierres turning away and racing into the woods.

*I’m gonna fucking kill that bloodsucker.*

I forced myself to my feet, ignoring the sharp throb in my head that pulsed with every heartbeat. I gingerly touched the back of my head, and my fingers came away wet with blood. *Jesus Christ. What the hell did Pierre hit me with? His chains, maybe?*

I really, really didn’t want to go chasing that bag of bones through the bayou. I could just let him run off—maybe he’d get gobbled up by more of those gator shifters.

But then again, that’d be letting him off the hook, wouldn’t it? We had a deal, and he’d just broken it. Besides, we might still need Pierre’s help—if I could even call it that—to locate the ashes. For all we knew, they might not be in that rundown shack after all, and we’d have to scour his all too fallible memory for a new hiding place.

As long as Cali’s life and sanity hung in the balance, Pierre was stuck with us, and we with him.

But after we got what we needed, I’d have no problem staking him, leaving him out in the sunlight to fry, or, yeah, even setting him free on the bayou and letting nature take its course. Considering he was, in a roundabout way, the reason we were dealing with a superpowered, vengeful vampire-witch in the first place, I couldn’t deny how satisfying it’d be to watch his ass turn to dust.

Unfortunately, we weren’t there yet. But if he kept trying my patience, we were going to get there a hell of a lot faster. But for now, he was still a giant pain in my ass, and now I had to go chase him down.

Vampires could be fast, but I was an Alpha, and I could hunt him down like any other prey, especially now that we were out in the middle of nowhere and there were no witnesses to worry about.

I shifted into my wolf form, my skull healing all the faster because of the shift, and took off after Pierre, following the vampire’s death scent.

Despite the stink of decay that clung to Pierre, it was trickier than I’d thought it would be to track him down. The bayou was teaming with all sorts of scents, most of them absolutely disgusting and not terribly unlike Pierre’s rank scent.

Fortunately, Pierre’s scent stood out just enough—and the broken branches and trees he’d smashed through as he fled helped mark the way. The deeper I went into the bayou, the swampier the ground became, and I had to pause every so often to make sure I was on the right path. In the darkness, it was almost impossible to tell where the swampy shore met actual water.

Something squirmed beneath my paw, and I looked down. Water and mud swirled beneath me and—snakes.

I leapt away, splashing through the darkness.

That pain-in-the-ass bloodsucker was going to pay for this.

I came to a small clearing where the trees and tall grasses gave way and water flowed in through a small inlet from the river. I looked around, scenting the air, and then I heard it: the telltale sound of feet moving through shallow water.

Pierre was up ahead, moving fast, but I was closing in on him. I could go around the inlet, but that would take more time. I jumped into the water, praying I could avoid any surprises that might be lurking just beneath the surface. Out in the middle of this hell swamp, it seemed like just about anything could pop up and ruin my day. Snakes, weird-ass carnivorous fish, and, of course, gators. River seemed like a decent enough guy—for a gator shifter—but I’d had just about all I could ever take of gators. If I never saw another one, it’d be too soon.

As I took a cautious step through the inlet, Pierre let out a bloodcurdling scream. From across the inlet, I could make out the sounds of a struggle, splashing water, heavy breathing, screams, and the snapping of jaws.

*Speaking of gators…*

It sounded like Pierre had ended up on the wrong side of one.

“Oh no,” I said sarcastically. “Poor guy. I’d better save him before he experiences a horrible death or something.”

The bright side to this newest development—and to be clear, I didn’t really see a downside—was that Pierre was likely so busy trying not to get eaten that he’d never see me coming. I could use this to my advantage and get to him. But maybe not *entirely* before the gators did.

He could still guide us to the ashes, even if he was a little chewed up, right? Besides it served him right for bashing me over the head like a fucking barbarian and running off. He was *lucky* it was still worth the effort for me to intervene.

I was about to forge ahead and try to pluck him out of the fray when the moon broke through a gap in the clouds, revealing several large shapes on the surface of the inlet—moving straight toward me. I looked behind me—more were coming from every direction.

*Fuck.*

I didn’t have time to take on every fucking gator in this bayou, and it became alarmingly clear to me that there was only way out of here.

I charged ahead and leapt high in the air, avoiding the snapping jaws of one gator after another as I used their backs as stepping stones, running and jumping from one miserable swamp dinosaur to the next. Just behind me, they snapped and splashed as I made my way toward the opposite side of the inlet, where I could now see Pierre fighting two gators.

*I’m coming to save you, you unbelievable asshole.*

I continued my way through the blockade of gators when I suddenly lost my balance and slid into the murky water.

*Fuck!*

It filled my nose and mouth, and I lunged for the surface, sputtering as I swam toward higher and drier land. The water beneath me shifted as a gator’s powerful tail tried to knock me on my ass back into the water.

I snapped and snarled at the beast, ripping into its scaled, rotten-tasting flesh as I stumbled onto the shore. More gators slithered toward me—I could hear their gigantic bodies sliding through the water. One of my legs was sore and throbbing, probably from getting whacked by a gator tail.

From my spot on the shore, I could make out Pierre killing the remaining gator on his ass, and then, with a quick look in my direction, he sprinted into the woods.

Shit. This was getting really fucking old.

My healing leg burning, I set off into the woods after him. Almost immediately, I lost sight of him through the thick crop of trees and vines. I paused, searching for his scent, and then took off after him again.

I charged through the woods, the sudden roar of a motor echoing through the trees. I changed my trajectory and burst through the trees in time to see Pierre race off in a fucking swamp boat.

*What the hell?!*

I looked out at the murky water rippling in the wake of the motor. There was no way in hell I could catch him—and seeing as how even trying to swim after him would undoubtedly put me on the business end of a pack of gators, I had no desire to throw myself into that situation.

I looked around. Could there be another conveniently hidden boat?

No, of course not. I wasn’t that lucky. *Or… I haven’t planned ahead. He’d said Adéluce didn’t trust him. Was that true?*

I wasn’t even at the river anymore. I was on the edge of some huge body of water. I couldn’t imagine Pierre had been lucky enough to run off in the exact direction that would take him to a hidden, gassed-up boat he could use to escape. It seemed too perfect to be a coincidence.

But I couldn’t worry about that right now. Since I’d just lost our shitty excuse for a treasure map, I needed to get back to the music hall and find Xavier and the others. Maybe they’d had a lot more luck than I had and found the ashes in that old building.

*I hope this wasn’t a colossal waste of time.*

We didn’t have the time to waste. *Cali* didn’t have the time to waste.

As I looked around for the way back through the bayou, a thick, noxious fog moved in. Suddenly, I couldn’t pick up my own scent, which I’d been hoping would lead me back.

I moved cautiously ahead for a while before pausing. I had no idea where I was. It was just swamp and more swamp stretching before me. I breathed in, trying to catch Pierre’s scent, but only the smell of sulfur and mud filled my senses.

*Fuck. Am I lost?*

# Episode 3310

**Xavier**

The ghostly crowd around us scattered as the man leapt at me. I lunged back, just beyond the reach of his outstretched razor.

*I thought I already dealt with this asshole.*

Clearly, I’d have to be more careful this time around. Not only was this ghost capable of hurting me—I also couldn’t do anything that would risk the ashes. If this razor-wielding asshole made me fuck up Cali’s chance to be free from Seluna’s spell, I was gonna burn this whole fucking building to the ground.

Actually, now that I thought about it, that didn’t sound too bad either way.

Razor Guy took another swing at me, and I jumped back again at the last second, keeping the jar wrapped tight in my arms. I was at a hell of a disadvantage like this, on the defensive with one good arm to fight back with—at best.

I’d have to play this just right if I didn’t want to end up sliced to ribbons, or worse.

I watched Razor Guy circle me, grinning in a way that just screamed *unhinged*. He was ready to slash at me again, just like he had before. I didn’t think most regular ghosts could do this much damage, but then again, most ghosts didn’t have a witch mark grounding them. All the ghosts here were like the poltergeist kid back at the Duquette house.

As he lunged for me again, I anticipated the attack this time, getting well out of the way of the slashing razor. I kicked the guy, hard, and he went tumbling backward. The bastard still had the razor in his hand even as he hit the floor. He clearly wasn’t going to let go of his favorite torture device.

I wished I could shift—I’d have a much easier time finishing off this asshole. Hell, in my wolf form, I’d be able to actually land a blow. But shifting meant putting the jar down, and I couldn’t do that. If anything happened to it, I’d never forgive myself.

I glanced over at Rishika, hoping for some backup.

Nope—she was still mesmerized by Artemis’s singing.

“Rishika!” I called out to her. “A little help here?”

She sighed dreamily, never taking her gaze off Artemis.

This whole fucking ghost shack could eat a dick.

Meanwhile, Razor Guy was scrambling to his feet for another round. I kept my distance, moving backward as much as I could amidst all the furniture. I glanced around the music hall. Was there anything at all I could use to my advantage? Anything that would give me the upper hand against this prick?

Artemis was still singing her heart out on stage, which incidentally gave her a bird’s eye view of the shitshow going down right in front of her. Couldn’t she see what was happening?

“Artemis! Stop singing and fucking help me!”

She paused and looked at me, and a spark of hope ignited inside me. Maybe I wasn’t so alone after all.

I raced over to her and held up the jar. “Take this.”

She stared down at me for a beat, then picked up right where she’d left off. When I looked over my shoulder, Razor Guy was stalking forward, that same manic grin on his face.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered. “Do I have to do everything myself?”

I grabbed the nearest chair with one hand and swung it at Razor Guy. He jumped back, wary, and I swung it again.

“Yeah, it’s not fun having people swing shit at you, is it?” I snarled. I swung the chair again, but it slipped from my hand and went flying into the microphone stand.

Abruptly, Artemis stopped singing and stepped back, her face pinching in confusion. “Xavier?”

“Welcome back!” I said, grabbing another chair and chucking it at Razor Guy. “Hold these, please!”

I handed her the ashes. She was still dazed, but she did as I asked. Thank fuck.

When I turned around, Razor Guy was right up in my face, his blade slashing down at me. I jumped back at the last second, the razor cutting into my shirt but missing my skin by a hair.

I decked him in the face hard enough that he went reeling, and then I shifted. The crack of my bones transforming had never felt so good.

*Fucking finally!*

The crowd gathered in the fringes of the music hall screamed and scrambled for the door as I lunged for Razor Guy. I slammed into him, and we fell to the ground. He was surprisingly beefy for a ghost.

Behind me, I could hear Artemis calling out for Rishika. I sank my teeth into Razor Guy’s arm, then tore it off and threw the appendage against the wall. The razor was still gripped tightly in his dismembered hand.

Razor Guy let out a bloodcurdling scream as black blood oozed out of the stump where the rest of his arm had been.

*What the fuck is that? Ectoplasm? Do ghosts bleed?*

I didn’t have time to dwell on the disgusting specifics of whatever was pouring out of Razor Guy’s corporeal body. Then the scent hit me, and I flinched back.

*That is definitely not human blood. Could it be demon blood? What the hell kind of creature have I been fighting?*

I spat the rotten taste from my mouth and turned back to finish the guy off—only to find that he’d vanished. I whipped around, expecting to see him charging from another part of the room, but wherever I looked, there were only terrified patrons.

I couldn’t believe it was that easy. Surely he had some other plans up his sleeve.

Then a low chuckle slipped through the air, and the man reappeared. Before my eyes, he sprouted a new arm to replace the old one.

I shook my head in horror. *Am I imagining this?*

The man walked over to the severed arm, plucked the razor out of the hand, and then drew the blade against his own throat. More black blood poured down his neck, and he smiled.

“Who wants a shave?”

*Well, there’s enough nightmare fuel to last the rest of my life.*

I stepped back, bracing myself as Razor Guy stalked toward me, indiscriminately slashing his way through the helpless crowd just trying to get out of his way.

I crouched down, waiting for the right moment to attack. Clearly, ripping off appendages wasn’t going to do the trick.

Then, as Razor Guy made his move, I lunged at him, slamming into the man-slash-ghost-whatever-the-fuck, and we smashed against tables and chairs alike. I attacked him with everything I had. I couldn’t just tear into him like I might any other enemy.

I had to take off his head. However that was going to fucking work.

But the ghost was surprisingly hard to control—and so much faster than I thought. In no time, he managed to crawl on my back and press the blade against my neck.

I raced forward, leaping up with all my strength and smashing the man against the ceiling. His body made a satisfying *crunch* at the contact.

We fell to the ground, separated, and I was about to try for his head again when a sudden jolt rushed through me—like a bolt of electricity—and I stumbled, shifting back into human form without controlling it.

*What the…?*

I looked around wildly, trying to figure out what the hell had hit me. The music hall was almost empty now, the audience having raced out. Artemis was out of her trance. Last time I checked, Rishika didn’t have lightning magic.

So what the fuck was that?

I looked down at myself and froze.

Somehow, the razor was in *my* hand now, and Razor Guy’s raspy voice echoed in my head. *Thanks for hosting me.*

I looked around. *What the hell is going on?*

*We are as one*,the voice replied.

I clutched my head, almost cutting myself on the razor still locked in my grip in the process. I tried to drop it, but I couldn’t release my fingers from around it. I’d completely lost control of my limbs.

Slowly, my hand brought the razor down to my throat.

*No. NO!*

I tried to stop my hand as it pressed the blade into my throat, breaking the skin. Desperate for any kind of escape, I spun around and caught sight of myself in the mirror.

I wasn’t alone.

Razor Guy was mixed in with me somehow. He was possessing me. Even my face had taken on his dark, sadistic grin. This was bullshit. I’d come all this way to find these ashes, and now this ghost or demon or whatever the hell was going to force me to kill myself?

No, I couldn’t let that happen. I had to get back to Cali. I was a fucking Alpha werewolf. It shouldn’t be so hard to knock this asshole out of my head and take him down.

I grabbed the razor with my free hand and yanked with all my might to get it away from my throat—

Strong hands gripped my shoulders and spun me around, and I caught sight of Artemis mere seconds before she slammed a chair over my head.

# Episode 3311

**Artemis**

I winced as the chair crashed into Xavier’s head. The hand gripping the razor froze, but he recovered quickly.

“Sorry, Xavier!” I brought the chair down again—as hard as I could. It shattered over his head and shoulders, sending him tumbling backward onto his ass. The razor went flying—thank the gods.

Maybe beating Xavier over the head with a chair wasn’t exactly the best course of action, all things considered, but I had to do something! Xavier was on the verge of slitting his own throat! I had to knock some sense into him, or Cali would have never forgiven me for standing by and letting it happen.

Xavier looked up at me, stunned. Had I broken the trance? Or was the ghost still running the show?

“Xavier! Snap out of it!” I yelled. “I *will* hit you with another chair!”

He just stared back at me, almost wild-eyed. My heart continued to race. Was he even aware of who he was? Who I was?

I saw the same look on Rishika’s face when I tried to get her to help me save Xavier. Only, instead of staring blankly back at me, she started speaking in a strange accent and acted as if she had no earthly idea who I was.

What the fuck was wrong with this music hall? Were we all being possessed? Or were we under some sort of spell? With both ghosts and a witch being involved in this place, it was impossible to tell the difference.

Then I remembered—I’d been affected by this place too. I was singing up on stage, only I wasn’t singing alone. There was someone else, a foreign presence inside my body. I didn’t know how else to explain it. It wasn’t as if there were any way I’d ever get up on a stage and perform.

It felt like a ghostly possession. And I knew exactly what that felt like. After Letifer took a ride in my body for weeks on end, I didn’t think I could ever forget the cold emptiness of possession, the sensation that you were a puppet made to do the bidding of whichever paranormal entity you’d had the misfortune of coming into contact with.

But I’d been set free from the ghost up on stage. When Xavier knocked over the microphone, it was like waking up from the worst kind of dream. I’d realized who I was and what was happening around me.

And if that could scare off or remove the ghost from within me, then maybe smashing Xavier with a chair wasn’t such a far-fetched strategy to free him from the ghost possessing him.

*Sorry, Xavier. Your pretty face can take it.*

He was gonna be furious with me when he snapped out of it, but I’d rather deal with his anger than have to try to explain to Cali how her mate had been killed by ghostly possession right in front of me.

I picked up another chair and took a step toward him. “If you don’t snap out of it right now, I will break another one of these over your head.”

He just blinked at me in response.

I cleared my throat and tried again. “You’re possessed, Xavier. You have to fight it. You have to fight whatever it is that’s inside you. Cast it out—or I’ll have to.”

I briefly considered trying to use my Fae magic to blast the ghost out of him, but that seemed unnecessarily risky. My magic was still unstable, and the last thing I wanted to do was mistakenly kill one of my sister’s mates.

Xavier growled at me, his eyes narrowing.

*Is he going to shift and attack me? That’d be less than ideal, wouldn’t it?*

What was I supposed to do then? I didn’t want to fight him or hurt him, and I also didn’t want him to hurt *me*. And it wasn’t like I could run out of here to avoid the fight. I couldn’t leave Rishika here, at the mercy of the ghost possessing her—to say nothing about how quickly things could go sideways if I left Xavier alone with the homicidal ghost possessing him.

I glanced helplessly over at Rishika, who was looking at some pictures on the wall and laughing.

*Yeah, she’s no help.*

Which *sucked* because it would have been a hell of a lot easier to free Xavier with two sets of capable hands.

I pulled in a deep, calming breath. *I used to be a bounty hunter. I spent basically my whole life handling scary and dangerous situations all by myself. I can do this.*

I locked eyes with Xavier and raised my chair to hit him again.

A flicker of recognition flashed in his eyes, and I hesitated, the chair raised high overhead. “Xavier?”

As suddenly as it appeared, the look vanished, and Xavier charged toward me. I stumbled back and threw the chair at him.

Told him I’d do it.

He knocked it aside and tackled me, and we crashed to the ground. Somehow the razor blade was in his hand again—I didn’t know how. I grappled with him to stop the blade from slicing into my throat, but he was a werewolf. I couldn’t outmuscle him forever.

I grabbed his head. “Xavier, look at me! I’m Caliana’s sister. That name ringing any bells? I’m your mate’s sister. You need to stop this!”

The look of recognition returned, and he froze, his razor-wielding hand inches from my throat. I freed a hand and slapped him as hard as I could.

He growled but didn’t attack, and I slapped him again.

“Snap the hell out of it! Cali needs you!”

I repeated the process—the slapping, the screaming—several times, until my palm burned and my throat felt raw.

“Xavier, you have to—”

A strange vibration jolted us both, and the razor clattered to the floor.

Xavier grabbed my hand mid-strike. His cheek was a violent shade of red. “You can stop hitting me now.”

I studied his eyes. “Is it really you?”

“Hit me again, and you’ll find out.” He released me and rolled away.

I slowly sat up. “Are you okay?”

“Other than the fact that I feel like my face went ten rounds with a wall? Yeah, I’m peachy.” He rubbed his jaw. “I think I was possessed by a razor-toting asshole from the thirties, believe it or not. Must have been part of Adéluce’s little scheme.”

He stood and held out a hand to help me up.

“Wait.” He looked around wildly. “Where the fuck are the ashes? I told you to hold onto them.”

“Relax. I hid them behind the bar before coming over to save your ass. You’re welcome, by the way.”

He grumbled something that I was almost certain was *not* a thank you. I glanced at him and gave him a quick once-over to make sure he wasn’t going to attack me before I headed over to Rishika, who was still enraptured by the photos on the wall.

I slowed as I got closer. “Rishika? Can you hear me?”

She seemed oblivious, mumbling something in that strange, old-fashioned southern drawl she’d used earlier.

Xavier appeared next to me, the ashes tucked under his arm. “We need to get the hell out of here.”

He started toward the exit.

“Hey, wait, asshole!” I said. “Rishika is still possessed, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

He sighed and turned to face me. “So, grab another chair and start swinging. It worked on me.”

“I’m not going to hit her!”

“You didn’t seem to have any objection to hitting me—repeatedly. If you don’t want to do it, I can do it.”

“No.” I shook my head and turned back to Rishika. “I have a better idea.”

I gently turned her to face me, took her face in my hands, and kissed her.

*If it worked for Cali in the other house…*

Hopefully the rules weren’t different here. I guessed I’d find out.

Rishika jolted back, resisting the kiss before I felt another strange jolt, and suddenly she was kissing me back in all the ways I loved. Her hands twined in my hair as she nipped at my bottom lip and deepened the kiss. I greedily opened my mouth

*It’s her*, I realized with a rush of relief. *She’s back.*

I held onto her tightly and poured everything I had into the kiss with my girlfriend. Her lips had never tasted so sweet.

Xavier loudly cleared his throat. “Uh, excuse me.”

Rishika pulled away. “Oh, sorry, Xavier. What the hell happened? What was that?”

I was about to explain the possession when my gaze snagged on the picture just beyond Rishika’s head. The one she’d been staring at moments ago.

It was an old portrait, taken at this music hall with the band playing on stage. It was even older than the one of Pierre across the way. And sitting among the musicians was Xavier. I couldn’t tell if he was holding a harmonica or a razor.

“Come here. Look at this.”

Both he and Rishika examined the photo.

“That’s creepy as fuck. Let’s get out of here.”

We followed him out of the music hall, and Xavier paused on the porch, looking around in exasperation. “Where the fuck is Greyson?”

# Episode 3312

Believe it or not, I hadn’t actually intended to listen at the door after locking Tabitha and Adair inside the room. My plan was to stand by in case either of them did try to break down the door, but otherwise stay out of it.

But then I started hearing things banging around and being knocked down.

My eyes widened. *Oh no! Are Tabitha and Adair slugging it out instead of making up? That wasn’t part of the plan.*

I rushed to the door and was about to unlock it when suddenly the room went quiet. I couldn’t tell if this was a good thing or not.

I pressed myself against the door, desperately trying to listen for signs of life. *Oh god. What if they did fight?*

After seeing the borderline-obsessive way Adair had been protecting Tabitha ever since we found her, I struggled to imagine him physically harming her. Tabitha, though, I wasn’t so sure about. I didn’t know that I’d put it past her to try to knock some sense into Adair if she felt like that was required.

I gripped the doorknob, ready to fling open the door and demand that they break it up, when Mikah appeared next to me.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he said softly.

“But they—”

A soft moan from behind the door cut me off, and heat rushed into my face. “Oh…”

I turned to face Mikah and found Gabriel standing behind him, grinning from ear to ear.

“Come on.” Mikah nodded toward the kitchen. “Let’s give them some privacy. We shouldn’t be poking our ears around in their private affairs.”

“But it was finally getting good,” Gabriel said in a whisper.

When I shot him an affronted look, he just winked and followed Mikah. Since my choices were pretty much 1) stay listening at the door like a voyeur, or 2) follow Mikah, I followed Mikah.

Still, I couldn’t stop myself from glancing back at the door on my way to the kitchen. *Maybe my plan worked?*

I hoped so. At minimum, it’d be good to resolve the tension between Adair and Tabitha. Whatever was between them, it had the tendency to take up all the air in the room. And beyond that, it was obvious that they were in love with each other. I just hoped that whatever was going on in that room would lead to happiness. I didn’t know much about Adair, and he definitely wasn’t my favorite person in the world, but Tabitha deserved all the happiness in the world.

Even if she wanted it with Mr. Grouchy Fae himself.

*I’ll have to give Lola an update on this new development.*

In the kitchen, I braced myself against the countertop, suddenly unsure of what to do with myself. I glanced over at Mikah and Gabriel, who seemed to be having an unspoken conversation.

*They’re mates*, I reminded myself. *They’re probably mind linking.*

Still, I wished Gabriel would stop grinning like a madman. It reminded me of the way Colton always reacted after Xavier and I slept together. It was annoying and weirdly invasive, but there was also something endearing about it at the same time.

*Maybe he’s just happy that his friends are happy.*

“How are you feeling?” Mikah asked, drawing me out of my thoughts.

I shrugged. “Honestly, I’ve been so engrossed in fixing things between Tabitha and Adair that I haven’t really been paying attention to how I feel.” I considered his question for a moment. “I’m okay, I guess. Better than before, but still not my best. Have either of you heard from Xavier or Greyson yet?”

Gabriel’s grin disappeared, and he shook his head. “Not a thing. Do you guys think we should go find them?”

I wished we could. I hated more than anything that my mates were out there without me, facing down god only knew what for *my* benefit. But I’d also agreed to stay behind, and my reasons for going back to the safe house hadn’t changed. Now that I was thinking about my physical state, that exhaustion was rising back up. And who knew how long I’d have until the curse triggered another episode?

Until I was fit enough to hold my own in a moment of danger, I’d just be a burden. And that was worse than staying behind. I hated thinking of my mates and my sister and Rishika being in danger, but if I went along with them, I’d only make things worse.

My staying back was the best thing for everyone.

I shifted my shoulder, which was sore. I couldn’t remember if it was sore earlier, or if this was yet another friendly reminder of the deadly threat Seluna’s curse posed to me. A, *Hey! Don’t forget you’re probably dying!*

Mikah shook his head. “I think we should stay put.” He turned his gaze on me. “Both of your mates are fully capable of taking care of themselves—not to mention they have both Rishika and Artemis for backup. That’s as solid a lineup as any.”

I forced a small smile to my lips. “You’re right.” But knowing that Artemis was being thrown into danger alongside Xavier and Greyson only added to my worry.

“Let’s give them a little longer,” Gabriel suggested. “But if much more time passes and we still don’t hear from them, we need to do something besides sitting around in this house, listening to people bone.”

I cringed, and Mikah glared at his mate.

“What?” Gabriel shrugged. “I’m just stating facts.” He pushed away from the kitchen island. “I’m going to my room. Let me know if you guys hear from anyone.”

Silence settled in as Gabriel left the room, and it was only after I couldn’t hear his footsteps at all that Mikah turned to me with a rueful smile. “I love Gabe, but sometimes he can be a little… crude. I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

“Oh. Don’t worry about it.” I let out a little chuckle. “Believe me, I get it. You can love someone with all your heart and soul, but there are always going to be things that bother you. Nobody’s perfect.”

For instance, I used to absolutely *hate* it when Xavier hid things from me. Fortunately, he was a lot better now. But for a while it was hard to trust him when I didn’t know if what he told me was true, or if he was holding something back.

“Do you want something to drink?” Mikah turned to the fridge.

“Anything’s fine.”

He dug a water bottle out of the fridge and set it on the counter in front of me. “So, am I to understand that you engineered that little get together between Tabitha and Adair?”

“I did,” I confessed. “I hope you’re not upset.”

“Why would I be?”

Heat rushed into my cheeks all over again. “Oh, well… you know. Because you and Adair used to be together.”

“So, you think I’m jealous?” he asked with a tilt to his lips.

“I—I have no idea. But the possibility crossed my mind.”

He nodded. “Let me put your mind at ease. I’m thrilled for them. Adair and I were together, but that was almost a century ago. In your world that’s more than a lifetime. Besides, I’ve found my mate. I have no reason to feel jealous. I want Adair to be happy. Or, as happy as he’ll allow himself to be. And I want the same for Tabitha. She’s been through so much, and she deserves someone who loves and respects her.”

My mind stalled on the idea of Adair being that person for Tabitha. “How much of either of those things do you think Adair feels for her? You know him a lot better than I do, but he seems so distant and cold at times. So selfish.”

“I suppose he has his reasons,” Mikah said. “How could he not have been affected by such a toxic marriage?”

My jaw dropped. “I didn’t know he was married.”

“Still is.”

“Oh no.” I thought about what was going down in the study. *Did I just help Adair have an affair?*

“Relax.” Mikah smiled. “Even if Adair’s marriage to Celeste is still official, the feelings behind that marriage ended long, long ago. He would have dissolved it ages ago if he could, and I’m sure it’s one of the reasons he’s held himself back from Tabitha. But take it from me: Gabe and I have watched Adair and Tabitha orbit each other for a long while now, and this is a good thing. A happy thing.”

I blew out a relieved breath. “I’m glad to hear it.”

His smile disappeared. “Is your shoulder bothering you? You keep touching it.”

I pulled my hand away from my shoulder. I hadn’t even realized I was touching it. “Yeah, it kind of is.”

Gabriel came back to the kitchen and looked around in surprise. “Oh, I thought you were cooking something in here.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I smelled smoke. I was coming to tell you both to turn the fan on,” he said. “Don’t you two smell it?”

Mikah looked around in alarm. “Something’s burning.”

I followed his gaze to the black smoke pouring into the kitchen.

# Episode 3313

**Greyson**

I looked around the fog-obscured bayou. Pierre had ditched me, and I didn’t have the first clue how to find my way back to the music hall.

*Well, this is fucking fantastic.*

I’d come all the way out here on foot, so it wasn’t unreasonable to expect to see some familiar landmarks, or even footprints and broken branches. But there was nothing but trees, swampy land, and water as far as the eye could see.

I could have come to this point from any direction, so it was anyone’s best guess how I could find my way out of here.

I replayed the chase in my head. I’d crossed an inlet at some point—if I could backtrack my way to it, that would be a strong start. But then again, the inlet was absolutely lousy with gators and snakes. Hungry, *angry* gators and snakes who had been cheated out of their vampire- and werewolf-sized midnight snacks.

*Yeah, I’d rather be lost than go back to that shitshow.*

Maybe I could skirt around the area, keep the landmarks relatively close without engaging with the seemingly endless stream of beasts that wanted to eat me.

I breathed deep, trying to pick up a familiar scent—either my own or Pierre’s—but the swamp smell was so overwhelming I couldn’t scent anything other than rot and murky water.

*Fuck. I should have just let Pierre run off.*

Sure, he was our “treasure map,” or whatever, but he was a shitty excuse for one. The one place that hadn’t changed since he and Adéluce were on good terms hadn’t had the ashes, and he’d claimed that all the other landmarks had changed, making his intel only slightly better than useless. He was less a treasure map and more a wonky compass.

If I hadn’t bothered to haul ass after that bag of bones—who had bludgeoned me over the head, by the way—I’d still be back at the music hall. I could help Xavier and the others with whatever fresh hell they’d found in that creepy-ass abandoned building.

Instead, I was literally stuck up shit’s creek without a paddle, and I had no clue what the best move was. I could pick a direction and hope for the best, but there was no guarantee I wouldn’t end up more lost, or falling right into a gator nest, or god knew what else.

But I couldn’t just stand around ruminating either. I wasn’t going to be able to think my way out of here and back to the others. I had to make a decision. I had to move.

I pulled in another deep breath. *Okay, Greyson, think. You can’t let a swamp get the better of you. On the trip to the music hall, when we were in that airboat, we were heading downstream.*

I wasn’t sure of much in this swampy hellmouth, but I was sure of the direction the water ran. I’d been dumped in it when the gators upended our boat, and I’d watched the boat move *with* the current.

I turned around, in the direction Pierre had disappeared in his own boat. He’d continued downstream too.

I was near the river. If I followed it upstream, I should be able to find my way back to the others.

I closed my eyes and strained to listen, to hear the current, but it was impossible to hear the water over the sounds of all the nocturnal creatures that called the swamp home. Even without all that racket, the river’s current had been slow and steady, not some rushing, white-water flow.

I wasn’t going to hear the river until I was right on top of it.

*I’m close to the river. I know that. Pierre wasn’t far off when he escaped in that air boat. Maybe if I make a wide circle, I’ll eventually hit water at some point.*

I shifted my hand and used my claws to tear a mark into one of the trees. If I was stuck playing Hansel and Gretel in the middle of this goddamn bayou, then these marks would be my breadcrumbs.

I made it about a hundred feet before I realized I’d be able to move faster if I shifted fully—and I would be a hell of a lot better equipped to defend myself should that asshat Pierre decide to double back and attack me.

Or, god forbid, if I should run into another congregation of gator shifters. I’d rather take down Pierre a dozen times than face another swamp dinosaur.

It didn’t take long for the circling to get old. There was just something so defeating about wading through the muck and periodically marking trees while seemingly getting no closer to finding my way out of this swampy hellscape.

*Cali’s depending on me*, I remind myself in an attempt to keep my focus on the task in front of me.

And then my brain helpfully reminded me of all I hadn’t done to earn her trust.

*Let’s see, I got whacked by a treasonous vampire, then let him lead me away from where I was truly needed, and now where am I? Lost. No help to anyone—least of all myself.*

And sure, Pierre might have led the group to the jazz hall, but I had no clue if any good had come of it. If it was like the graveyard, totally useless. Or… if this was part of some bigger scheme and the music hall wasn’t a hiding place at all.

Maybe it was a trap.

In which case it was even shittier of me to allow myself to be overpowered and led astray by that fucking bag of bones.

*Maybe it’s better I didn’t stick around. Tonight is proving I’m about as useless as they come.* I muttered curses under my breath.

I was smarter than all this. That was the rub—I’d made one mistake after another, and I wasn’t even the only one paying for it. Every second I screwed up, or moved farther away from finding those ashes, was another second of Cali’s life wasted.

My anger at myself pushed me to move faster, and I broke through a heavy thicket of trees, crouching low to avoid the vines that fell onto my back. But as I ventured deeper into the thicket, I realized with a lurch of horror that not all of the vines were plants—some of them were alive.

They were snakes. Fucking *snakes*. I jerked another snake off my back with a snarl.

I’d seen enough of these today.

*Next time I decide it’s time for a holiday, it’ll be as far away from gators and snakes as possible. Because this is a fucking nightmare.*

The only tiny shred of a silver lining was that Cali didn’t have to suffer through this.

I paused, mud squeaking between the pads of my toes.

Was that water? The sound was barely audible, and it took me a long moment to decipher what direction it was coming from. My plan, stupid as it was, was working. I was getting closer to the river. I could feel it.

I raced ahead, ignoring the slithering, hissing snakes that fell as I passed by.

I burst through the brush, almost slipping on the bank and into the water. The river, slow and lazy as it was, glistened in the moonlight.

*Yes!* I wanted to throw back my head and howl in triumph. I’d found it. I’d done this one thing right—and maybe now I could do another thing correctly and find my way back to the others.

A mossy stick floated past on the surface of the water, confirming the direction I needed to go in. I couldn’t imagine the music hall dock was too far—I hadn’t been paying close attention to how long I chased Pierre before I lost him, but it couldn’t have been that far. It was still nightfall. The moon was still high in the sky.

Maybe the universe would cut me a break and I’d find my way back to the others in no time.

I followed along the bank, trying like hell to avoid stepping into the water. I used all my senses to watch for gators and any other creatures that wanted to make my life difficult. I’d had enough of the taste of swamp meat to last me a lifetime.

The bank was getting steeper, and foliage growing on the edge of the river was getting thicker, making it harder to trek through.

I had two options: I could go in the water—*ha*—or I could shadow the river from the woods.

*As long as I can keep the river in sight, taking the high ground is the best course, right?*

At the very least, it was the path with the fewest gators, and that alone made up my mind.

I veered away from the river, climbing up the bank, and continued traveling upstream, stopping every so often to make sure I could still make out the river and be sure I was going in the right direction.

I’d made it a few hundred feet upstream by the high bank path when a strange scent gave me pause.

*Is that a human?*

Why the hell would any humans be out here in the middle of nowhere? As far as I knew, the only souls out on this part of the bayou tonight were a Fae, three werewolves, and a dank corpse of a vampire.

*Shit.* I stopped in my tracks. The last thing I needed was to encounter anyone while I was a full-on werewolf. Or, you know, a naked human. There were no good options.

I took a careful step forward, and a sudden snapping sound broke through the forest. It was the sound of rope whipping through the air, and the ground beneath me was jerked upright.

In a blink, I hung in mid-air, trapped in a wire net.

# Episode 3314

**Xavier**

I looked around the area outside the music hall. It was quiet, dark, and neither Greyson nor the bloodsucker were anywhere to be seen.

*Well, this doesn’t bode well.*

“Where the fuck are they?” I growled. I hadn’t gone two rounds with a razor-happy ghost and nearly gotten my head bashed in by Artemis and her fucking chairs just to come out and have a new crisis to deal with.

Rishika jogged over to the sheds near the back of the building. “They’re vacant!” she called out. “No sign of either of them!”

My molars ground together. “Perfect.”

What the hell had happened? It wasn’t like we were in the music hall all that long.

*But I guess it explains why Greyson never rushed in to provide backup.*

I blew out a slow breath and mentally ran through some possible scenarios.

*Option 1: Greyson got a read on something and took off after it. He brought the shackled Pierre along with him so the vampire couldn’t be a liability to us in the music hall.*

*Option 2: Pierre played Greyson and escaped. And if that’s the case, then Greyson’s currently hauling ass across the bayou to catch up to the emaciated vampire.*

*Option 3: Adéluce followed us and did something to him.*

Option one was annoying as hell, but also unlikely, if only because it was out of character for Greyson to run off without telling someone, or leaving a fucking note.

Option two would be hilarious under any other circumstances, and I would certainly give him shit for letting a vampire that looked like a thinner, weaker version of the Crypt Keeper trick him.

Option three was the one I was most worried about. And the one I’d be the most pissed about. The only person who was allowed to annoy, inflict pain upon, or kill my brother was me.

And after what Rishika, Artemis, and I had just been through in the music hall, there was no telling what fresh hell Adéluce could have planned for Greyson.

Adéluce had allegedly promised Cali she wouldn’t interfere in our search, but there was a loophole the size of Oregon when it came to the traps and enchantments she’d already put in place. To say nothing of her relative trustworthiness as a revenge-driven vampire-witch and all-around psychopath.

Rishika jogged back over to Artemis and me. “I picked up Greyson’s and Pierre’s scents, but they get lost in the bayou smells really quick. It’s like a natural cover for scent tracking.”

“Awesome,” I deadpanned. “How the hell are we going to find either one of them if we can’t track them?”

“We can track them,” Artemis said as she crouched down by a cellar door. “Well, I can. See these footprints in the ground?”

I squinted at the spot she was referring to. “Sort of?”

“It looks like Pierre ran and Greyson went after him,” she said. She lifted a hand, revealing a dark, sticky mixture of mud and blood.

I leaned in to sniff the blood. “It’s Greyson’s. What happened here?”

It was looking like option two was the winner after all, but how the hell did Pierre overpower Greyson? Whatever he’d done to my brother must not have been too severe, otherwise Greyson wouldn’t have been able to take off after him.

*Shit. What do we do now?*

We had the ashes. Finally. After what felt like an unending trail of bullshit, we had the ashes. We were *this* close to setting Cali free from Seluna’s curse. This was exactly what we’d come here for.

But if I went back to Cali without Greyson, this wouldn’t be a win. Not for her. And as convenient as Greyson’s absence would be for me personally, I knew in my gut that I couldn’t just leave him behind.

I’d done that already in the Fae world, after all. It was a decision made out of years of anger, but I regretted it more and more each day. If I could go back in time and not leave Greyson to rot in the Kollector’s zoo, I’d do it.

Now that I thought about it, there were a lot of things I’d do differently if I could. But since I couldn’t fix any of my past mistakes, the least I could do now was not leave Greyson behind again. Not make that terrible choice a second time.

“Do you think you can keep tracking them?” Rishika asked Artemis.

We stared out at the foggy, murky darkness of the bayou.

After a beat, Artemis nodded. “I have to try. Cali would expect me to.”

“There’s probably a whole herd of gators out there,” I reminded her.

“Herd?” Rishika asked with a laugh.

“I don’t know what you call a group of gators.” I shrugged.

“A clusterfuck, maybe?” she suggested.

A smile tugged at my lips, but I tried to stay focused. “All I’m saying is, this place is dangerous, and gators and whatever other wildlife wants to eat us aside, this could all be some kind of trap, another play by Adéluce.”

*That fucking witch. I bet she’s laughing her ass off right about now.*

If I ever got a chance to settle the score, I’d do it in a heartbeat. No hesitation. No regrets.

“And?” Artemis asked. “We still can’t leave Greyson out here. If he’s stuck in that vampire-witch’s trap, then that’s all the more reason we need to find him and help him.”

I sighed. “What are we going to do with the ashes then? We’ve gone through hell to get them, and I don’t want to leave them behind. But if we bring them and we run into trouble and I have to shift, what then?”

“We could dig a hole and bury them until we return,” Rishika suggested.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t want them out of our possession. If they’re with us, we at least have some control in this situation. I’m not leaving them out for Adéluce to get back.”

“There’s an easy solution to this,” Artemis said. “There’s one person here who can’t shift: me. I’ll put the jar in my bag, and I’ll guard it with my life.”

I didn’t doubt it. The bond between Cali and Artemis had only strengthened over time. Artemis loved Cali just as much as I did, and she’d do just about anything to free her sister from the curse. Of course, Cali loved Artemis just as much. Both sisters would risk their lives to save the other.

I passed over the jar and watched her stow it in her bag. She slung the bag over her shoulder. “All right. I’ll lead the way. Stay close, and watch for gators.”

She headed into the darkness of the bayou, and I took one last look back at the music hall. If we did come back this way, I was gonna burn that place to the ground.

We made steady progress, but it felt slow. Every time Artemis stopped to examine a print, I had to physically restrain myself from snapping at her to hurry things up.

“What do you think?” she asked Rishika after crouching down to inspect something. “Does this branch look like it was broken by a werewolf? Or maybe just a regular animal?”

Rishika eyed the branch. “It’d take something big to make a break like that—and I don’t see gators coming this far onto shore.”

While they were focused on tracking, I kept my eyes, nose, and ears focused on our surroundings. If Adéluce was up to something, I had to be ready for it. I couldn’t let her trick us again.

A ways up ahead, something reflected in the moonlight as a thick patch of fog moved past. Rishika crouched down and picked up a mud-covered chain and sniffed it. “This is definitely the one Greyson used on Pierre.”

I frowned. This was an unsettling development. I seriously doubted Greyson would have set Pierre free, so Pierre must have broken the chains himself. But wouldn’t he need his full vampire strength to pull that off?

Something glistened on the wet ground ahead of us, and a cluster of slithering snakes scattered into the water of an inlet.

We slowly approached the inlet, and my stomach tightened as the scent of death filled the air. *Is it Greyson? Did Pierre drain my brother?*

“It’s a gator,” Artemis called, then let out a relieved sigh. “Just a gator. Something ripped it to pieces.”

I let out my own sigh of relief. *So, Greyson kicked a little gator ass while he was chasing after Pierre. Nothing wrong with that.*

We started to move forward again when human voices sounded through the dark bayou.

Instantly, we crouched down, using the hand signals that Rishika had taught us during training drills back at the pack house to communicate.

I led them toward the voices with Rishika and Artemis flanking me. Soon the scent of a woodfire filled my nose, and I could make out someone discussing the best way to season jerky.

*Campers? What are they doing all the way out here? Wouldn’t their tents basically sink into the ground?*

I stopped suddenly when a familiar scent hit my nose.

*Greyson.*

He was suspended in a net in wolf form above a group of armed men who all turned in unison, their weapons trained on me.

One of them snarled, “Who the hell are you?”

# Episode 3315

**Greyson**

My vision was partially obscured by the goddamn metal netting that cut through my fur and into my skin with every movement, but I could just make out Xavier, Artemis, and Rishika as they stepped out of the woods and into the cleared campsite with their hands up in front of them.

Several emotions hit me at once: relief that they were okay, anger that they were not looped into whatever bullshit these campers were into, and so many questions. How did they find me? What happened at the jazz hall? And, more importantly, did they find the ashes?

My brother glanced up at me and mind linked, *What the hell have you gotten yourself into now, Marshmallow?*

My molars ground together, and I gave him the best stink eye I could muster in my wolf form. *Be careful. I’m not sure what these guys want, or whose side they’re on.*

One of the people around the campfire approached my brother, a crossbow in hand, which he was also pointing at Xavier. *The fucking nerve on this guy.*

He took a quick look at Artemis and Rishika before turning his attention back to Xavier. “What the fuck are you doing out here in the middle of the night?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Xavier said flatly.

“And I’d say it’s none of your business!”

Xavier shrugged. “Same. And since we’re respecting each other’s privacy and all, I’d like to take it a step further and ask you to stop pointing that fucking crossbow at me.”

This, of course, wasn’t acceptable to the man, and as he and Xavier continued arguing, I considered my options. They were a group of humans up against three werewolves and the deadliest Fae I’d ever met. It didn’t matter that these guys were armed—we could probably raze them in a heartbeat.

Not that I loved that idea. I generally tried to avoid murdering random humans, but it was comforting to know we could handle it if push came to shove. And the guy arguing with Xavier didn’t seem above pushing.

As I sat, suspended and deeply uncomfortable while the squabble continued below, I considered my options.

I could shift back to my human form, but I had no idea how the guys would react to it. I’d also be in my human form while stuck in a net suspended in the air. Definitely not ideal.

These campers probably thought they’d caught a wolf—though, as far as I knew, wolves were not bayou creatures and the chances of catching a wolf alone out here were slim. The chances of catching one as huge as me were… pretty much impossible.

*Yet they haven’t really commented on my size. That’s kind of weird.*

I could cut through the netting, but now that Xavier and the others were here, I thought it best to minimize the conflict if possible. A full-scale fight—or panic from a gigantic wolf being on the loose—was probably the last thing we needed.

“Hey!” Rishika broke through Xavier and the guy’s argument. “I’m Rishika, and we’re camping down by the old music hall. We’re looking for an old friend of ours who might have gotten lost. Have you seen anyone come this way?”

The guy with the crossbow grinned and pointed the tip of his arrow up at me. “Just that big-ass wolf. I’m Mériadec Aury, and this is my group.” He gestured vaguely behind him at the others.

It was then that I noticed the group was slowly fanning out into a semicircle, cornering Xavier and the others.

I mind linked with my brother. *Watch out. They’re up to something.*

And since the humans were potentially becoming a risk to my brother and friends, it became really easy to decide what to do. I needed to cut myself out of this thing. I could ask questions later.

I drew one of my razor-sharp claws over the netting—and it didn’t do a damn thing. My claws didn’t break through it.

*That’s… odd.* I’d never encountered a material my claws couldn’t sever. *What the hell are these people hunting for out here? It’s almost like…*

A chill went down my spine.

*Were they expecting werewolves? Or something else?*

Mériadec gestured with his crossbow. “You all aren’t from around these parts, are ya?”

Xavier laughed. “No shit.” He glanced up at me, his expression more curious than calculating. “I didn’t realize wolf hunting was legal in Louisiana. Or that there even were any here. How’d you manage to catch a big one like this?”

“It’s not illegal either,” the guy said, raising his brows. “Wolves don’t typically live here. So, you can’t be charged for killing something that shouldn’t even be here.”

I tensed. I wasn’t on board with all this wolf-killing talk *at all*, but strangely the thought of razing through these humans didn’t sound all that repugnant to me anymore. The group was still pointing their weapons at Xavier and Rishika, which led me to believe they knew something about them.

Clearly, though, they didn’t know everything since they weren’t targeting Artemis. And claws aside, she was the deadliest member of our group.

*This isn’t looking good.*

Mériadec’s smile faded as he leveled the crossbow on Xavier. “Why don’t we save some time and stop fucking around? We know exactly what you all are. Werewolves.”

*Shit. Are these guys hunters?*

That would be the shit frosting on top of our clusterfuck cake.

Xavier snorted. “Wait—are you serious? You know werewolves aren’t real. What are you guys on right now? Are you selling?”

Mériadec didn’t look amused by Xavier’s attempt to deflect. “They may be rare in these parts, but they exist. The only thing we can’t figure out is you.” He pointed his weapon at Artemis. “What the hell are you doing with a bunch of werewolves?”

Artemis gave him a smile that was more a baring of teeth. “Keep pointing that thing at me, and I’ll show you.”

The guy laughed. “Oh, whatever the hell you are, you’re a firecracker. I like the feisty ones.”

I mind linked with Xavier. *They have to be hunters. You can’t beat them. There’s too many of them, and they’ve got all their gear here. I can’t break through this net.*

Xavier didn’t respond. He kept his expression blank and his eyes focused on Mériadec. I knew that look on my brother’s face. He was planning to attack the moment Mériadec was distracted.

“You want to know what I am?” Artemis asked, stepping closer. She was absolutely fearless with that weapon pointed right at her.

“Well, I asked, didn’t I?”

“I’m a bounty hunter, and I really like the look of your crossbow.”

Mériadec smiled proudly. “I crafted it myself. It’s strong enough to break through just about anything. The bolts are strong enough to shatter brick and some types of stone.”

Artemis’s brows rose, and she let out a low whistle. “Can I hold it?”

The hunters laughed.

*What the hell is she doing? She has to know there’s no way he’s going to give her his weapon.*

And then, as I watched Artemis’s face, I realized she hadn’t taken her eyes off of Mériadec. She hadn’t so much as blinked. The realization hit me: Artemis had the ability to influence people with her magic.

Was that magic working? Could she actually convince him to give up his weapon? Was magic even stable enough to pull this off?

Artemis had been having trouble with her powers long before the magical shutdown we’d fixed in New Orleans. Even with magic running full-force, I had no idea if she was capable of performing such a feat.

Mériadec paused, seemingly mulling over the request. “It’s my pride and joy.”

And then, he handed his pride and joy over to Artemis. Shock rippled through the rest of his group, and they all stood wide-eyed and ramrod straight, clearly unsure what to do.

Artemis examined the bow carefully. “You should be proud. It’s truly a work of art.” And then she raised the bow up in the air as if taking aim at something above her head.

She released the loaded bolt, and the next thing I knew, the rope that held me suspended in the air snapped, and gravity took over. I fell down, down, down, crashing onto several of the hunters when I hit the ground.

And all hell broke loose.

In the confusion and chaos, I managed to break free and lunged at a hunter who was bearing down on Artemis with a wicked-looking dagger.

Xavier and Rishika leapt into the fray, shifting and mowing through the confused hunters with more efficiency than I’d dared to hope for. Hunters were notoriously difficult to beat in a fight, and even harder to kill. Maybe Artemis’s stunt had given us the upper hand we so desperately needed.

I tossed a hunter into the side of a tree. His head smacked against the trunk, and he lay still. I moved on. I didn’t want to fight with anyone tonight, least of all a gang of seasoned hunters. I just wanted the ashes and Cali.

*What the hell were they even hunting out here? Gator shifters?*

If there was a silver lining to all of this, it was that they clearly weren’t expecting a run-in with werewolves. For all of their gear and weaponry, I didn’t see a single bit of silver amongst them.

I tossed another hunter out into the bushes and then shifted back to my human form so I could talk to Mériadec.

“We have no interest in fighting you! This is all a misunderstanding,” I explained. “We’re after someone else.”

Mériadec held up a hand. “Stop!”

The hunters stopped fighting. Xavier and Rishika stepped back, growling, and Artemis sidled up to me, one of her daggers clutched in her hand.

Mériadec squared his gaze on me. “I’ll bite, wolf. Who are you after?”

# Episode 3316

I barely had time to think. At all once, an onslaught of sensation poured through me, and my body’s only response was to panic. Smoke was billowing into the kitchen, my shoulder was burning—

*Or is that from the heat of the fire?*

What the hell had happened? Was there some kind of accident? Had something caught fire outside? Or… was something darker, something infinitely more nefarious, happening?

*Is this Adéluce? Or Seluna?*

I gulped, staring at the dark, opaque smoke as it poured into the house.

“Come on!”

Gabriel’s hands on my arm jolted me out of my trance, and when I turned to look at him, he was wide-eyed. “We have to get out of here!”

Mikah started toward the opposite hallway when the fire forced him back. Were we trapped? But… we’d only just seen the smoke! Surely we’d have more time?

“We gotta get out of here. I refuse to die in this shitty safe house,” Gabriel said.

“Maybe we can try the window?”

Mikah didn’t hesitate. He grabbed one of the pans hanging over the stove and smashed the glass out, then used his hands to clear away any excess shards. He tossed the pan away and then jumped out the window first.

“Cali, you next!” he called through the open window. He took my hand and helped me through the window. Gabriel followed close behind, and the three of us stumbled out into the night, putting as much space between the burning safe house and ourselves as possible.

I blinked up at the burning building, still in shock. “How did this happen? And so fast…”

And then it hit me like a pile of bricks. *Tabitha and Adair are still inside! They might not even know about the fire until it’s too late!*

I raced toward the front door—or, at least, I tried to. I made it about five steps before Gabriel was there, grabbing me around my waist like I weighed nothing at all and pulling me back.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demanded. “You know the house is *on fire*, right? Xavier made me promise I would keep you safe.”

I tried to break free from his grip, even though I knew it was useless. I was only half Fae, but I was pretty sure that even if I were full-blooded, I wouldn’t be able to overpower an Alpha-blooded werewolf.

Mikah appeared at our side, looking more concerned than anything else. “Cali, what’s gotten into you? Is it the mark?”

I shook my head. “The others! Tabitha and Adair! They’re still inside!”

Gabriel released me. “Shit. You’re right. But please, for the love of god, stay here.”

“I will! Just go!”

He and Mikah immediately rushed toward the house. Already, thick smoke and flames were erupting from windows on the second floor. The fire was spreading fast—too fast. Faster than I’d thought possible. It had to have been only a minute or two since we bailed out through the window. Less than five minutes since we discovered the smoke.

How was it burning through the house so quickly? And how much longer would it take before the house—and anyone still trapped inside—was beyond saving?

My stomach lurched.

*They’d better hurry.*

Mikah was a vampire, so maybe there was the possibility that he could resist the heat, but Gabriel was just a werewolf. As far as I knew, even an Alpha werewolf burned just as badly as a human might, though I supposed he had the benefit of healing abilities.

And good thing too. Because he was going to need them.

Mikah rushed in front of Gabriel and kicked the front door down. Like a horrible chain reaction, the moment the door fell inward, an explosion shook the entire house, blowing out the remaining windows, and the front porch collapsed.

“MIKAH! GABRIEL!” I screamed, completely horrified. I couldn’t see them through the black smoke. I was several feet back from the burning wreckage, and I could barely breathe. The heat was oppressive, burning my skin even from a distance.

There was no way I could get any closer.

*I can’t save them. I can’t do anything.*

Tears tracked down my cheeks, cooling the ash and smoke that had settled there. Wood groaned and was thrust aside as Gabriel came stumbling out of the remains of the porch, covered from head to toe in soot.

They made it within a couple feet of me before turning around and staring back at the house in horror.

*Tabitha. Adair.*

None of us said it. None of us broke the shocked, grief-stricken silence, but we all knew the truth.

There was no way Tabitha and Adair could have survived that.

My chest hitched with one sob, then another. This was all my fault. If I hadn’t trapped them in that room—literally locked them in—they would have been able to walk out and escape like we did.

I was so set on helping to fix whatever problems they had, but in the end, all I’d done was doom both of them to a terrible fate.

Even as guilt clung to me, somehow more oppressive than the smoke and the heat, I hopefully scanned the house for some sign that they’d survived. *What about Adair’s magic? Couldn’t he get them out of there? Did something happen to him? Did Tabitha’s magic cancel his out?*

I still had my magic. Maybe I could try to use it. I could… I don’t know… blast through the house to give them a way to escape. Or I could create a shield for them somehow? Something to protect them—and me—from the flames until we could all make it out safely.

But I didn’t know if I had the strength for it. I could barely remain conscious for very long, no magic required. And if my power burned out halfway through, we’d all be burned to a crisp regardless.

“Maybe there's a way in through the back,” Mikah said. From his expression alone, I knew he was grasping at straws just like I was. Trying to find a way for Adair and Tabitha’s survival to be possible. A way to save them. A way to do anything except stand here and watch the safe house burn. “I’m not going to give up on them.”

He started toward the side of the house, but Gabriel grabbed his arm and pointed at the house. “Look!”

I wiped tears and smoke from my eyes, squirting up to see through the haze. Something was moving by the remains of the porch.

*No, not something. Someone.*

A figure moved through the fire. It looked like a mummy.

It stumbled away from the porch and fell to its knees.

“It’s Adair!”

Mikah rushed forward, and Gabriel followed after him.

I stayed in place, still confused. *Did Adair use some kind of magic or something? What’s going on?*

And then I saw Mikah and Gabriel pulling away the smoke- and ash-stained fabric to reveal Adair with Tabitha in his arms. I moved closer and saw the thing that had been wrapped around them was a thick, wet cloth.

My heart swelled. “Oh, thank god.” *They’re both okay!*

Mikah put an arm around Adair’s shoulders and helped the pair move farther away from the fire.

I rushed up to them, meeting everyone halfway. “Adair, how did you do that?”

He gently set Tabitha down, and I noted with a little thrill that the Dark Fae kept a protective arm around her.

“As soon as I realized the house was on fire, we tried to escape. But the door was locked”—he gave me a pointed look—“and the fire behind it was burning fast. Our only escape route was the bathroom. So I ripped the curtain down from the study, soaked it with the shower, and used it as a shield for Tabitha.”

My guilt tripled. “I’m so sorry, guys. If I’d have known…”

“How could you?” Tabitha asked, her voice rough. She coughed, then cleared her throat. “It was horrible trying to find our way out of there, but Adair never lost his cool.”

“For what it’s worth, I only wanted to bring you closer, not barbecue you.”

Adair held up a hand. “There’s no need to apologize. You had no way of knowing what would happen. Besides…” His gaze shifted to Tabitha and lingered there. “You might have been on to something. We worked out our differences.”

Tabitha smiled, wiping the soot from her face. “Maybe we should thank Cali.”

Adair shrugged. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

Despite his trademark snark, I felt nothing but relief. Nobody was dead. That was the important thing.

A wave of heat washed over us as, behind us, the house crumbled in on itself.

“What are we supposed to do now?” I asked. “The safe house turned out not to be so safe.”

Emergency sirens sounded in the distance, and lights illuminated the sky.

“We have to go now,” Mikah said. “If the police find us, they will ask a lot of questions that we don’t want to answer. No one was supposed to be in this house. Come on!”

We took off down the block as police and firefighters raced onto the scene.

# Episode 3317

**Xavier**

I recognized this group for what they were—hunters—before Greyson had mind linked to warn me. I’d recognized it in the caliber of their weapons and the general insanity that it would take for regular humans to go camping in the Louisiana bayou and bring crossbows and daggers to protect themselves instead of a shotgun or bear spray.

Plus, a few of them were wearing shirts with the same insignia.

*That looks familiar. It looks like the insignia of that elite hunter camp Charlie went to back in Minnesota. Well, that’s just great. We only want the best backwater hunters to gut us and leave us for gator chow.*

Over the years, I’d avoided hunters. Like witches, they tended not to have a great relationship with werewolves. Luckily, hunters were less of an issue in Oregon. But more often than not, they’d stick you full of silver before you could even try to reason with them, and I wasn’t interested in any of that. It wasn’t personal, either. Hunters were destructive. They were murderers. And they tried to kill any supernatural creature they could get their hands on without hesitation or guilt.

They must be out hunting gator shifters or something tonight, because they didn’t seem to have any silver on them. Thank god. But we still needed to get the hell out of this situation before it reached a boiling point. We’d managed to knock a couple of their guys out, and Greyson was free from the net, but it would still be a hell of a fight if push came to shove, and I wasn’t in the mood to scrap with a bunch of hunters.

I was here to get my brother and haul ass back to Cali with the jar of ashes. Now I’d found my brother. We just needed to get the hell out of here.

I shifted back to my human form alongside Greyson, causing the hunters to do a double take. Apparently, it wasn’t every day they saw two Alpha werewolves buck-ass nude in their human forms—not that I cared about being naked in the middle of the bayou with a bunch of hunters.

*God, it’s like the setup for a bad joke.*

I cleared my throat. “Listen, we’re only here to get him.” I pointed at Greyson. “And now that he’s free, we’re happy to be on our way. We don’t want any trouble, but if trouble’s what *you’re* after, be warned my whole pack has been alerted. It won’t be long now before they send backup.”

Hopefully the lie held some weight. I couldn’t tell how murder-happy these guys were, but if they were itching for a fight, maybe they’d feel differently if they thought the odds weren’t in their favor.

The guy named Mériadec shook his head. “We’re not in the business of hunting werewolves around these parts. I’m sure you’ve noticed we don't even have any silver-tipped weapons. But that doesn’t mean we can’t kick your asses from here to kingdom come if I feel it’s worth our time. So, tell me now, who the hell are you after? Why are you out here?”

He turned his gaze on Rishika, who was still in her wolf form. “And before any of you try to lie, we know that camping story was a bunch of bullshit.”

I smirked. “It was a pretty good one though.”

Mériadec turned on me. “I want a name—now—or we can pick up where we left off.”

“We’re after a witch,” Greyson said.

“A vampire-witch,” I clarified, causing some wide-eyed looks among the hunters. “Don’t suppose you’ve heard of her? Adéluce Duquette?”

The hunters all looked at one another.

*Guess that answers my question.*

Mériadec’s gaze narrowed on me. “What business do you have with her?”

“Adéluce threatened my pack, so we came to New Orleans to stop her.” There was no need to get into all the details. These people only needed to know the basics.

He seemed amused by this concept. “Do you have any idea how dangerous she is? How notorious? We’ve been hunting that bitch for years—and all I’ve got to show for it is dead men and women.”

“Right. That actually brings me to my first question: who, exactly, are you guys?” I asked.

Mériadec beamed and puffed out his chest. “We’re the Bayou Squad. Protectors of these parts.”

Artemis smiled, stifling a giggle.

I cocked my head. “So, you’re the BS?”

*My bullshit detector was certainly going off.*

He seemed surprised by this. “Oh. Well, I guess I never thought of that.” He turned back to his companions. “We may have to think of a new name?”

I snorted under my breath. *You think?*

“What’s the plan here, Bayou Squad?” Greyson asked. “We both want the same thing. I’m willing to forget the whole capturing me in a net and stringing me up like an animal thing—”

“To be fair, you were in an animal form at the time,” Mériadec pointed out. “And we didn’t know yet if you were the bloodthirsty murdering kind of werewolf or… you know… whatever it is you guys are.”

I rolled my eyes.

Mériadec rubbed his grizzled chin. “Honestly, I’ve never planned for something like this. Never even thought it was possible. Y’all are actually the first werewolves I’ve ever encountered. And normally, as hunters, and according to the code, we’re supposed to… you know.”

My jaw clenched. “Murder us. You don’t have to mince words. We all know what hunters do.”

Mériadec and his guys looked somewhat offended at that assessment, but Greyson jumped in before it could escalate. “It doesn’t have to come to that. We’re not here to threaten anyone, nor are we planning on staying. The sooner we leave New Orleans, the better for all of us.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Mériadec said stiffly. “Can we have your word that you will leave here when your business is done?”

Greyson held out his hand, and Mériadec took it.

“We have a deal,” Greyson said. “You don’t mess with us, we don’t mess with you.”

My brother’s expression was solemn, and I knew from his face and tone that the handshake was a promise—and a warning. If Mériadec betrayed the terms of our agreement, we’d have no compunction about retaliating. I certainly wouldn’t mind showing him what a real live werewolf was capable of when they weren’t playing nice.

To be honest, I wasn’t thrilled that we were making deals with the enemy. We’d already made more deals than I was comfortable with since coming out to New Orleans, but right now, in this situation with the four of us against the Bayou Squad and all the weapons, I didn’t see an alternative.

“And what about Adéluce?” I asked. “Will it be a problem for you if we take point on that?”

Mériadec shrugged. “I don’t care who gets her. She’s been a pain in everyone’s ass for years. She’s elusive and reckless. I say good riddance and happy hunting to you.”

He turned to his gang. “Let’s get everything packed up. We need to keep moving.”

It wasn’t until that squadron of trained hunters turned their backs on us and started stowing their weapons that I felt myself relax. They were keeping their word. They didn’t care about us as long as we stayed out of the way of… whatever the hell they were doing out here.

Somehow, in all this craziness, we’d made a deal with hunters. Who would have seen that coming?

Artemis was still laughing about the BS thing when the trees around the campsite began to sway even though there was no wind.

I froze as a swirl of dark, misty water rose from the ground.

Everyone at the campsite tensed or reached for weapons as the swirl took shape to reveal Adéluce.

My vision went red, and I lunged for her on instinct. “You bitch!”

I passed right through her, skidding against the hard ground. Around me, hunters took aim at her apparition.

She waved her hand, and the ground shook with a rumble. The sound of water filled the air, and trees and brush alike were knocked aside as a wall of water crashed down on Mériadec and dragged him screaming into the swampy blackness.

We all watched as bubbles rose to the surface, and then the water went still.

*Fuck. He’s gone. She made that look way too easy.*

Adéluce turned to me. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice? Do you think I’m that stupid, Xavier Evers?” She scoffed. “You should have known better. You made a mistake leaving her behind. It made it so much easier.”

She had to be bluffing. She had to be. Yet, all the air rushed out of my lungs, and I suddenly felt like I was the one drowning. I locked eyes with Greyson and saw my own visceral terror staring back at me through his eyes. This was everything we’d been fearing. Everything we’d worked so fucking hard to avoid.

“Cali?” I turned on Adéluce. “What did you do to Cali?”

# Episode 3318

**Greyson**

My stomach churned with sudden fear. The way Adéluce had just spoken about Cali made it sound like she had already done something to her, and I had long since gotten a sense of the power Adéluce could wield when provoked.

Her smile twisted into a smirk as Xavier stepped toward her, rage rising from him like a mist.

“What did you do to Cali?” he demanded.

I swallowed hard, trying to quell the tidal wave of terror rising in me. I couldn’t stop my brain from fabricating worst-case scenarios where Cali was alone and defenseless, cornered and scrabbling to get away as the terrible Adéluce closed in on her. I tried to shake it off. I couldn’t let myself lose focus here. This was probably just another of Adéluce’s mind games.

It had to be.

I stepped next to Xavier as Adéluce grinned, looking between us.

“Oh,” she sang teasingly, “but wouldn’t you like to know.”

The taunt in her eyes and the terrifying confidence in her voice made me feel even worse, but now the fear was turning to rage.

“If you hurt her…” I snarled.

But Adéluce didn’t flinch. She only smiled wider. “And if I did, what would you do about it, hmm? Growl at me some more?” She gave me a swift, dismissive once-over. “What do you think the likes of you could possibly do to me?”

I could taste the bitter tang of fury in the back of my throat, and I shifted in an instant. I was dimly aware that Xavier had done the same thing next to me, but I couldn’t think about that. I was working on pure instinct now—pure emotion.

I lunged toward Adéluce with teeth bared, snarling. I was fucking *sick* of this vampire-witch. I was finished making deals, and I was finished listening to her threaten Cali. Adéluce Duquette was going to pay for everything that had happened—everything she had done. I was going to make her pay.

Adéluce anticipated my attack and stepped easily to the side, making me overshoot her position. I turned quickly and sprinted for her again. I changed my path of attack at the last minute to try to confuse her, but I only felt my shoulder brush against her as I missed her again.

She was impossibly fast, and even fighting two of us, she was winning handily. She seemed to anticipate our every move, able to move out of our way just before we could reach her. We were pursuing, but it didn’t even feel like she was *trying* to avoid us. It seemed almost easy for her.

Without discussion, Xavier circled so we could attack her from the front and the back. We charged her, but in an instant, she had disappeared, and Xavier and I barely avoided crashing into each other.

She reappeared in the trees to the left of us. She watched us as we changed direction again, and she changed direction *again* as she waved her hand, causing two massive oak branches to fall, cutting off our path.

Chest heaving, I looked around, considering my options for an attack position. It was clear this wasn’t going to be a fair fight. Adéluce was literally laughing out loud as she watched Xavier and me—the two most skilled fighters in the Pacific Northwest—chase our tails as we went after her. The sound of her laughter was high and brittle, and it reverberated throughout the woods, bouncing off the trees and ear-worming into my head and filling me with white-hot anger.

*On your four!* Rishika cried, charging up next to me. She had shifted as well and was going after Adéluce with all her might, though having as much success as I was.

*Dammit!* she screamed, nearly running into a tree as Adéluce disappeared from right in front of her.

Artemis still had hold of the crossbow, and she shot it at Adéluce over and over, but the vampire-witch waved the arrows away like flies. She held up her hand, and the arrows Artemis had shot flew into her open palm. She laughed as though it was a game and flung them at us with the same force generated by the crossbow.

*Someone somehow tell Artemis to stop giving her ammunition*, Xavier snarled as Artemis raised the bow again.

Rishika batted the bow out of her hand, and Artemis seemed to get the message.

We were giving it all we had, but even with all three of us wolves working together, we weren’t even getting close to her. She was laughing at us, toying with us, like an evil-eyed cat playing with a particularly annoying pack of mice.

We tried to flank her and all took a run at her together, but she blipped away, causing us to run into each other at full force. When she laughed again, it sounded different. The sound was loud and high-pitched enough to break glass. It hurt my ears and filled me with a creeping sense of dread.

“You fools!” she screamed. Her voice was strange. It reverberated around in a way that wasn’t natural. She shook her head as she glared at all of us. “Can’t you see? It’s already too late!”

She disappeared, blipping out of the clearing.

We all stopped, watching, looking for her to reappear. It was unnaturally quiet in the clearing for a moment, the only sound the panting of three exhausted wolves and a Fae. Finally, after a long moment, a night bird began to sing once more, and Xavier and I looked at each other. We didn’t even need to use the mind link, as I was sure we were thinking the same thing.

Then we shifted back to our human forms.

“Fuck.”

I looked toward the voice and saw the hunters staring at us, wide-eyed with shock.

Honestly, I’d forgotten about the hunters. But there they were, standing next to a tree, clutching their weapons.

“Thanks for all the help back there, fellas,” Xavier snapped at them.

“What the hell were we supposed to do against that witch?” one of the hunters asked. “You all are fucking *wolves*, and it didn’t look like a picnic for you.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Unbelievable.”

“Whatever you guys are into,” the hunter went on, backing away from us, “you’re in way too deep. This shit is crazy. There’s no way we can help.”

A woman hunter in the group stepped forward. “Stop it, Aaron, you don’t speak for us all.”

Aaron glared at the woman, apparently irritated at being called out. “What the hell are you talking about, Del? You’re telling me you want to get into something with *Adéluce Duquette*?”

Del narrowed her eyes right back. “I don’t think we should just be walking away.” She pointed to where Adéluce had last stood before she’d blipped away. “That bitch just *killed* Mériadec! We all had to watch that happen. And we owe it to Mériadec to help these people destroy her.”

But Aaron wasn’t convinced. He shook his head. “Mériadec is dead, Del. He’s gone, and I’m not looking to die next. I don’t want any part of this.”

Del gave the hunter a hard, cold look. “Fine. If you want to be a coward, walk away. Be my guest. No one’s going to go after you. But I’m staying put and doing what’s right.”

I nodded at Del, grateful for her help. And I understood her determination to avenge Mériadec. I was feeling similarly vengeful.

Aaron looked around at the group of hunters for support. “Come on. I’m walking away from this bullshit. Who’s with me?”

The hunters hesitated for a moment, then there was a quiet rumble as they began to mutter and move around, arranging themselves into groups of those staying with Del and those leaving with Aaron.

In the end, only one other man had moved toward Aaron, which really pissed him off.

“Fine!” he shouted, throwing up his hands. “Fine! If you idiots want to be killed by a witch helping out these fucking werewolves, then that’s on you. Aquine and I are out!”

He waited for a beat, as though expecting someone to object, but no one did. The two men stormed into the trees, melting in a moment into the shadows. It was as though the woods had absorbed them, and after a moment even the sound of their feet stomping loudly through the underbrush had completely disappeared.

The hunters who stayed behind turned to look at me.

“So?” a man said, stepping toward me.

I stared at him. “So what?”

He looked around at the other assembled hunters, then back at me. “What’s next?”

My only thought was of Cali, so I spoke instinctively. “We have to get back to the safe house.”

Xavier snorted with derision, and as soon as the words were out of my mouth I understood why. We were completely lost and in the middle of absolutely nowhere. How the *hell* were we going to get out of here?

# Episode 3319

**Xavier**

I was *pissed*. Completely pissed. I knew there was a huge amount of fear involved in there, too, but all I could think about was how absolutely furious I was. I knew Adéluce was aiming to get under our skin, and she clearly knew that threatening Cali was the best way to throw us off our game. It’s not like Greyson or I ever hid our devotion to our mate.

But I couldn’t be sure she was bluffing this time. I wanted to think she was—I prayed she was—but I couldn’t be sure.

Cali wasn’t dead. I knew that, and I held onto that fact with all my might. I would know if she was dead. I would be able to sense it through our mate bond. But even this was of little comfort. Adéluce was the most powerful being I had encountered, and I knew she could do things to Cali that were worse than death. If Cali was in the clutches of this vampire-witch, she could be hurt. She could be trapped and scared and in pain. And I *hated* that I wasn’t there to protect her.

The thoughts crowding my brain were driving me insane, and I ground my teeth together. What the hell were we going to do? With Pierre gone, we would have absolutely no idea where to even start looking for Cali if Adéluce did have her.

Fuck. I hated how helpless I felt. It wasn’t something I was used to.

So, when Greyson suggested going back to the safe house, I was so amped up I let out a bark of furious laughter.

“That’s a fucking *great* idea,” I snarled. “Why didn’t I think of that?” I threw out my arm, gesturing toward the darkness of the Louisiana swamplands surrounding us. “And, pray tell, how do you think we should go about that, oh great Alpha? Do you have some kind of internal compass I don’t know about? Are you planning on making friends with some gators and hitching a ride?”

Greyson rounded on me, his eyes flashing. “You go ahead and curb that fucking attitude, Xavier,” he snapped.

“And if I don’t?” I asked, taking a threatening step toward him.

“If you don’t, you’re going to find out,” he said, taking a step toward me.

He got in my face, so I stepped closer, getting in his face. We were both so angry and desperate it probably would have escalated from there, but Artemis shoved herself between us before that could happen.

“Um, *hello*?” she said, glowering at us both. “Can we please focus up? You two dicks aren’t the only ones who are worried about Cali. So just cool it and get your shit together.”

Greyson stared at me for a moment, then he brushed past me, shoulder checking me hard enough I had to take a step back.

“Artemis is right. We need to think,” he said.

Getting my feet back under me, I glared at Greyson. I was still fuming, but I kept my mouth shut.

The woman from the hunter group—Del—stepped forward. She looked conflicted but seemed to marshal herself. “We’ve got boats,” she offered.

“*What?*” I asked, stunned.

She nodded. “And we know the way out of here. Just follow us.”

Thank god. Relief washed over me as I started after the line of hunters through the swampy underbrush. Everything smell like just-turned earth, and I could feel water oozing up every time I stepped.

The boats turned out to be several small fishing vessels—the motorized kind people used to fish in a lake on a sunny day—and they were docked at the end of a rickety pier. We split into mostly even groupings and climbed in without discussion. It was clear we were all glad to be leaving this place.

Greyson and I ended up in the boat with the woman hunter. She started the engine and began to navigate it through the dark water. The other boats fell in line behind us.

“I’m Delphine, by the way,” she said after a while.

“Greyson Evers.”

“Xavier,” I grunted.

Delphine nodded. “Nice to meet you,” she said wryly. “Where is this safe house?”

“It’s in the Bywater area,” I said.

“We can get there,” Delphine muttered, and angled the boat a little more north.

As we sliced through the quiet water, I realized I felt a bit better. The feeling of being on the move helped me feel slightly less furiously helpless, and I was glad as hell to be moving toward Cali.

“Thanks for this,” I said gruffly. “Thanks for sticking to Mériadec’s word and helping us out. I know you could have just walked away.”

Delphine nodded. “Yeah, sure.” She paused for a moment, then gave us a curious look. “That was Adéluce Duquette back there, wasn’t it? Like the *real* Adéluce Duquette?”

I looked at Delphine, surprised she had recognized the witch. “How do you happen to know that?”

Delphine looked out at the dark water and gave a bitter laugh. “The Duquettes have been a problem around here for the entirety of my life. Or at least they’ve been stories. I’ve actually never seen Adéluce Duquette before, or her husband Henri. But you hear enough about a person and can just start to figure things out. I mean, a witch like that?” She shook her head, awed. “I’ve never seen anyone with magic like that before.”

“Yeah,” Greyson muttered, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Plus, once you mentioned having some kind of ongoing feud with her, I just sort of put the pieces together,” Delphine said with a shrug.

“Well, you win the prize,” I said bitterly. “That was her.”

Delphine was quiet for a long time. “Mériadec was my oldest friend. I can’t believe he’s just gone.” She looked at us, her eyes blazing. “And if you two are going to try to take down the bitch who killed him, then I want in.”

I gave her an appraising look. Delphine was a badass—I was sure about that. She was knowledgeable about the area, loyal, and didn’t take shit from idiots like Aaron. It definitely wouldn’t hurt us to have her on our side.

We lapsed into silence as we continued through the water. The swamp was loud with frogs croaking and crickets chirping. Cicadas screamed so loudly sometimes I could barely hear the motor over their sound.

“Mériadec’s gear is down there,” Delphine said after a long time. She jutted her chin toward a duffel shoved in the back of the boat. “You can find some clothes in it.”

We muttered our thanks and pulled on jeans. I got a T-shirt, and Greyson made do with a tank top. In the other boat, I could see that Rishika was dressed in an oversized shirt and sweats, so someone in her boat must have given them to her.

The trip though the water seemed long. It was hard to do anything but stew about Cali’s safety, trying to imagine how she was doing. And I had a feeling Greyson was doing the same thing.

Finally, Delphine navigated the boats to the Bywater area and pulled them into port at a small dock.

I looked around and felt a sense of relief. I recognized the area, and I knew just where to go.

“The house is just a few blocks away,” I said as I climbed out of the boat. “Let’s go! *Hurry!*”

We sprinted across the dock and onto the streets of Bywater. Greyson next to me, we headed for the safe house at a dead run.

After a moment, Artemis fell into step with me, and I could see from her expression that she was just as determined to get to Cali as I was. Artemis was a hard nut to crack, but it had always been clear that she cared about her sister.

Artemis glanced over and caught me looking at her. “Can’t go any faster than this?” she asked breathlessly.

I noticed she had her bag slung over her shoulder. It jostled around as she ran, bouncing against her hip. “Be careful with that.”

She grinned at me and patted the bag. “Don’t worry.”

“I *am* worried,” I insisted.

“I’ve got the jar safely wrapped up,” she told me.

“What jar?” Greyson asked, looking over at us.

“The ashes,” Artemis said.

Greyson’s eyes went wide as dinner plates. “Wait, *what*? The ashes? *Seluna’s* ashes?”

“We think so,” I said, praying I was right. I looked over at Greyson, and he gave me a nod, looking deeply impressed.

“Why wouldn’t you fucking lead with that?”

“We got busy,” I snapped. I turned back to the group. “It’s just around here,” I yelled back at the crew following behind us. But I skidded to a stop as we rounded the corner. The street was lined with firetrucks blaring sirens. Red flashing lights bounced around, reflecting off the windows of the other houses. They were all centered around the safe house, which was now nothing more than a smoking, skeletal structure, charred black.

My blood ran cold. What the hell had happened here? And was Cali still inside?

# Episode 3320

**Artemis**

I felt like I couldn’t breathe. The burned-down safe house looked like a skeleton, and despair washed over me as I realized that I might have just lost my only sister. I blinked slowly, trying to make some sense of what I was seeing, but I couldn’t wrap my brain around it. Cali was the first family I had ever known about, and her taking me in had changed everything about my life.

Cali and my mother were the family I cared most about. They were all I had tethering me to this mortal world. Without them, who was I? What would be my purpose here? I tried not to get too overwhelmed with anxiety. *Yeah, too freaking late*. I guessed the old mortal saying was true: you never really knew what you had until it was gone. Or, in this case, in dire peril. But panicking wouldn’t do me any good. I took a breath. I had to rely on my training in this situation. Where was the old, tough-as-nails Artemis? There was a problem to solve, and as usual, I had to be the one to do the solving.

My throat was tight as tears welled in my eyes, despite my trying to beat them back. When I looked around, I saw that Xavier and Greyson had both stopped as well, looking pale and terrified.

“What the hell happened here?” Rishika whispered, stepping to my side.

“Adéluce,” Xavier said grimly. “It must have been her. This was what she was talking about.”

My head was spinning so much that I grabbed onto Rishika’s arm to steady myself. The thought of Cali trapped in a burning house was so horrible it sent violent shivers down my spine. Despair threatened to overwhelm me, and it might have, but Greyson stepped forward at that moment, looking determined.

“She’s not dead,” he said with conviction.

I stared up at him, desperate for him to be right. “Are you sure?”

Xavier nodded. “She’s alive,” he agreed firmly. “I would know if she wasn’t. We both would.” He nodded over at Greyson.

I didn’t totally understand what he was talking about, but I assumed it was a mate bond thing.

*Okay*, I told myself, trying to shake off the heavy sorrow I’d let myself feel, *Cali is alive.* Her mates were sure of it, and I had to trust their intuition.

I took a deep breath, ready to get back into a mode that was much more familiar and comfortable to me—action.

“Okay,” I said briskly, turning to the group, “where would she have gone?”

There was a beat of silence as everyone looked around at one another. No one offered any suggestions.

“Let’s call first,” Rishika suggested.

We all pulled out our phones.

“She’s not picking up,” Greyson said, shaking his head.

“Nothing,” I said after trying her myself, then put my phone away.

“Neither is Gabe. I guess that’s not surprising,” Xavier said with a sigh. “They might have turned off their phones. Or if they’re hiding, they’re probably somewhere without a signal.”

“You know, if you switch your carrier to Verizon, you get way better coverage in this part of the city,” one of the hunters put in unhelpfully. “I switched a few years back, and it’s made a huge difference in the…”

He trailed off as Greyson shot him a lethal glare.

Rishika turned to me, her face lined with worry. “What about you, Artemis?”

I stared at her. “What *about* me?”

“Do you think you can track Cali and the others?”

I wasn’t sure. I needed a great deal more to go on than the smoldering ruins standing before us.

“I can help with that,” Delphine put in. She gestured at her group, clustered behind her. “My hunters are excellent trackers. That’s how we’re trained.”

I nodded, working to get a grip on my emotions. “Yeah,” I said, clearing my throat. “But I’ll need to get closer to the house so I can work from there.”

“So let’s do that,” Xavier said, pushing me forward.

Yellow tape surrounded a large perimeter around the house. I looked around and spotted a firefighter standing next to his truck, looking on as some of the other firemen walked around the house, making sure the fire was completely out. Cops were swarming the place, but I chose this guy because he looked the most causal. He had his hard hat off, and his fireproof coat was hanging off one shoulder.

“So,” I said casually, walking over, “what happened here?”

The fireman, who looked to be in his early twenties, with sandy blond hair and a sharp jaw, wore a bored expression. But when he glanced over at me, his eyes lit up. He straightened and pulled his jacket back on, clearly puffing out his chest. “Bad house fire,” he said, nodding toward the house.

I was used to men in the human world reacting to me like this. In fact, I had counted on it when I’d walked over to him. “Oh, looks like it’s under control now,” I pressed, hoping for more information.

He nodded. “Yeah, you should have seen it a few minutes ago. Got totally out of control. Took everything we had to get on top of it. I had some pretty risky moments in there myself. Could have died a couple of times.”

I resisted the very strong impulse to roll my eyes. I couldn’t give less of a shit about this man and his manufactured heroics at the moment. “Yeah, but what about the people inside?” I demanded, my voice sharp.

The firefighter looked surprised by the force of my question, and Greyson stepped next to me.

“Any idea how the fire started?” he asked, sounding a lot more diplomatic than I felt at the moment.

The guy sized up Greyson for a minute, then shrugged and scratched his jaw. “It was pretty weird, actually.”

“Weird how?” Greyson asked quickly.

“From the initial investigation, it’s looking the fire started, like, spontaneously or something.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling scared again.

The firefighter shrugged. “There’s no clear accelerant, and the fire didn’t follow any path that we can find. No one’s ever seen a burn pattern like this. It’s like the whole house caught fire at the same time. The burn is exactly the same everywhere.” He looked at the house. “It’s pretty spooky, actually.”

I glanced at Greyson, and I could tell he was thinking what I was thinking: this was definitely the work of Adéluce. The firefighter was right about one thing—no one would have ever seen a fire like this before, because this fire had been started by magic.

I cleared my throat, forcing myself to ask the next question. “Was anyone injured?”

The guy shook his head. “I don’t think so. A neighbor called the fire in, and we haven’t seen any signs that anyone was inside the house when the fire started.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. The other firefighters were closely inspecting the house, and they had dogs walking carefully across the foundation, searching. They would have noticed if there were bodies in there, which meant that Cali and the others hadn’t been inside.

“Well, thanks,” I said, giving the guy a bright smile.

He grinned back like a dope, and when I turned away, I was feeling a lot more hopeful than I had a moment ago. I headed to the edge of where the yellow tape cordoned off the house and looked carefully around. I was scanning the ground, looking for anything that looked familiar or even out of place. Anything that might give me some clue about where Cali, Gabriel, Mikah, Adair, and Tabitha might have escaped to.

But it wasn’t going to be easy. The area was total chaos. With the firefighters, cops, and onlookers walking around, there were footprints *everywhere*. It was going to be nearly impossible to make out prints specific to the people I was looking for.

*Fuck.*

I glared around at the scene. Why did everything in the human world have to be such a circus?

I took a deep breath. I needed to calm down. I needed to focus. I was anxious as hell and getting mad, and I wasn’t going to find anyone that way.

Any tracks were useless, so I looked up, changing my perspective. There was more to this scene than what was on the ground, I reminded myself.

I let my sight go soft as I scanned the perimeter of the scene. Apart from the officials putting out the fire, there were quite a few neighbors who had come outside to see what was going on. They all looked unextraordinary—except for one guy.

He was standing near the back corner of the cordon, peering at the charred house with what seemed to me like far too much interest. He was wearing a tattered leather jacket, and there was something about him that just seemed shady.

He happened to look up, catching me staring at him, and I watched his eyes go wide. He took a few steps backward, then turned tail and ran.

I screamed to the rest of the group over my shoulder as I started running, “Follow that man!”

# Episode 3321

**Greyson**

Adrenaline pumped through my veins as we charged after the man in the leather jacket. I’d barely gotten a look at him before he took off, but Artemis had said to catch him, and I trusted Artemis’s instincts. Especially her instinct for finding trouble.

The streets were dark and more crowded than they might have been usually because of the fire and the sirens and lights. The guy in the leather jacket was fast and smart—he threaded through knots of people and zigzagged along the street, so we had to work to keep up with him. Something told me it wasn’t his first chase. But it was his bad luck that those of us in the group following were just as motivated to catch him as he was to get away.

The guy rounded a corner, and—worried I’d lose him—I put on an extra burst of speed to catch up. I was frustrated this was taking as long as it was and wished I could just shift already, but I couldn’t do that in such a public space.

I drew nearly level with the guy, close enough to hear the pounding of his feet on the pavement and his shallow, panting breathing. And just as he shot a terrified glance over his shoulder at me, I took my chance and leapt for him. I covered the distance between us and tackled the guy to the ground, both of us hitting the street, hard.

He struggled beneath me, and the group surrounded us as I pinned down the guy’s arms and legs. He was still fighting hard to get away, so I straddled him, using my body weight as an anchor to make sure he didn’t go anywhere.

“What are you doing? Leave me alone,” he whined in a thin voice. “Whatever you think I did, I didn’t do it!”

Artemis crouched down next to the guy, getting in his face. “Why were you creeping around that house?” she demanded coldly. “What were you doing over there?”

The guy looked away from her. “Come on! I wasn’t the only one there. A house burned down! I was curious, just like everyone else there. Go chase after them!”

“No way,” she said flatly, shaking her head. “I saw the look on your face, man. You were way too interested, which tells me that you were involved—”

“Involved with what?” he cut in, his eyes darting around. The blood had drained from his face, and he looked panicky. “You’ve got this all wrong! I’m an upstanding citizen, and it is unlawful to hold me here against my will! Let me go!” he shouted, trying to push me off of him.

I shot Artemis a questioning look. I trusted her judgment, but I knew she was upset about Cali. What if this guy was telling the truth and he was just a bystander?

But before I could say any of this, Artemis stood straight and shrugged. “Fine, if you don’t want to talk, we’ll *make* you talk.”

“What are you—” the guy started weakly.

“Greyson, break his arm,” Artemis snapped.

Shocked, I looked up at her. She had to know there was no way I was going to break anyone’s arm, and I didn’t appreciate being ordered around either. There was no way for us to know that the guy had done anything wrong. What was Artemis playing at? He might very well be some poor neighbor.

But when I looked down at the guy, his eyes had gone wide with alarm. “No, wait! Please don’t hurt me! I swear, I’ll tell you everything!”

Artemis gave him a triumphant smile. “That’s better.”

The guy stopped fighting me and went limp. “Yeah, fine, I’ll talk, but not out here in the open.” He looked around, terrified. “*She’s* always watching,” he whispered.

I raised my eyebrows. I figured he must be talking about Adéluce, and when I looked over at Xavier, I could tell he was thinking same thing.

We were finally on to something, so I stood and stepped aside, letting the guy get to his feet. But I kept a firm grasp on his arm so he wouldn’t get away.

“Where do you want to talk?” Artemis asked.

The guy’s eyes darted around. “That way,” he said, jutting his chin toward an alley behind a dry cleaner. It was narrow and dim, but we’d definitely be sheltered in it.

We headed toward the alley, and as we stepped in, the group surrounded the guy in a circle. They moved without being directed, and I was grateful we were all on the same page. Even the hunters.

“Okay,” Xavier said, stepping toward the guy and crossing his arms across his broad chest. He was trying to intimidate the guy, and damn if it wasn’t working like a charm. “Start talking.”

The guy took a deep breath. “First of all, you should all know that this isn’t what it looks like. I never meant to get caught up in any of this,” he added, his voice cracking as he rambled on. “I was down on my luck, you know, and I was there drinking at Smithy’s, this place I like to go, and this woman walked in. She was the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Not just ever seen at Smithy’s—like ever. And she comes right over to me, and I’m thinking I just won the lottery. And she tells me she’ll pay me a bunch of money if I keep an eye on some things for her.”

He took a shuddering breath. This guy wasn’t a criminal mastermind. He was just some dope who got femme fatale’d—just like what had happened to Pierre.

“Anyway,” the guy went on, “I did the job, and this woman paid me—but way more than I was expecting. Which is good, because I ain’t had steady work in a long time. So I kept doing jobs for her.” He glanced around the circle, his eyes wild, like a cornered animal. “But something’s not right with her.”

“What to you mean?” Xavier asked quickly.

The guy shook his head, looking troubled. “She’s not right. I saw…”

He trailed off and looked down. Then he looked up again, right into my eyes.

“What did you see?” I asked.

“I know this sounds crazy,” he said quietly, “but I think she’s a witch!”

His face was so grave, and his voice was so scared, I couldn’t help it—I gave a snort of laughter. “You don’t know the half of it, buddy.”

“I know it sounds insane, believe me. But I swear, it’s like she knows things she shouldn’t know. She sees things she couldn’t possibly have seen. It’s creepy, man.”

I almost felt badly for the poor, dumb human. He seemed completely terrified of Adéluce, and I didn’t blame him for that one bit.

I shook my head. “None of that is important right now. We need to know—were you watching the fire the whole time?”

The man gulped. “Yeah.”

“Did you see anyone leave the building?” I asked with more urgency. “Where did they go?”

The man hesitated, then looked around the group again. “You’re not going to tell Adéluce I talked to you, are you?”

Artemis stepped forward, her eyes blazing. She looked sick of this guy. “If you don’t talk to me, trust me, you’re not going to have to worry about Adéluce.”

The man gulped, clearly interpreting Artemis’s message that *she* would be the one to kill him. I looked at the Fae with respect. She definitely knew how to lean on a witness, and I was glad to see her ferocity to protect Cali. I felt the same way.

The man put up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. Listen,” he said with a sigh, “I did see a group of people running away a couple of hours ago. I think they were coming from the house. I’m pretty sure.”

A wave of relief broke over me. “Which way?” I asked him, almost kindly. I was so grateful to this rando, I might have bought him a car if he had thought to ask at that moment.

He pointed south. “That way. Down Water Street.”

“Okay,” I said with a sigh of relief. “Okay, thank god.” Then a thought occurred to me, and I looked quickly at the leather jacket guy. “Wait, you haven’t told Adéluce all this yet, have you?”

The man shook his head. “No, man. Not yet. I was just about to go give her my report—”

“Under no circumstances are you to talk to Adéluce,” I growled. “Do you understand me?”

The guy nodded nervously. “I understand.”

“Why don’t you plan on getting out of town,” I said coldly. “And if I find out you did tell Adéluce about this little conversation of ours, understand me—you’re going to have *me* to answer to.”

# Episode 3322

I looked uneasily around at the group. We were crowded into the booth at the little diner, and now, under the fluorescent lights, I was able to see everyone better. And I could see that everyone looked like they were in pretty shitty shape. Tabitha’s hair was mussed, and beneath the streaks of dirt and ash on her face, she looked pale and terrified. Adair was next to her, barely letting her out of his sight, and he looked shifty as hell. When he wasn’t watching Tabitha closely, his eyes were ranging around the diner, looking for threats. Mikah and Gabriel probably looked the best out of any of us. They were both dirty and ragged, but they pulled it off somehow.

My hands and clothes were filthy, and my face felt grimy to the touch. I hadn’t encountered a mirror in a while, which was probably a blessing. I could only imagine how I looked.

I pushed away the menu the hostess had given us. It had large, colorful pictures of the food, but even the sight of hamburgers and sandwiches made me feel sick. I was too anxious to eat. We all were. Mikah and Gabriel had been the ones who’d suggested coming to the diner. They’d said it was an old favorite of theirs, but more than anything they felt like we should probably stay in a public place for the time being. No one said it, but I think we were all hoping our attacker wouldn’t dare come after us in front of a restaurant full of witnesses.

I leaned my head against the back of the plasticky vinyl of the booth with a sigh. I closed my eyes and tried to gather my thoughts. The first thing I did was check in with how I felt physically. That might have been a mistake, because it was at that moment that I realized how weak and exhausted I felt. Ever since the magic had returned to New Orleans, the Seluna mark on my back had been bothering me more than ever. It was sapping my strength.

“Hey, there. What can I get y’all?”

I looked up to see the owner of the cheery voice. It was a blonde waitress in a blue uniform, standing in front of our table. She smiled down at us, but her smile faded as she looked around, taking in our filthy faces, torn clothing, and hunted looks.

She cleared her throat. “Anything to drink?” she asked, sounding nervous.

Mikah gave her a weak smile. I think he was trying to be reassuring. “Just coffees all around, please.”

The waitress nodded and hurried away.

“Okay, so what do we do now?” Gabriel asked as soon as the waitress was out of earshot.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket again. There were no notifications, which I’d been expecting, but it was still disappointing. I’d been trying to send messages for a while now, but they had all bounced back, and—looking at my phone—I saw that none of them had been delivered.

I pushed a lock of hair off my face. “The first thing we need to do is find Xavier and Greyson,” I said, and dialed Xavier’s number again.

He didn’t pick up, and neither did Greyson when I tried him. The numbers didn’t even ring, just went straight to voicemail. I tried Artemis next, but it was the same story with her, too.

“Anything?” Tabitha asked anxiously. I looked up to see the whole group watching me closely.

“No, nothing,” I admitted. “No one’s reachable. I’m not getting a lot of signal here, either.” I felt dejected. My head was spinning, and I had to admit I didn’t have a ton of ideas about what to do next. “I’m going to try Artemis one more time.”

Then, without warning, my vision blurred, turning the world around me into a runny watercolor picture. My muscles went slack, and my phone slipped from my hand. Dimly, I could hear it clatter onto the formica table.

“Cali?” Mikah’s voice called to me. It sounded like it was coming to me from a distance. “Cali? Are you okay?”

“What’s going on?” I heard Tabitha asking.

My ears were ringing, and when I opened my eyes, I realized my head was resting on the table, though I didn’t remember doing it.

“Cali? What the hell just happened?” Gabriel asked.

I managed to lift my head and looked up at him. “I’m fine,” I said weakly. “I think I’m a little tired.” But the truth was that I wasn’t fine. I felt like total shit.

Gabriel looked nervous. “Is this about your magic mark thing?”

“Seluna, I think,” Mikah cut in.

“I think so,” I admitted. “I think it has to do with the magic returning.”

Gabriel looked at Adair. “Can’t you do something to help her?”

Adair shrugged, though the gesture wasn’t dismissive. “I don’t know what’s going on here,” he admitted. “I’m not one for healing magics, so I can’t exactly tell you what’s going on.”

“Wait,” Mikah said, looking closely at Tabitha, “if you can negate magic, maybe *you* can help.”

“What could I do?” she asked, confused.

“Maybe you could try to negate Cali’s Seluna mark. I’m sure getting rid of that connection would make her feel better.”

I looked up at that, suddenly hopeful. “Really? Do you think so, Mikah? That sounds good.”

“It might be worth a try,” Mikah said.

I turned to Tabitha. “Do you think you could do that?”

I noticed Adair warily watching the scene unfold as Tabitha nodded slowly.

“I mean, I don’t know,” she said, though she looked curious, too. “It’s not like I can even *do* magic, you know? I’ve never focused on my negation; it’s always been something that happens around me. Spells don’t work, curses bounce off. I’ve never tried negating magic on someone else before. I’m not even sure how to go about doing it.”

“Maybe if you concentrate you can lift the magic away or something,” Gabriel suggested, getting interested.

I rubbed my eyes. I was exhausted and fighting to keep them open. “Dani was learning to control her ability to amplify magic, so maybe you can try to do something similar.”

“Well, no promises,” Tabitha said, “but I can try.”

I glanced around the diner. It was fairly empty—only a couple of men sitting at the counter eating pie and a couple in the far corner. They were sharing a platter of pancakes and looked uninterested in anything except each other.

“No one’s looking over here,” I said, and Tabitha nodded.

She closed her eyes and frowned with concentration. She lifted her hands toward me, palms out.

At first, nothing happened. Then, gradually, I started to feel a lightness in my chest. Slowly I felt warmth spreading through me and my energy returning.

“I think it’s working!” I gasped.

But my excitement fled in an instant when—across the table—I saw that Tabitha had gone pale as parchment. She dropped her hands onto the table, and Adair gasped and put his arm around her.

“Tabitha?” he said loudly, urgently. “Tabitha?”

At that exact moment the blonde waitress returned and placed a tray of coffees at the edge of the table. She looked a lot less chipper this time, but as she slid the mugs to everyone, her gaze went to Tabitha.

“Is your friend okay?” she asked, frowning. “She looks kind of pale.”

Tabitha opened her eyes, but barely. She looked half asleep and woozy. She swayed against Adair, who held her close.

Mikah grabbed a cup of coffee and shoved it in front of Tabitha. “She’s fine,” he said hastily.

“Just a little hungover. You know how it is,” Gabriel added. He laughed, way too loudly.

The waitress rolled her eyes and—taking her tray with her—walked away.

Adair hadn’t taken his eyes off Tabitha, and he pulled her closer. “Tabitha,” he said quietly, “can you hear me?”

She nodded. “I can hear you. I’m okay. I’m just really tired.” She spoke quietly, and her speech was slurred, almost as if she *was* hungover.

Adair frowned at me. “She must be feeling the effects of siphoning off your magic,” he said angrily. “We’re not doing that anymore.”

“No,” Tabitha said weakly. “No, it’s okay. I can do it. It was working—”

“No, Adair is right,” I said as guilt washed over me. “We’re not going to do that again. I don’t want you making yourself feel shitty just to make me feel better.”

“But—” Tabitha started.

“We’ll have to figure something else out,” I said. I pulled a coffee toward me and added a packet of sugar. “But first we need a plan.”

Mikah nodded, grabbing for his coffee too. “That’s right. We need to decide what we’re going to do now, how to find the others.”

I looked around at the group. “Any ideas?”

Gabriel sat up straighter and smiled, his eyes on the window. “I’ve got one.”

“What is it?” Mikah asked.

Gabriel grinned and pointed out onto the street. “Why don’t we just meet up with them now?”

We all turned to see what he was pointing at, and I gasped as I saw Greyson, Xavier, Artemis, Rishika, and a knot of strangers barreling past the diner.

# Episode 3323

**Xavier**

When the guy in the leather jacket had finally given us a general hint of where Cali and the rest had fled after the fire, we’d all taken off without a word. Even the hunters had seemed to understand the rush and were keeping up with the rest of us. And I was feeling hopeful.

When I’d first spotted the blackened and charred safe house, it felt like my brain had just shut down. I couldn’t grasp what I was seeing—or the implications. Cali *couldn’t* have been in there, she *had* to be all right. I’d kept saying that to myself, over and over. And now we had a location and a plan of action.

I wasn’t happy, but I was glad to be doing something. I wasn’t going to be happy until I had Cali safe in my arms and could see with my own eyes that she was safe and with me.

“Slow down!” Artemis shouted as she slowed her steps. “This is the area. I need to track, and the rest of you should use your noses, too.”

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t want to stop. I needed the powerful forward momentum to feel like I was getting closer to Cali, and I didn’t want to just stand around while Artemis looked at pieces of trash on the ground.

Just as I was about to tell her so, I heard a sound that made me freeze—the most beautiful sound in the world.

“Xavier! Greyson!”

I spun around to see Cali standing on the sidewalk outside a diner, waving like crazy.

Without even processing the thought, I charged for her. She ran at me, and when we met in the street, I swept her up into my arms. Her legs wrapped around my waist, and she held on to me, sobbing my name.

My heart pounded in my chest as I drank her in, feeling the curves of her body beneath my hands, the weight of her in my arms, and the smell of her soft skin. It was there, beneath the heavy smell of smoke in her hair and clothes.

I lowered her back to the ground and looked at her face, then ran my hands down her arms, checking that she was unhurt.

Greyson had appeared at my side, and Cali moved from me and threw herself into his arms. I was too glad to see her to even feel pissed about that. All I could feel was deep, profound happiness as I watched Cali disentangle herself from Greyson and hug Artemis.

“Cali!” Artemis said, pulling her sister into a bone-crushing hug. “There you are!”

Everyone was exclaiming and shouting, and the hunters were standing around looking confused. I was so overwhelmed to see Cali that even though she was standing in front of me, safe and sound, it took me a long time to tear my eyes from her beautiful—though filthy—face.

But when I did, I saw that Gabe, Mikah, Adair, and Tabitha had also walked out of the diner.

“What the hell, man?” Gabe called out, walking over to me. “Where have you been?”

“Gabe!” I called.

Mikah walked over and took in my appearance. “You look a bit worse for wear.”

I snorted with laughter. “You’re one to talk. You look like shit. You all do,” I said, looking around at all of them. “But I’m glad you’re all okay,” I added gruffly.

Gabe gave me a rakish grin. “Come on, Xavier. You know me—it’s going to take more than a fire to take me out.”

Cali pulled away from Rishika and looked around. Her gaze traveled in the direction of the safe house. “We should probably get off the street,” she said anxiously. “Why doesn’t everyone come inside the diner, and we can make a plan.”

She shot a curious look at Delphine and the rest of the hunters. I could tell she was wondering who the hell they were but was too polite to ask.

Delphine stepped through the mass of huggers toward me. “Listen, Xavier, I need to get my people to safety. We gotta regroup, too. Let me have your phone number.”

I told her, and she typed it into her own phone.

“Okay, I’ve sent you my number,” she said. She looked around. “We’ll be in touch.”

I nodded. “Thanks for your help,” I said.

“You got it,” she replied shortly, and she and the rest of the hunters moved off, disappearing into the crowds.

“Let’s get inside,” Mikah called, waving everyone into the diner.

As Cali started inside, I slipped an arm around her waist and hugged her close to me. I never wanted to let her go.

Cali glanced over her shoulder in the direction the hunters had gone. “So,” she started, “who were those people?”

“Allies,” I said. Cali frowned, and I shook my head. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later.”

Inside the diner, Mikah and Gabe grabbed a table and pushed it up to a booth littered with full cups of coffee. It must have been where they were sitting when we showed up, because Mikah and Gabe grabbed for their mugs when they sat back down.

There were only a few other customers, so I didn’t think adding to our party was a big deal, but I did notice a blonde waitress in a blue uniform was standing behind the counter, staring daggers at us as we all sat.

“Okay,” Cali sighed as she sat and looked around, “tell us. How the hell did you find us? What have you been doing?”

Artemis grinned, her eyes sparkling. She looked happier, too, now that we had found Cali. “Oh, a little of this, a little of that. You know, getting the ashes, no big deal.”

Cali gasped. “Oh my god! *What?* The *ashes*? Are you serious right now?”

Artemis beamed happily. “Hell yeah, I’m serious.” She glanced around the diner, making sure no one was paying any attention to us, then reached into her bag, pulled out the jar, and passed it to Cali under the table.

Cali stared at the jar in her lap, thunderstruck. “Oh my god,” she whispered. She picked it up, then shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t know why, but for some reason I was expecting it to be super heavy, but it’s not.”

She peered closely at the jar’s contents. “It just looks so… boring.” She looked up at the rest of us, who were watching her closely. “It’s basically just a jar of dust.”

I couldn’t help but snort at her description. Leave it to Cali to call this incredibly powerful magical item nothing but a “jar of dust.”

“Listen,” I warned her, “it might not look like much, but don’t take this lightly. We all know how powerful they must be. You know that better than anyone.”

She nodded. “I know, I know. I’m just… overwhelmed, I think,” she said. She was looking at the jar with sparkling eyes, and I could tell she was really excited. I could see the wheels turning in her head, and I felt a knot of anxiety.

I loved seeing Cali happy, and I didn’t want to burst her bubble about the ashes, but I didn’t want her to get her hopes up too high and then be devastated.

“Getting these is just the first step; remember that,” I cautioned, tapping the top of the jar. “It’s an important step, but we can’t get ahead of ourselves.”

“Right,” Cali said nodding. “Yeah, you’re right. What else do we have to do?”

“We still need to get them to the demon realm for Seluna to release her hold on you, and we can’t forget the charming Adéluce is still on our tail—and out for blood,” I pointed out.

Greyson nodded in agreement. “Xavier’s right. It’s good news, but it’s still too early to celebrate our victory.”

“So, what should we do next?” Gabe asked, looking around.

“I think we have to go on the offensive with Adéluce,” Artemis said. “We can’t just wait around for her to find us.”

“No way,” Mikah said, shaking his head. “The last thing we want to do is go looking for this witch. We need to spend all our time preparing for the next time we meet her, not looking up her address in the phone book.”

“I’m with Artemis,” Greyson said. “We have to make the first move…”

The debate about our next step raged on, but I didn’t contribute. I was too focused on Cali. She was still staring down at the jar, her eyes wide with wonder.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked her quietly.

When she looked up at me, tears were caught in her eyelashes, and they sparkled like diamonds. “I was just thinking that maybe this whole nightmare is really going to come to an end.”

It was going to. I would make sure of it.

# Episode 3324

The bubble of hope welling up in my chest felt… unfamiliar. Strange, but not unwelcome. Everything with Seluna had been so hard for so long, and this was one of the first times I had really allowed myself to feel like things *might* work out.

“I know I shouldn’t get too excited,” I said to Xavier, my eyes still on the jar in my hands. “Like you said, getting the ashes was just the first step. But still, I have the ashes in my hand. That’s huge, right?”

Xavier smiled back at me, but I could tell that he was a little reserved, like he was worried about seeing me disappointed. He squeezed my hand. “I hope so, Cali. That’s what I want too, and I have a good feeling about this. We can get Harlow or Clementine or some other witch to confirm these are the right ashes.”

I nodded and looked up. “And what do we do in the meantime? Are we just supposed to go home? I mean, I guess we could have Big Mac or Kira confirm the ashes are Seluna’s. The ashes *are* what we came here for, right? And now we have them.” I shot a look down the table. “And Adair and Tabitha. So that’s it. We found everything we were looking for, right? Maybe? Do we go back to Oregon?”

“Yes,” Greyson said at the exact same time that Xavier said, “No.”

They were sitting on either side of me, and I looked between them for a moment. “Okay, so, is that a maybe?”

“If we go home now, we can keep everyone safe. The pack house is a controlled environment, and we are way better prepared to defend ourselves on our own land,” Greyson laid out.

Xavier was shaking his head. “It’s not that simple, man, and you know it.”

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

“Come on, Greyson. Adéluce isn’t just going to let us go. She’s not going to just forget about us. She’s not the out of sight, out of mind kind of witch, in case you didn’t notice. If we leave, she’ll follow us back to the pack house,” Xavier said. “It doesn’t matter if we’re in New Orleans or on our own land; we’re not prepared to deal with someone like her. All we’d be doing is exposing our pack to that danger.”

Greyson thought this over for a long moment. “That’s probably true,” he said slowly, rubbing his jaw. “She was already terrorizing us in Oregon, and then she followed us here.” He shook his head. “But I still think it would be better to face her with the power of the whole pack behind us.”

“But my parents are there,” I said, shuddering at the thought of Adéluce being anywhere near my mom and dad.

“I was thinking along the same lines,” Xavier said grimly, “and I say no way. I’m not willing to put the entire pack at risk because of a mistake *I* made. I’m staying. You can do what you want.”

Greyson eyed his brother for a long moment, then blew out a gusty breath. “If we don’t take care of Adéluce before we leave this place, this thing with her is never going to end.” He nodded. “I’ll stay too.”

For a moment I was sure the next words out of their mouths were going to be that I was going back the safety of the pack house, so I spoke before they could talk about sending me away.

“I’m staying, too,” I said stubbornly.

The brothers exchanged a look over my head.

“I wish I could send you back,” Xavier said with a sigh, “but since Adéluce is specifically after you, the safest place to be is probably here, with us.”

I was relieved to hear him say this. I hadn’t realized it, but the rest of the group had been listening to our conversation, and they started to chime in.

“I’m not going back,” Artemis said firmly.

“Me neither,” Rishika added, squeezing Artemis’s hand.

“You’ve got us,” Gabriel said, and Mikah nodded.

“I want to see this through,” Tabitha put in, though she looked worried. Adair nodded.

After everyone’s pledge of loyalty, the group lapsed into silence.

Gabriel stirred five sugars into his coffee, clinking the spoon against the porcelain. Mikah cleared his throat. Adair stared moodily out the plate glass windows of the diner.

“So,” I finally said, breaking the silence, “anyone got any ideas on how we take down Adéluce?”

I thought back to my encounter with the witch. The memory of the sheer force of her magic still chilled me to the core. I knew that my mates were strong, and Mikah and Gabriel were scrappers. Artemis was a fighter, and Rishika had never entered a battle she didn’t win, but I knew even we weren’t a match for a vampire-witch like Adéluce. She wasn’t like anything we’d ever encountered. She was just so damn strong.

Gabriel seemed to be thinking along these same lines. “We’re going to need a witch on our side,” he said thoughtfully.

Xavier nodded. “That’s a good idea. We should go find Clementine.”

Artemis agreed, and Rishika nodded.

“Okay, let’s go,” Greyson said, getting to his feet.

It wasn’t a whole plan, but it was the start of one, and I felt better about having something in place as we all rose from the table.

I noticed the waitress was still glowering at us, so I dropped a twenty on the table as her tip, then smiled as we all filed out.

“I’ve got the rental car over on the next block,” Xavier said. “I’ll go grab it if you all want to wait here.”

I was so exhausted I nodded yes before anyone else could respond.

“We won’t all fit in your car. I’ll call a cab, too,” Mikah offered.

“I completely forgot we had a rental car.” Rishika laughed. “I don’t even remember what it looks like.”

Xavier disappeared, and as we waited for him to come back, I stepped closer to Tabitha, who was standing propped against Adair. He still had a protective arm wrapped around her, and—if he didn’t exactly glare at me—he didn’t look all that friendly as I drew closer.

“I’m really sorry about the whole siphoning thing,” I said to Tabitha. “There’s no way I would have asked you to do that if I had known what would happen.”

Tabitha smiled. “It’s not your fault, Cali. You couldn’t have known. And I’m fine. I’ll be okay in just a few minutes.”

Adair apparently didn’t like what he heard, and he *did* glare down at me, then cast a tender eye on Tabitha.

“Just rest against me,” he said to her quietly. “It’ll be okay.”

She nodded sleepily and closed her eyes, her whole body resting against him.

The cab pulled up just as Xavier returned with the rental, and everyone split themselves up and climbed in gratefully.

Greyson climbed into driver’s seat, and I got in up front with him. In the back were Xavier, Artemis, and Rishika. Having all of us here like this almost made it seem like everything would be okay.

But I could feel that the momentary reprieve I’d gotten from Tabitha’s magic negation was wearing off. My head had started to pound again, and my limbs felt heavy, like they’d been filled with concrete. I closed my eyes.

“Cali?” Xavier said, his voice worried.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked urgently. “What’s wrong?”

I almost laughed at them—they were so in sync—but I opened my eyes. “I’m okay. Just feeling a little under the weather.”

Both my mates looked like they wanted more information on that matter, but I looked out the window instead. I knew staying quiet wasn’t what they wanted, but it didn’t feel like the time to talk about it. We were going through too much.

When we got to Clementine’s building, we all piled out in front of the converted church. Clementine didn’t answer her bell, but that was normal for her, so Gabriel caught the door as a pizza delivery guy was leaving, and we all headed up to her apartment.

Xavier was leading the way, and he stopped dead in the hallway.

“What’s wrong?” Greyson asked immediately.

When Xavier looked over his shoulder, I could see that his expression had turned tense. “Look,” he said quietly, pointing to Clementine’s door.

I stood on tiptoe, and what I saw made my stomach clench. The door was slightly ajar.

Shit.

“Cali, stay behind me,” Xavier said softly, “and everyone keep quiet.”

Greyson walked past me, positioning himself so he and Xavier entered the apartment first. I followed just behind them, and when I stepped into the apartment, I sucked in a breath.

“Cali, wait!” Greyson said. “Don’t look!”

He grabbed me and pulled me into his chest, but it was too late. I had already seen.

Clementine was dead.

# Episode 3325

**Greyson**

I stared into the room, thunderstruck. I had seen plenty of weird shit in my time, but I had never before seen anything like what I was looking at now.

“What’s going on?” Mikah called.

“Are we all going in?” Gabriel asked.

“Is everything okay in there?” Rishika wondered.

The rest of the group crowded in behind me, and I could hear it as they fell silent, one by one, as they took in the sight before us all:

Clementine’s still body, hovering ten inches above the ground.

Her eyes were rolled back so far only the whites were visible.

Xavier stepped carefully forward. “I’m going to check her pulse,” he said quietly, which would have been a purely symbolic move. It was clear Clementine was dead and had been for a while. But Gabriel put out a hand to stop him.

“Don’t touch her body!” he warned.

Xavier froze. “Why not?”

“Just to be safe. Think about it,” he went on, gesturing to the body. “I think we can all agree this is Adéluce’s work, right?”

“I’ll say,” Artemis muttered.

Everyone else nodded.

“There’s no way to know if she put some kind of trap on the body, or a spell against anyone who touches her.” Gabriel looked at Clementine’s floating figure and took a step back. “I just think we should all keep our distance.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

Mikah nodded, his face hard. “Let’s all spread out and look around the place. We should treat this apartment like a crime scene—because that’s what it is. We need to figure out if we can tell what the hell killed this poor witch.”

Cali was shaking now, and I kept her close to me. I really wished she hadn’t seen this. She was already tired and stressed, and this was straight-up nightmare fuel. I wanted to get her away at least, so I tightened my arm around her and guided her into the next room, putting some distance between her and the dead body.

“Are you okay?” I asked, looking into her eyes. “You look really pale, love. That was horrible, I know.”

Cali nodded slowly, her eyes bright with tears. “Horrible. Poor Clementine.”

“I know.” I sighed. I knew how big Cali’s heart was, and I was sure she felt bad about the part we had played in helping Adéluce find Clementine. “But the best thing we can do right now is to find Adéluce and stop her, before she can do this to anyone else.”

Cali nodded. “Let’s do it.”

“I’m going to start looking around. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

Cali nodded numbly. She didn’t look up. I hated seeing her this way, but there was nothing I could do. We had to get rid of Adéluce. That was how all of this would end.

I dropped a kiss on the top of her head and headed to the living room.

The group was in full search mode, tearing the apartment apart looking for anything they could find. Xavier had flipped over the couch and was looking beneath it, Rishika and Artemis were going through all the books stacked along the wall of the apartment, and Gabriel and Mikah were pulling papers out of the desk in the living room, shuffling through kitchen drawers, and pulling open the refrigerator.

“Do you even know what you’re looking for?” Adair asked coldly.

“Anything at all,” Mikah said, leafing through a stack of maps on the table. “If Adéluce is behind this, maybe she left a trail.”

“I don’t—” Adair started, but he stopped speaking, and we all looked over when we heard the knock on the door.

No one spoke for a moment.

“Fuck,” I muttered to myself. If someone were to walk in right now—with Clementine like that and all of us in here, tossing her apartment…

“Hello?” a voice called. “Clementine?”

I recognized Harlow’s voice.

Double fuck. I stepped toward the door, hating that Harlow was going to have to see this.

“Harlow,” I said, opening the door only a crack. I was wracking my brain, trying to think of an excuse to send her away to spare her the sight of Clementine’s body, but seeing me, Harlow’s eyes widened.

“Greyson?” she asked. “What are you doing here? What’s going on?”

Before I could say anything in response, she pushed the door opened and brushed past me, moving into the living room.

I braced for it, but I still winced when I heard her gasp in horror.

“Oh my god.” She rounded on me. “What happened here?”

I shook my head grimly. “Adéluce.”

“Oh god,” she said. Her voice was soft. Almost a sob. “I didn’t get here soon enough.”

“What do you mean by that?” Mikah asked, striding toward her.

“Soon enough for what?” Xavier questioned.

The whole group had surrounded Harlow, demanding answers.

Harlow took a shuddering breath. “About an hour ago, Clementine called, but I had my phone on silent, so I didn’t hear it ring. She didn’t leave a message, but a couple of minutes later she sent a text.”

“What did she say?” I asked quickly. “Did she say what was happening?”  
 Harlow shook her head. “She didn’t give any information. She just said she was worried and that she needed some help. She wanted me to get to her as quickly as I could. And if I couldn’t, to find the box.”

She dropped her face into her hands, clearly stressed out and affected by what was going on. “I was out, but I hurried back here,” she said. “I got here as quick as I could. I practically ran across the city—*oh god*. This is all my fault! I should have been here!”

Cali had come back into the living room when she heard Harlow’s voice, and she put a hand on her shoulder.

“Harlow,” she said gently, “of course it’s not your fault. None of this is your fault. Only Adéluce is responsible for this. No one else.”

Harlow cried harder. “It’s just horrible to see a fellow witch like this. After all we’ve been through, for her to die like this—”

Cali pulled Harlow into a hug, and all of us were quiet. The only sound was Harlow weeping and Cali gently rubbing her back.

I looked around, thinking hard. If Clementine had sent a message to Harlow just an hour ago, that meant Adéluce must have been here recently. Thinking of her walking this floor that recently sent shivers down my spine.

I’d been actively avoiding it, but I looked over at Clementine’s body and saw that her mouth was open in a scream. Her face was frozen in an expression of horror, and the sight of it filled me with resolve. I was more determined than ever to find Adéluce and stop her before any other innocent people were hurt.

My gaze flicked to Cali, who was still trying to comfort Harlow. When I thought of protecting the innocent, I was thinking especially of Cali.

“Wait, what did she mean about a box?”

We all looked over at Xavier, who looked confused.

Harlow pulled a little away from Cali and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Clementine and I had spoken after everything with Odette and the elder witches had happened. She told me about the box and said if anything happened to her that I should look for it. I don’t know if she was afraid of Odette, or if it’s related to what you all are doing here in the first place,” she said. “I don’t know exactly what the box is, but it has to be here somewhere. Hopefully.”

“What do you think is in it?” I asked.

Harlow shrugged. “I really don’t know.”

“Do you know where it is?” I asked, looking around.

“Maybe she kept it in a desk drawer,” Harlow offered.

The rest of us exchanged glances.

“We need to find it,” I said firmly.

Harlow wiped her eyes and used the neck of her shirt to dab at her nose. “Okay,” she said to me. She walked to the little room Clementine had used as a study and started opening desk drawers. The first one was just an assortment of papers, and the second was the same. But when she opened the third, I saw a shiny black box sitting all alone in the drawer.

“Here,” Harlow said, handing me the object.

I stared down at the box in my hands. The thing was tiny, and I couldn’t figure out what could possibly be in it. It clearly wasn’t important enough for Adéluce to have found, or it had been hidden well. I was starting to worry that it wouldn’t be of any use. But I had it, so I had to check.

When I opened the box, I nearly dropped it in surprise. The box was empty, but as soon as it was opened, Clementine’s voice filled the room:

“Tell Caliana Hart to find Melusine!”

# Episode 3326

Clementine’s disembodied voice boomed around the room, then faded, leaving behind a ringing silence. We all looked at each other in confusion.

“Find who again?” Gabriel asked.

“Who’s Melusine?” Xavier asked.

“Are we supposed to know who that is?” Rishika wondered. “Am I missing something?”

But Harlow looked stricken and sucked in a breath. “What in the hell? *Melusine?*”

We all looked over at her.

“Who is that?” I asked. “Who’s Melusine?”

Harlow shook her head, looking baffled. “Not even a *who*, really.” She looked down, like she was doing some fast thinking. “But why would Clementine say that? Why would she tell Cali to look for her?” she asked herself.

“Harlow! Who—or what—is Melusine?” Greyson asked urgently.

Harlow looked up and scratched her head as she answered. “Melusine is a story.”

“A story?” I repeated. “What does that mean?”

“She’s a mythic creature that parents tell their kids about. It’s a scary story, like a cautionary tale kind of thing. Melusine would snatch them up and take them to the swamp to eat them if they weren’t careful and strayed too far from home or didn’t finish their dinner or talked back,” Harlow went on.

“That seems like a tame version of some of the stories I heard in the Fae world,” Artemis said. I shuddered. I didn’t want to know any of the stories she’d been told.

Harlow ignored the comment. “Legend goes that she used to be a witch, but she was banished to the swamp, and she turned into a monster.”

We all stared at the witch, thunderstruck.

“Okay… So what do we do with that?” I asked. “What does that even mean? Why would Clementine’s last message send me on some kind of cryptic hunt to find a character from a bedtime story?”

Harlow shrugged, looking shaken. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

Greyson furrowed his brow, deep in thought. “Well, if she wanted Cali to find her, then we’d better find her.”

Harlow looked up at him, surprised. “But you don’t understand. She’s not real, Greyson—”

“I used to think werewolves weren’t real,” I pointed out. “Or vampires. Or witches. Or Fae. And I *am* Fae. So, who really knows what’s real, right?”

“There has to be a reason Clementine said it,” Greyson reasoned. “Whether Melusine is real or not, we have to go with the lead.”

“In these stories, is there any specific place Melusine is supposed to be?” Xavier asked.

Though she still didn’t look convinced, Harlow nodded. “Yeah, I could take you.” She took a steely breath. “If you think this will help avenge Clementine, then I’ll help out. I’ll do anything. Follow me.”

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Harlow had led us just outside the city, where we now stood at the mouth of a swamp. I peered through the trees and vines at the water—or what I could see of it. The plant growth on top of the water was thick, and it looked deeply uninviting. More than that, it looked terrifying. Because it almost looked like solid ground, but I knew if I were to step on it, I would sink straight through into the fetid water. The whole place had the putrid smell of decay, and mosquitoes were everywhere, biting the hell out of everyone—except Mikah.

“Are you *sure* the stories about Melusine take place here?” I asked Harlow uncertainly. I was really hoping she’d say no. The idea of exploring in this disgusting swamp was wildly unappealing.

“Yeah,” Harlow said with a nod, “I’m sure. Sorry.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay then.”

“Stay close,” Xavier said to me.

I nodded, and Greyson stepped to my other side, so I was flanked on both sides. I looked around, glancing at Artemis, Rishika, Gabriel, Mikah, Adair, Tabitha, and Harlow. Everyone looked grim and hesitant—no one was exactly thrilled about what we were about to do.

“Welp,” Gabriel said, clapping his hands together, “let’s go find us a monster!”

Someone gave a half-hearted cheer, and we started into the swamp, carefully picking our way through. Everyone was trying to stay on dry land, but even that was boggy, and water squished up on either side of my foot as I stepped down.

I kept my eyes on my feet, determined not to slip into the brackish water, but as I reached for a rock, I underestimated how slippery the moss was, and my foot slipped into the dark water.

The second my foot hit the surface, the whole swamp came alive. Creatures sprang to life, swimming toward the surface so fast the water looked like it was boiling. I screamed and tried to yank my foot back, but a hand with fingers like segmented chopsticks wrapped around my ankle and tried to pull me deeper. I could barely see its face—bald and withered like an old potato—but even through the choppy water I could see that it was looking up at me with a wicked grin. But as terrifying as that was, it was nothing to the snakes that were suddenly speeding through the water, swimming at an uncanny speed, spitting and hissing at all of us.

I screamed again and again, and—as one—everyone *freaked out*.

More of the potato-faced evil gnome creatures appeared, their long fingers on the rocks, clutching like they were trying to pull themselves up. The snakes wrapped themselves around the logs and rocks people were standing on, and another creature appeared—like a desiccated corpse with long, outstretched arms—and was swimming toward us.

“Oh *FUCK NO*!” Gabriel bellowed.

“What the *hell*?” Adair exclaimed, grasping Tabitha to him as she screamed.

Artemis wasn’t screaming, she was just trying to blast everything she saw with her Fae power, but she was so shaken she kept missing.

“RUN!” Xavier yelled. He leapt toward me, swept me into his arms, and we all sprinted deeper into the swamp and away from the creatures.

We ran for about ten minutes before anyone dared to slow down.

“Let’s stop for a second,” Greyson called out, and everyone gathered around, breathing hard, looking at each other with terror-struck faces.

“Okay, what the *hell* was that?” Gabriel demanded.

“No idea,” Greyson breathed.

“I’ve never seen anything like that before,” Harlow admitted. “And I never want to again. That thing with the long arms…” She shuddered.

Xavier put me back on my feet, and I looked around. We had stopped in a dark, dank clearing. The air had been humid when we started, but it seemed worse here, and there wasn’t a breath of wind. The trees were close on all sides, dark and oppressive. They felt mythic in their gloom, like the forest in *Sleeping Beauty*.

“Well,” Xavier said, looking around, “should we continue?”

Rishika shook her head. “This is insane,” she said quietly. “We have no idea where we’re going.”

I looked at her, worried she might be losing faith, but she fell in behind the others as we continued.

Xavier was leading this time, and he headed straight into the dark trees. We walked for a few uneventful moments. I heard a creak above me and looked up. It had sounded wooden, as though someone was walking on a wood floor above me. But I didn’t see anything strange, so I kept walking.

And then I heard it again.

“What was that sound?” Artemis asked, looking around, so she must have heard it, too.

“Like a creak, right?” Tabitha asked.

But before anyone could answer her, the limbs of the tree next to us began to move. They lowered down toward us, twigs grasping like fingers, as though they were going to start snapping us up.

I screamed, fear flooding through me, hijacking my brain completely. Chaos broke out as everyone tried running in every direction, trying to avoid the moving, creaking limbs. Because it wasn’t just one tree—every tree in the swamp had begun to move, and I realized that the entire swamp had come alive around us.

The ancient oaks creaked as though they were going to tear themselves up by their roots. Everyone flinched and ducked when a branch as thick around as my waist came crashing down right in front of us, and then—

“Rishika!” Artemis screamed.

I looked over just in time to see a branch grasp Rishika around her middle and lift her up, twenty feet into the air.

I tried to breathe, tried to think, but it was hard to do either in the midst of the chaos. Suddenly, the ground beneath me began to give way, and I scrambled back just in time to avoid the massive sinkhole that suddenly formed. The ground fell away in an instant, dropping down to a black abyss.

Amidst the absolute pandemonium, I had one clear thought: *This is all for us.*

“Why would Clementine want us to find Melusine?” Harlow shrieked from somewhere to my left.

I had been asking myself that same question, and I yelled back in response. “We’ll never defeat Adéluce if we die in a freaking swamp first!”

Then, without warning, the swamp fell quiet, stopping as quickly as it had started. It left a strange, eerie silence, and into that silence spoke a quiet, melodic voice:

“Did you say Adéluce?”

# Episode 3327

I stared around, frozen with fear. Everyone else was doing the exact same thing.

The voice we’d heard wasn’t loud exactly, but it seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. It was disorienting—and terrifying.

Finally, the voice came again, and this time I determined that it was a woman speaking.

“Well?” she said impatiently.

“Um… yes?” I said nervously.

There was a rustle, and we all turned to see a figure that looked vaguely like a woman gliding out of the trees. As she moved, the trees around her began to move, but this time it wasn’t terrifying—it was amazing. The stinking, horrifying bog was transforming around her into what looked like an enchanted bayou. The aged trees became soaring live oaks, thick with leaves. The sludge was replaced with clear, mirror-like water, and lightning bugs filled the air, twinkling like stars.

I squinted to see the woman better—but wait… *Was* she even a person? She seemed like the swamp personified.

My brain was trying to make sense of what I was seeing. Whoever this figure was, she had two arms and two legs, but that’s where the human characteristics seemed to stop. Her skin was mottled and scaly, like the bark of a tree. She seemed to be half-woman, half-plant. It should have been disturbing, but somehow it wasn’t, and as she drew closer, I could see her green eyes and long, greenish-black hair. I could see how beautiful she was.

Something about this figure reminded me of Vander—both seemed not quite human, more like nature spirits of some kind.

I could see her more clearly as she glided forward and stopped in front of Harlow. “You mentioned Adéluce Duquette, did you not?”

Harlow’s eyes were huge as she stared at the woman. “*Melusine?*” she breathed. “Can it really be?”

The being—Melusine—smiled. “Yes, child. I am real.” Then the smile disappeared, and her eyes grew colder. “Was it you?” Her dark eyes darted around accusingly at us all, then landed back on Harlow. “Who dares to speak the name Adéluce here?”

But Harlow didn’t answer the question. It didn’t look like she could. She could only stare at Melusine—spellbound.

“I didn’t think you were real,” she whispered.

Melusine laughed lightly. “That’s because this is how I desire it, child.” Her eyes narrowed. “And I don’t take kindly to human visitors these days.”

“So why did you come out to talk to us?” I asked, astonished by my own daring.

Melusine whirled around to me, and my heart thudded with fear. She stared at me for a moment, then widened her gaze, taking in the whole group.

“Well, this is an interesting group. Very interesting, indeed.” She raised her eyebrows. “Not one you see often. Fae, a vampire, witches, werewolves…” She trailed off, looking at each of us in turn. Then she looked back at me. “I speak to you now because of your mention of Adéluce Duquette.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, worried that Melusine might be an ally of Adéluce.

The woman tipped her head and gave me a curious look “If Adéluce is after you, and you’re still alive, then perhaps you are worth talking to.”

“How do you know Adéluce?” Xavier asked, stepping toward the woman. “She *is* after us, but we’re trying to stop her. Can you help?”

Melusine shook her head. She tsked quietly. “*Werewolves*,” she said, speaking to herself. “I forgot how busy they always think they are. Just rushing from one thing to another without any thought.”

“What does *that* mean?” Rishika whispered to herself.

I glanced at Xavier, then at Greyson, and I saw reflected in their eyes the frustration I felt, too. I didn’t know why Melusine thought we were being trivial. We were actually dealing with something *objectively urgent* here. Lives were on the line.

Greyson cleared his throat as he stepped forward and spoke diplomatically. “Well, we really do appreciate that you were willing to speak with us—and stop your trees from trying to crush us—but we actually do need any information that you might have—”

Melusine waved her hands, waving away his words as though she was waving away an annoying mosquito.

“Come with me,” she said with a sigh. She turned and headed back into the trees. “I will speak with you. It’s been far too long since I had any guests.”

The frogs croaked in harmony as she faded into the shadows of the trees, and I was torn. I moved closer to Greyson.

“Do you think this is some kind of a trap?” I asked quietly.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Doesn’t this all feel a little like *Hansel and Gretel* to you?” I questioned. “Like we’re all about to be pushed into an oven?”

Greyson shook his head. “I don’t think we have a choice but to follow her.” He glanced over his shoulders, where the whole group had lined up. “But everyone, keep your eyes open and stay on your toes.”

Everyone nodded, and we started after Melusine. The woods were even more beautiful as we went deeper in. The moss on the trees looked as though it had been painted on by artists, the kudzu hung down in swooping curves, and the crickets sang more sweetly than I had ever heard. The smell of the place was the biggest change of all. No longer putrid and rotting, the smell of deep water mingled with the scent of jasmine and honeysuckle in the warm air.

*Maybe less* Hansel and Gretel *and more* ThePrincess and the Frog*, then*, I thought. I was still on guard, though.

We caught up with Melusine, and she led us to where the trees thinned. A small stone cottage lay nestled in a clearing on the mossy banks of a brook that babbled happily as it bubbled by.

Harlow gasped. “I thought you lived in some kind of cave? That’s how the story goes, at least.”

Melusine smiled indulgently at the young witch. “Who says I don’t?” she asked wryly. She waved her hand, and the scene around us changed completely. The gorgeous live oaks disappeared, replaced with dying aspens, the water went black and still, and the stone cottage became—just as Harlow had mentioned—a stone cave with wet, slimy walls.

There was a gasp from the group before Melusine waved her hand again, changing everything back in an instant.

Harlow looked around, as wide-eyed as the rest of us.

The door of the cottage opened when Melusine approached it. “Won’t you come in?” she asked, stepping aside to let us enter.

I still felt nervous, and I hesitated on the doorstep, but I realized that Greyson was right—we really didn’t have much choice here.

“Please, make yourselves at home,” Melusine said when we were all inside the cottage.

I looked around. It was small, and to my dismay, it did look a *lot* like a cottage from a fairy tale. The furniture was all wooden and looked hand-hewn. There were no lights, only candles on little brass trays, and a fire roared cheerily in the wide hearth.

“I wish I had some refreshments to offer you—tea or cookies or fruit—but I have nothing. I am no longer in need of sustenance of any kind, so I never keep it here. It keeps the frogs out of my cupboards. Sit, please,” she said gesturing toward the low wooden chairs.

We all sat, though Adair remained standing, positioning himself behind Tabitha’s chair.

Melusine turned to me, giving me an unnervingly searching stare. She looked at me so intensely it made me squirm in my seat.

“Yes?” I finally asked when I couldn’t take another moment of it.

“You have the mark of a demon on you.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “Well, yeah. I know. But we’re trying to fix that.”

Melusine frowned. “What do you mean?” she asked politely.

I reached over to Artemis, who was sitting next to me, and dug into her bag, searching for the jar of ashes. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe Melusine could help me destroy the ashes and send them to the demon realm, ridding myself of the mark of the demon forever.

I grabbed the jar and held it up to show Melusine. “We just need to send these back to the demon world, and then I won’t have the mark anymore. These are demon ashes, and they’ve been causing a lot of trouble with magic in this area.”

I was starting to feel hopeful again as I looked up at Melusine. “Do you think you could help us do that?”

Melusine—still frowning—took the jar from me. She looked at it closely, turning it upside down. Then she looked at me with a small smile. “There’s no point.”

“*What?*” I gasped. “What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “These won’t do you any good.”